

VIOLENCE...US AND THEM  
Terre Haute, IN (June 13, 2004)  
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Iraq may seem far away to most of us, but the images of naked prisoners and beheadings and caskets of American military have put a personal touch on the news that we find impossible to shake. We are outraged and angered by the violence and abuse we have witnessed, especially in the last few months.

In my own family, my nephew, Aaron, recently finished 3 terms of duty as a Marine and was grateful to return to Indiana. He doesn't talk much about his time in Iraq except when he receives news, as he did last week, of one of his buddies being killed.

Senseless violence came even closer than Iraq in the pages of the Sullivan Daily Times. A thirteen year old boy died from a shotgun wound in Shelburn last week. The boy went to Sullivan Junior High School and was a friend of my great niece, Danielle. She was so upset that she could not even handle going to his funeral.

Violence everywhere or so it seems....getting worse as the years go on. Remember the storming of the Davidian Complex in 1993? Remember the bombing of Oklahoma City in 1995? Columbine in 1999? September 11, 2001?

Add Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and Candles Museum. Fill in your own blanks for places in your memory, large or small of senseless violent actions. Shake your head; wring your hands; wonder why "they" can do such things and ask what this world is coming to?

We know problems such as these need to be solved, even as we breathe a sigh of relief each time it isn't really us... each time our children and our own young men and women in the military are still safe. We praise Indiana as the great heartland country... a wonderful place to live for families and family values even if we hire police to walk our school grounds and we must pass through metal detectors to go to a concert or sporting event.

Wait a minute! Let's look a little deeper. Could it be that we need to ask a different question than "Why"? Are we missing some important understanding as we ponder "why" this is happening, what "they" are doing, and how "they" need to change to turn our world right side up again.

Perhaps we need to leave the "why" answers for the historians. "Why" is a societal question and time often helps us sort out the real reasons a particular condition has existed. Looking back we may be able to see more clearly than when we are in the midst of all that is happening.

So I invite you to put “why?” aside and ask yourself another question. This question might hold part of the solution in its answer. The new question is “What?”. What part do we; what part do I play in perpetuating violence as a way of life? And a second “what” question... What can I do to help slow this escalation of violence that is rapidly moving across our world and coming into my life?

Deepak Chopra phrased it clearly in the reading we shared this morning: *“Is there not a deep wound at the heart of humanity? Isn’t this an attack on civilization from without that is also from within? If you and I are having a single thought of violence or hatred against anyone in the world at this moment, we are contributing to the wounding of the world.”*

The violence around us is an outward sign of the violence within us. Once there was a time, and it wasn’t that long ago, when words were carefully chosen to express thoughts. It was a time when we believed that the way we spoke reflected who we were.

We seem to have forgotten that concept for most of us have absorbed into our daily conversation words of violence without even realizing we have done so.

For example, have you ever heard the expression, “Rule of Thumb”? Did you know that the rule of thumb was a measurement for the size of a stick a man in England was legally allowed to use for beating his wife? In other words, the stick could not be larger than his thumb for him to be within his husbandly rights...

We speak of “getting” one another. We use “kill” to express how badly we want something. We use words like “hit”, “strike”, “beat”, without any awareness of some of their meanings. How about “conquer”, or “shoot”, or “fight”? We “disrespect” one another so often we don’t see the words of violence that rule our thoughts. We don’t even realize that we live our own violent actions from subliminal messages pulsing through our daily lives.

Our habits speak loudly of the violence we have absorbed into our being. We watch the television screen bring senseless violence into our homes and sometimes we change the channel, but more often we don’t. If there are children in the house, we may remember to monitor what they watch, but many times we don’t even think about all the violence they have been exposed to every day since infancy. The lives on the flickering screen becomes as unreal as the cartoon characters who knock each other around.

We find it difficult to remember that the blood we see on the news screen is real because we see so much theatrical destruction of life that takes a curtain call only to return in another series.

