

Anne Coghill

THE SPRINGS OF VIOLENCE

The discovery of nuclear power is the greatest challenge yet to human existence since it enables us to destroy both ourselves and the planet, Earth. The great religions through the ages have sought to change human attitudes and behaviour. Will the threat to our survival succeed where they have failed? Perhaps it will stimulate us to understand ourselves more thoroughly, to be aware of those thoughts and feelings on the edge of awareness or deeply repressed, which lead us to adopt certain attitudes and to cling to them with a blind and fearful enthusiasm? Attitudes which are already out of date because of our technical progress?

One way of changing attitudes is through increased awareness. We value academic achievement so much more highly than emotional maturity or spiritual development that we know a great deal more about technical innovation than we do about the processes of emotional maturation. We are still arguing about the causes of depression and whether the human animal has or has not an aggressive instinct. In the ideal society, it would have been wiser to find this out before producing the bomb. We find it easier to solve technical problems, difficult as they are, than to solve emotional problems . . . easier to put men on the moon than to contact those cut off parts of ourselves that influence our thoughts and attitudes and make us fearful and inflexible in our thinking; these feelings are shared by most humans, including politicians and they are feelings that militate against survival in the nuclear age.

I want to look at these processes of maturation and the changes of attitude that they bring about. I have seen this happening to adults in a unit for psychoneurotic patients in hospital; I have seen it happening in groups of so-called normal people, run by the Human Potential Movement. But it is with children of primary school age that I've studied it in greatest detail.

From primary school on, parents and teachers are interested in the child's academic progress; little attention is paid to the needs of

the child's emotional development unless he or she exhibits signs of disturbed behaviour or obvious blocks in intellectual activity.

The study I am going to describe is an attempt to explore the emotional life of the ordinary primary school child, the sort of child who does not appear to have any problems of significance. I say this because, in the teacher's ratings of the children, several were described as lacking concentration, or being unable to 'get their words out' but this was not considered a serious problem.

The study was inspired partly by the theory which sees the source of problems in early childhood experiences and seeks to help both the child and adult by encouraging them to re-experience the original painful situations which led to the repression of feeling. It was also inspired by the fact that all living organisms have a tendency to fulfil their potential. This is a fact that we disregard at our peril; fulfilling its highest potential is the most satisfying activity for any organism. Preventing a child or adult from fulfilling their potential is a powerful inciter to violent feelings; anger and frustration, whether conscious or unconscious. How much of the violence in society can be traced, I wonder, to frustrations of this sort, because we have failed to provide either in our schools or outside them, structures in which problems of this sort can be discussed openly and feelings can be openly expressed by both the academic and the non-academic child.

What I would like you to notice in the accounts of these children is the way they took advantage of the freedom and security of the acting groups to free themselves from patterns of feeling and behaviour that had been imposed on them by their environment. I would also like you to notice the sorts of insights which they developed about themselves. Finally, notice the improvement reported by their class teacher in their school work and general behaviour.

In a previous study I had given a projective test to over 500 children of primary and secondary school age; each child was shown a series of five pictures of people in various situations; the pictures were drawn rather vaguely and were part of a series of Pickford's Projection Pictures. The child was asked two questions what do you think is happening in the picture? and: What do you think will happen next? I found that the children who responded most freely, tended also to name emotions most explicitly in their stories. I decided to put a small group of children into a situation where they would be free to act out the stories from a series of projective pictures and to ask them to name, after each play, the emotions that had been expressed in the play, to see whether open discussion of feelings encouraged

children to express them more freely in their acting. There were two groups of six children, one an experimental group, one a control group. Each group was made up of three girls and three boys, aged nine years. The groups were recorded and, for this reason, only three children acted at a time so that it was possible to record individual voices. The three actors were shown one of the pictures. Whether they followed it or not was unimportant. It acted as a stimulus. In the experimental group, after each play, the children were asked to name the feelings that had been expressed in the play. In the control group, they just went on to act another play. The groups took place once a week for two years and lasted 45 minutes. There were 63 sessions in all.

