
SOME POST-CONFERENCE THOUGHTS ON VIOLENCE

by

Jill Hall

Violence is the only emotion that we know, a priori, must be diverted, converted or transformed. It is not enough just to acknowledge and express our violence as is fitting with our other human emotions.

Is this perhaps because it is not a **primary** emotion? Does it not, always, arise out of another feeling state and the denial and/or blockage of the flow of that state (thus preserving it as a 'state' or emotional position)? If so, we must look to its source and ground. We must reach it at its root.

Now, to look for the source of violence is not quite the same sort of search as to look for, say, the source of grief. For the source of grief is a **happening** in the world whereas the source of violence is another emotion which has been thwarted. It is therefore pointless to try to empty violence through catharsis although catharsis may clear the way to reveal the source emotion.

It seems to me that there are two strands to violence; each drawing on what might be thought of as opposite feelings and states of being. One strand stems from fear and the other from the stoppage of life's movement calling for expression - the stoppage of love. The first strand arises from a contracted state, a state of **dispiritedness** and

the resultant loss of the security, strength and well-being that comes from experiencing our spirited nature. Perhaps there is even an exact correspondence between the extent of the experienced powerlessness and the power grasped to redress the balance. The second strand arises from the process of expansion, the need to expand, which is then obstructed in some way and breaks through the barrier with violence. This strand is rooted in our spiritedness. It may carry the quality of righteous indignation and clarity while the former strand is riddled with guilt and clouded with defiant shame.

However different their sources, the violent actions flowing from either strand may be horribly similar to receive. There is therefore the need that they be contained and redirected. How that may best be achieved depends, in the first place, on recognition of the particular quality of the energy out of which the actions emerge. May I stress here that just because we recognize the workings of the life force at the base of some violence we must not fall into romanticizing the expression of that violence. Indeed I believe that, at the most fundamental level, **both** strands arise out of thwarted life force which, in some sense, insists on its right to be, although that insistence

is more deeply buried in the fear-dominated violence. There the being has lost confidence in that right, expects rejection and denial of love. But would the fury break out if there were not some sense of deep violation involved? Without that sense wouldn't the person simply wilt or fade? So, in dealing with violence in ourselves and others, as perpetrators and receivers, it is first necessary to acknowledge **the right to be** of all living things. After that we shall need to discover whether the violent feelings are fear-ridden or, instead, riding on the urge towards self-expression.

If they are fear-ridden, then the focus must be on providing conditions of safety; safety for all participants in the action. Traditionally however, violence of that sort has been dealt with by developing more and more efficient means of defence. Because we so readily identify with victimhood we feel justified in providing armour and weapons for ourselves in various forms, both concrete and psychological. But that only increases the fear level rather than decreasing it. It increases the fear in those with the original violent feelings (so that they feel even more violent) while it also justifies and reinforces both parties in their fear of each other.

What is needed is quite the opposite response. Conditions of safety must be sought **for the whole happening** - for all participants - a common safety net to hold the gestalt, rather than one lot endeavouring to feel safe **against** the other lot and at the expense of the other's sense of

security. We must endeavour to create just those conditions where it is all right to feel the fear - and the anger that flows from that fear. We must enable the violent one to feel safe rather than to feel even more threatened. If, instead, we alter the reality by adding more defences and weapons of defence, then the fear becomes re-grounded in the new reality and we have reached a point where safety is no longer available. Then violence reigns - either openly until it is spent, or covertly while being itself violently contained, but ever ready to re-emerge in full force when the constraints ease or tire.

The common holding, the underlying safety net of recognition of each individual's right to be, is one of the arts of life yet to be fully developed. We practise it in the best Group work. We need to find ways of creating it elsewhere, in daily life. In the face of violence, let our first concern and challenge have to do with raising the safety level for everyone present. And, to that end, rather than immediately searching for ways to aid our **own** safety (in opposition to that of the violent person or persons) let us instead ask ourselves how we may raise the safety level of the **violent** person. Such a response calls for an expansion of consciousness to include the other person(s) rather than a retreat into our own shell. And that means an awareness of the whole; living the gestalt. So easy to talk about in Humanistic Psychology courses, but can we do it?

