America: A Culture Driven by Fear?
Although I do not think that fear is the only motivation for such things as American gun control policies, the fact that our culture is saturated with violence, and has a murder rate which is absurd when compared to other countries, Michael Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine* provides persuasive arguments to support the theory that American citizens have abnormally high levels of fear. It is this fear which permeates their lives and triggers decision-making behavior. A poignant moment in the film highlights a woman from Canada who calmly speaks about the differences between Americans and Canadians. She explains that Americans simply "react", and do not take the time "to think". Perhaps it is the fast pace of our lives. Americans seem to be always on the go! In my home town, children are scheduled into activities round the clock, from babyhood right on up to graduation from high school. You barely have time to reflect on your after-school art class before being whisked off to soccer practice. Things happen so quickly, one after another. Kids are conditioned to move on without thinking, without reflection.

These youths make up a generation which is constantly exposed to a tremendous amount of gruesome violence through all outlets of the media. They overhear adults talking about the latest cases all the time. They see torture and murder and kidnaping everyday on television, and unfortunately this has become part of a normal life in America. These acts become, in their minds, "what happens all the time." The bad guy broke in and got shot. The girl went to the mall and got kidnapped. The gang attacked the other gang. He got shot. They got shot. Everybody gets shot! I think that if you interviewed third graders, and asked them their opinion on the subject, they would probably say that they too, would pull the trigger on a "bad guy". If
you asked them what a bad guy was, they would probably say it is anybody walking towards them. I know that this is how I sometimes feel. I hardly ever go anywhere alone, and if I do I am immediately suspicious of "weird people" or "scary people" walking towards me. I know these actions are the result of viewing one too many news stories on real-life occurrences. It isn't so much the horror movies, the bloody video games, and definitely not raging heavy metal music. It is the nightly news which really gets to me and pumps up my level of fear. I believe George Gerbner sums it up perfectly in his well-known “Cultivation Theory” which states that television is "the dominant force in shaping modern society." He concludes that, "heavy television viewers develop an exaggerated belief in a mean and scary world."

Michael Moore highlights Professor Glazer’s book Culture of Fear when he begins to examine the news media in America. Robot-like reporters are shown, one after another, giving their slick synopsis of the current tragedy. There is no feeling. They all have the same voice, the same cadence and delivery. One particular reporter exposed in the film, was far more concerned with his lack of hair spray than he was with the story he was covering about a little elementary school girl being shot in her first grade classroom, right in front of her teacher and fellow classmates. He was joking and laughing about developing “wind-proof hair products” behind the scenes, yet when his audience tuned into his broadcast, they saw a solemn and concerned man who genuinely felt compassion for the innocent girl who was accidentally shot. Every channel reruns the same story over and over. There are "in depth" analysis shows on all the cable news stations round the clock, making the coverage of murders and kidnapings nearly inescapable.
When a teenager begins to engage in independent activities, the warnings from adults pretty much take most of the fun out of everything, but there is more to it than that. Parents have always given warnings, (even Little Red Riding Hood was warned to stay on the path), but I remember feeling something else. I knew first hand, from watching the news, that it was really possible to be kidnapped right from the mall in broad daylight. It really was possible to be stabbed randomly, just walking down the street. A car really could drive by and shoot me for no reason. I had seen all this, and more, repeated on the news for years. I cannot help but think that if only some brave TV executive could think of a way to balance this constant stream of real-life horror in the news with celebrations of the glory of earth and mankind's achievements, we might get a little closer to living in a state of grace, rather than a state of fear.

I am a great believer in calling the cops if something seems amiss, however I do not know if I could ever take a weapon to someone who was crossing my own comfort barrier, like opening my front door without knocking. In the film, Michael Moore randomly opens the front doors of several homes in a Toronto neighborhood, after being told by multiple people that noone locks their doors in the unaggressive country of Canada. The doors were in fact all open, and the people inside barely seemed surprised by his sudden intrusion. They weren't even startled! I think if I were home alone and someone opened my front door, I would scream, try to hide, and if I could, I would dial 911. It would be my immediate reaction. This exact conditioning is what is so beautifully pointed out in the film.

One of the most interesting segments in the documentary is the interview with rocker Marilyn Manson. Though I do not care at all for his silly stage act or hideous music, I love to
hear Marilyn speak. He is so calm and articulate. He talks about fear in America and the corporate greed that goes along with a society steeped in fear. He says, "Keep everyone afraid, and they will consume." America's economy is, of course, a consumer-based economy. We will buy stuff to make our lives better, or at least what we think is better. The powers that be tell us what to be afraid of, and provide us with all sorts of supplies to counteract these harmful agents. If you have enough deodorant, make-up, clothes, advanced technological equipment, fire alarms, burglar alarms, carbon monoxide alarms, car alarms, and media alerts, you just might be safe. If you can afford enough of these things, you just might survive and get away from all the bad things out there. It is so easy to make people afraid, and if you make a whole nation afraid, you can sell a whole nation protective devices. Talk about profit! Even my mother broke down and got a cell phone for herself and for my teenage brother. She held out for a long, long time because she saw the cell phone as a corporate money trap; a product whose need was magnified by relentless campaigns of, "Don't let this happen to you!" Your car breakdowns in the middle of the night, a woman alone, no one to help. Everybody has a cell, so you need one too. What if you got into trouble? Kidnap victims dialed 911 on their cells frequently, according to news sources. Figure out how to squeeze another fifty dollars into the monthly budget and sign a two year contract, count those minutes, and you just might save your own life. As if that little device could stop a random bullet!

There is no real answer found in the film. Embarrassing an old crotchety Charleton Heston is not the answer, nor is getting Kmart to stop the sales of bullets. I don't even think getting President Bush to stop the War in Iraq is the answer. I do think, though, that the news
media in America is insane. Where do they get these people and who is training the journalists in our country? Who is programming these news stations and how can we stop them? I do believe that if the American news media was saturated with sanity and humanity, a kinder and gentler America would emerge, even though it might take a few generations to undo the damage already done. I hope, as a Communications major, that a new generation of journalists are trained in the Humanities as well as in “Show-Biz”. It should no longer be acceptable to treat murder as entertainment. *Bowling for Columbine* is a wake-up call for America. Perpetuating fear upon a society is a form of terrorism. Are we not engaged in the War against Terror? Victory begins at home.