The findings were unexpected; the children in the experimental group showed less change than three children in the control group in whom the changes were fairly dramatic. The conclusion I came to was that the children in both groups used a situation in which they felt free to express themselves but also secure in order to effect a development which they were ready to make. The changes that occurred provided evidence of the sort of developmental changes that children need to make if they are to resolve their conflicts and, in the process, free themselves from among other things, the residue of infantile savagery which Melanie Klein showed in her work with young children, to be part of the history of infancy. These savage fantasies, if repressed and not worked through, lead in adult life, to irrational fears, to prejudice and to thinking that is rigid and uncreative.

The changes that took place in the three children in the control group, consisted mainly in the ability to explore roles, to express unacceptable feelings and, in the process, to discover insights both about themselves and other people. The process was initiated in the case of each child by a play which was a sort of breakthrough in that the child very definitely took the lead in deciding the play's story. He or she expressed strong emotions which were different from those they had expressed up to then and the play often included references to exploration, for example, exploring new territory, underwater caves, tunnels and so on; sometimes they discovered treasure. This was particularly interesting, considering the amount of time both groups spent stealing things from shops and people. Here they were finding treasure which was their own, part of their deeper potential.

To take Janet first. Her teacher described Janet as being shy, saying that he couldn't get a word out of her; that there was no life in her. In her first play, she chose the role of a co-operative child but, after that she cast herself as mother or teacher, in which roles she was

authoritarian and controlling. In the eleventh session, she broke out of these roles, casting herself as a sister. She started off by saying: "Mother's always driving; she's the boss," and later, "Oh, come on Mother, don't give me that rubbish." In this play, she and her family set out on an expedition. Janet took the lead from the start. She suggested driving a boat, exploring a cave, looking for fish and exploring an underground tunnel. So here we have Janet expressing anger against her mother and becoming herself an enterprising child. It is interesting that after she calls her mother 'bossy', she went on to call her 'Mum' fourteen times in the play, which was more than she had ever done before, suggesting that the open expression of her mother's bossiness was followed by greater closeness to her, as well as by an increase in her freedom to fantasize.

For the next fifteen plays, she reverted to playing authoritarian and controlling adults; she also tried to control the situation outside the play, by telling the audience what to do. In one play, she gave as many as eleven directions to the other children. After the groups had been going for a year, at the beginning of the fourth term, she began to cast herself again as a cheeky and rebellious child. She called her mother "a silly old cow" and added: "I'm not your slave", at the same time saying three times, that she was driving a car. She continued to play these two roles, bossy mother and rebellious child. In one play she organised her own rejection. She cast herself as a child bringing her violin home from school to play it to her parents; she told them to reject her and tell her what an awful noise she was making. In the end, the mother took the violin away from her.

As time went on, she played more child roles, in fact, insisted on doing so when the other children wanted her to be the mother. Her roles became more varied; she played delinquent children. She said: "Let's do some more stealing. I feel like it", but she also continued to play bossy mother roles.

To sum up then: Janet used the groups to act out her anger towards her mother and to get into contact with her own initiative, to gain space in which to explore her own potentialities, to try out roles in which she did not have to be either controlling or submissive but could be spontaneously herself. These were the changes that took place in the groups. Did her teacher see any change in her? Janet was rated by her teacher at 9 years, 11 and 12 years. The last rating was given a year after the children had been at secondary school. The greatest change in the teacher's ratings took place between 11 and 12 years. At 11 she was described as "too timid to be naughty"

but at 12, she was said to be "occasionally naughty". Her attitude to work changed from "only works when watched or compelled" to "works steadily" at 12 years. In games and play, she changed from being "dreamy and uninterested" to "plays steadily and keenly". Instead of being "on the fringe" in her relationships with other children, she was said at 12 to be liked and a good mixer. Of course, at 12, she was in a new school, under another teacher and this has to be borne in mind.

Robert was described at nine years as a friendly though rather shy boy who stammered and had difficulty in getting his words out. He was unable to concentrate for long but he was a keen games player and fitted in well with the team.

He appeared to me as a friendly boy although rather shy and nervous. It was difficult at first to hear his voice on the tape. His stammer was only slight and intermittent but his voice was often too soft to be picked up clearly. He played several father roles in which he showed care and affection for his children. He began by being irritable rather than angry but, in the sixth session he said: "I love fights" and, as a burglar, stole from and killed a woman. He was then killed by a policeman. After this, he tended to be passive rather than active. The boys all attacked each other all the time but Robert often accepted the violence done to **him** without hitting back. When in session ten, a gorilla attacked him at the zoo, he fainted. His son said to him: "You can wake up, Daddy". Robert answered: "I wish I could". In the next play, he was the son of a diver; after rescuing his father, he said: "I've saved you Dad; I wish I could save myself". Here we see the beginning of insight into his condition, giving us a clue to the situation in his inner world.