This is not some impossible ideal. It is based on changing direction, changing our focus of energy, in such situations. It does not demand that

human nature be other than what it is, does not require that we start off as utterly different beings - the usual basis of over hopeful and thus hopeless idealism.

As well as looking to the safety of all participants in a potentially violent interaction we have to look to the art of 'saving face'. Anyone prone to violence will very likely be having ego difficulties. These may take the form of inflation, or poor self-image or, in some cases, loss of ego boundaries (containment of a special kind would be needed here). Because violence often erupts out of humiliation, the worst response must surely be one which humiliates even further. However appalling the behaviour, some way through some space - some opportunity for self-respect, even for pride if need be, must be offered. Such an offering may be, indeed needs to be, truly creative and, as such, carries the rewards of any creative endeavour. It can utterly transform the situation.

Somewhat similar to that is the fruitful response to those (including ourselves) whose violence sometimes springs from the second strand mentioned earlier: the thwarted need to express the movement and unfolding of the life and love within each of us. Dangerous behaviour results from the combination of highly aroused energy and blockage. The compression that results leads to explosiveness - the volcanic phenomenon of the psyche. The power of the life energy in each of us must be respected. Release for the expanding energy is essential. Whatever behaviour has to be contained, in ourselves as well as in

others, we must always see to it that expression of some kind is allowed. And we need to be inventive in finding as many ways as possible. Often the most unexpected ways, new ways, bizarre and surprising ways, will carry the expansive energy more satisfyingly. We must never simply shut down; never totally obstruct those forces, in ourselves or in others, whatever appalling expression is emanating from us or from them.

We need to develop the art of conversion and diversion; the art of transformation rather than distortion. We all need to be alchemists of life.

It does seem to me that violence is not a primary emotion; not an intrinsic part of human nature. It is, rather, an habitual response to the denial of our human nature. Were we no longer to have feelings of violence, we would not therefore be less human. We should, instead be powerfully energized at such times, and much displacement and reorganization would take place, but the destruction of one form to enable another to emerge is a completely different order of happening from the destruction of a form because of fear of one's own destruction; here the act of destroying is the eclipse of being rather than the furtherance of being.

We should be cautious about any legitimization of acts of violence through appreciation of some Goddess figure; and wary of confusing humankind's destructiveness with nature's ever moving cycles of regeneration. There were

moments at the conference when I felt that we were in danger of laying our stuff on Mother once again - only at a more advanced level. (If She does it, so can we!) I realize that the awesome, powerful title 'Violence and Spirituality' which had drawn me to the conference also engendered, in me at least, an openness to the archetypal level at the expense perhaps of the practical level.

I am arguing then that, in any situation of violent confrontation in which we are participating, what is needed is a sharpening of awareness in order to find ways, fitting to the living situation of that moment, of creating truly safe conditions for the organic completion of the innate need to express life.

This holds not only on the personal level but also on the level of national and international action. Avoidance of humiliation by finding ways for the face-saving of national pride was not sought, for example, in the case of Germany after the first World War, leaving that humiliated nation ready ground for the boosting, purposeful nationalism of Hitler. Such avoidance, and easing the fear level of the nation considered to be the most violent, will probably be the main concern on the international front whereas internal conflict may more often require an understanding of the 'rebel' need for recognition and paths of expansion.

AN ELDERLY ISSUE

by

Mark Matthews

I have an elderly aunt who has turned to me for help and guidance. The elderly issue is in this sense very personal and indeed painful. While attempting to resolve some of the questions which arose I spoke with the editor in the hope that he could refer me to someone for advice. During our talks we both realised that a special issue of *Self and Society* devoted to the role of Humanistic Psychology with the elderly, would be a good idea.

During my personal enquiries I have found two reports. The first by the Council of Europe deals with care for the elderly at home and the second by the Health Advisory Service (Annual Report) deals with various aspects of care for the elderly. Both stress the fact that the independence, responsibility and involvement of the elderly must be respected. This is not just because it is their right but because there is evidence that 'growth' or learning