We go to movies that carry on where television leaves off. There we sometimes get drawn into the drama on the big screen because there are no commercials to detract us and we close our eyes if the scene is too gruesome. We may even choose to attend a documentary that reminds us of the reality of violence, pain, and suffering. Yet more often we tend to choose a mindless film with car crashes, bomb explosions, or destruction above cascading musical sound tracks to heighten the suspense and help us escape our own frustrations.

The newest sources for our habitual exposure to violence, however, are the computer and computerized, hand held games. The internet, with its ready access to any type of information we choose to select, along with video games, is slowly being fed into homes all over the world. “Games” of warfare and destruction are available for every age and degree of skill. It’s a common practice to escape into these games and not even be aware of the connection between mini explosions and violence hidden within one’s self.

Violence within is not fed only by vocabulary and media. It is also fed by attitudes we have internalized by seeing people as “them” or “other”.... people of different skin color, ethnic origin, or different social class... people we separate from ourselves because of educational opportunities or gender... people of different body size, age, or sexual orientation... Any time we create “not us”, we are creating an opening for our potential to do violence to emerge.

Violence is embedded deep within each of us, so wherein is our hope of changing ourselves or the world? We must realize that hope is also embedded within us, just as deeply as violence. Hope tells us to begin in small steps and believe that we make a difference. Hope asks us to love our neighbor and to remember that the world is our neighborhood. Hope reminds us that our neighborhood begins in our backyard if we really are serious about stemming the cancer called violence. Hope reminds us that we are part of an inter-connected force upon this planet and together we can and will make a difference.

So what can we really do? We can begin... begin to see one another, no matter what age; no matter where our paths cross. From the drive up window of McDonald’s to the students roaming the mall... from the senior center to the daycare center... from the kid who lives next door to the homeless person pushing a grocery cart... we can start seeing faces and eyes and smiles.

When we take the time to look into another person’s eyes we can recognize the spark of divinity that resides within all of us. We can smile when our eyes meet another person even in passing on the street.

We can begin to listen to one another... to take the time to hear the stories of each others joys and triumphs, of each others aches and pains. We can listen without passing our judgment as to what another should be thinking, feeling, or doing. We can listen, so we can learn from what we hear as well as what we see.

We can speak gently in our words. We can remember the power of our words and the vulnerability of the person hearing them. We can speak to the clerk in the store as kindly as to our best friend. We can speak with love to those we say we do love... our family and people close to our daily lives.

As we reach to one another, we will discover new ways to rid the world of violence, at least in our immediate vicinity. Like “Mr. Clean”, we will discover we can become a magic violence eraser.

Sounds simplistic, but the greatest truths are often simple. If we truly want to do something to end the violence we witness almost daily, then the only place we can begin is with ourselves.

The poet, Marge Piercy, has written:

*“It goes on one at a time, it starts when you care to act,  
it starts when you do it again after they say no,  
it starts when you say we and know who you mean,  
and each day you mean one more.”*

Dorothy Day has said:

*“People say what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.  
A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that. No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.*

We can and must believe that violence can be stopped. Let us pause this morning with a time of reflection in consideration of attitudes and actions we can practice to help stop violence:

1. Have I spent any time lately in looking at my own attitudes and behavior as they contribute to or combat violence around me?
2. Have I considered my use of terms or phrases that may be perceived to perpetuate violence?
3. Have I become increasingly aware of violence in television programming and complained to those in charge?
4. Have I suggested or taken steps to implement discussions or workshops aimed at understanding roots of violence with friends, colleagues, social clubs, or church groups?
5. Have I made a personal contract with myself to take a positive stand, even at some possible risk, when the chance occurs to respond in a nonviolent manner?
6. When do I plan to begin doing all I can to stop violence?

Great leaders have risen in days past to lead us in ways of non- violence. Sometimes their lives have ended before the lesson was learned, but the example of how they lived has continued far stronger than the violence. Their words give us inspiration to remind us that we can continue... being one voice, joined by other voices... acting in a peaceful manner... working to rid the world of violence, hatred and abuse.

This is what Gandhi, the great leader of India tried to tell us when he spoke the words we use for closing this morning on Page 577,

*“It Is Possible to Live in Peace”.*