His breakthrough came in session 20 when he cast himself as, "A little boy and in the night we'll change into men and become explorers". He drove in a speed-boat, saying: "Nothing will stop me now". However, the rate of change was not as rapid as this might suggest. In later sessions, the conflict between passivity and action often occurred in the same play. For example, in session 26, he showed initiative by driving a car and going fishing, but next we find the fish swallowing his wellington-boot. He cried out: "The fish has caught me". A rather unusual reversal of roles. In another play in the same session, he said: "Oh, I'm drowning in milk and can do nothing about it". Was this an awareness of over-mothering emerging? The danger of 'doing something about it' was high-lighted in session 31 when he

found himself locked in a railway carriage. He finally smashed his way out only to find himself lying on the railway line in the face of an on-coming train. He was rescued just in time.

In session 42, he became more assertive towards his mother; she locked him in his bedroom; he managed to bash the door down and get out. As the sessions continued, he became more assertive and aggressive generally and showed more humour. In session 47, we find him saying: "I've grown up to six feet now". He also chose a wider variety of roles. Finally in session 58, he asserted his independence from his mother more openly; they were going on a school outing and Robert's mother insisted on getting into the coach with them. Robert took the initiative in pushing her out. However, this action was followed by him going up in an aeroplane and doing a death dive. At the last minute, he bailed out. So assertion was still dangerous.

Was Robert's change to more active behaviour reflected in the classroom situation? His attitude to work and his ability to concentrate improved between 9 and 11 years and by 12 he had lost his stammer. One of the most interesting aspects of Robert's behaviour was his ability to describe what was happening in his inner world.

"I wish I could wake", "I wish I could save myself".

"We'll change into men and become explorers".

"Oh, I'm drowning in milk and can do nothing about it." After saying this, he did in fact begin to do something about it as we have seen, first smashing his way out of the railway coach and then out of his bedroom. It was after these breakouts, that he said: "I've grown up to six feet now".

We find in Robert's acting the same alternation of old and new patterns of behaviour that we found in Janet, with the new slowly gaining on the old and leading to greater spontaneity and freedom of fantasy. Robert settled down well in his new school, after a rather timid start.

Steven was described by his teacher as a normal friendly boy but one who was too timid to be naughty. This phrase is interesting in view of his later behaviour. His school work was described as poor; he was unable to concentrate for long. He got on well in games, being boisterous but never fighting. He stuttered and found it difficult to get his words out.

My own impression of him was of a lively, friendly boy. He acted all through with great enthusiasm and showed the most interest in

the groups continuing. In the first 14 sessions, he talked a great deal about food. He said: "I'm starving" in a scene at school and "I'm hungry" at a scene in his home. In session five, he went to the shops and ordered: 6 ice creams, 6 rolls, 7 dishes of pie and mash, 6 dishes of fish and chips, a pot of jam and a jar of pickle and a pot of honey. He said in a scene at school in the same play: "I'll never get these sums right because I'm a bit in the head, Mum". This is interesting because 18 months later, during the last term of the experiment, when he was playing the father, he said of his son: " He's hungry, that's why he's gone mad". This association of hunger and madness suggests that on a half-conscious level, he realised the connection between his feelings of deprivation and the furious madness of his anger.

In session five, he began killing the other players; in session 8 he produced a machine gun. Up until then he had been mainly verbally aggressive; he was very fluent verbally and his stuttering, when it occurred, seemed more related to too many words wanting to come out rather than to any inhibition or fear of speaking.

As his aggression became more lethal, his obsession with food declined; it reappeared slightly on two later occasions: once when the head-mistress of whom they were all very fond, was leaving and again when the groups themselves were ending.

His aggression became specifically directed against his father in session 15, when he suggested blowing his father up in his car. He made explosive noises and laughed wildly as he said: "His car's all burning", but a few minutes later he urged his father to escape: "You'll burn to death. Jump out of your car", a dramatic example of his ambivalent feelings. During this play, Steven spoke of going into a tunnel; this is an image which is often associated with the process of getting into touch with repressed feelings. From this point on, Steven expressed in nearly every play, more explosive aggression than the other children. His way of finishing a play was to shoot the other players. He acted out some of his anger against his mother though this was less direct than that towards his father and was followed by self-directed aggression on one occasion. For example, in session 23, he said of his mother: "Oh, she'll drive me mad", and after that he shot himself. In session 44, he killed his mother in order to stop her moaning, then accused one of the girls of going mad and then proceeded to behave as if he was himself mad.

Steven engaged week after week, in what can only be described as an orgy of killing. He appeared to feel compelled to do so. He used

such phrases as: "I've got to blow everybody up", "I've got to kill them off". He acted with great energy and with a great fluency of ideas and he showed affection as well as being destructive.

His most important breakthrough came towards the end of the two years when he cast himself as: "The boy who invented the time-machine". He and another boy went back into Roman times. A very fierce gorilla got into the time-machine. The boys were afraid of being attacked by him, so Steven said: "Let's train him" and he gave him what he called friendly salts to keep him peaceable. Everytime he got aggressive they gave him more salts. In the end, Steven said four times: "He's nuts, this animal". It sounds as if he is speaking about himself, his sense of shock at the madness of his own aggression.

This play did indeed mark a turning point; already, before it, he was killing less often, afterwards the decline continued. In the next play, he said twice: "Get the gun" but later added: "They're not killed, just fired at". Other changes took place; he developed a delightful sense of humour and began to play with words. He explored being mad more openly.

This boy had obviously been under a lot of stress. What was surprising was that so little of it had been apparent in the classroom situation. His work showed an improvement at 11 years: he was rated as working steadily instead of being unable to concentrate and his stutter had disappeared. The acting groups had provided Steven with an opportunity to express his feelings of deprivation and his intense frustration. He was an emotional child and said that he found the work in class very boring. At secondary school, where he settled in well and was very happy, he became captain of the first year rugby team.

I don't want to give the impression that no good feelings were expressed in the plays; people who had been cut up were sometimes sewn together again. Real grief was shown on one or two occasions when people were killed. One play in particular stood out: in session 35, Robert and a girl called June set out to pick apples. Instead of fighting, they helped each other and shared them out. Later on, June cooked an apple crumble which they both enjoyed. This play was an exception because of its warm and friendly atmosphere. There were many very involved and exciting adventure and spy stories from the boys but, apart from these, the plays seemed to offer an opportunity for the children to release, over and over again, socially unacceptable impulses and, in doing so, to become less ambivalent. This was illustrated

on one or two occasions by a child suddenly speaking with power in his or her voice. It generally occurred in a dramatic situation and suggested that, for that particular moment, the child was speaking as a whole person, unambivalent, unconflicted, directly with all the power of her or his being.

What I learnt therefore from these groups is that children have an inner momentum towards change and development but that it has to be allowed to happen and we need to find ways either inside or outside school, of providing them with an opportunity to change. That we are not doing this is shown by the graffiti one sees, not to mention the outbreaks of violent behaviour. In north London in the last few weeks, I have seen the following: 'Kill rockers but don't kill mods', 'kill the winch' 'money kills' and 'the killing joke'. Written in large letters on a wall outside a comprehensive school were the words: 'The urge to destroy is a creative urge'. Now if that could have been said inside the school, in open discussion, would it have had to be written up outside? Expressing destructive feelings, as we have seen, can be a step towards being more spontaneously creative, so, in a sense, there is a sort of partial insight in that sentence.

If these conflicts of feeling are not resolved in childhood, then repressed aggressive feelings tend to be projected in adult life and form the basis of irrational fears that hinder the sort of creative thinking we so desperately need if we are to survive in the nuclear age.

Aron Gersh

WAVES OF TRANSFORMATION

Jean Houston and 'Mr. Thayer' at the Conference

Waves of transformation constantly wash up on the shores of time newly perceivable and perceived images of humankind. But to make a wave one needs to drop at least a pebble in the pool of time. Alas. Jean Houston was more like a meteor hitting a vast ocean. We really enjoyed her, and I'm sure she made many waves. (The flood of imagery that has soaked and overpowered me since the conference is more than I can mention.) Many waves of transformation . . . in the spatio-temporal hologrammic sea of Life.

Yes. We enjoyed her wonderful wit, her poetry, her energy, her intelligence, her constant invocation of the archetypes and empowering