

Build Babies – Not Jails

Thomas Verny

Abstract: This paper, from JOPPPAH's Archives is excerpted from the opening address at APPPAH's 7th International Congress in September of 1995. These words from Dr. Verny are even more valuable today.

It takes much neglect, rejection, humiliation, physical maltreatment, and sexual abuse to transform a tiny, trusting, innocent human being into a callous, cruel, and vicious person. This paper examines some of the factors that lead to the development of the violent personality from conception on. It is suggested that the answer to violence is not state violence. The answer is conscious prenatal and postnatal parenting supported by social institutions, laws, and practices which attend to the needs of pregnant parents, particularly the disadvantaged. Our motto should be: BUILD BABIES - NOT JAILS.

One of the wonderful things that has marked our meetings, from the beginning, has been the warmth of the participants and the depth of their interactions. By joining our energies we form a community that deeply cares about our fellow human beings, both those already born and those not yet born. What we do here is, for me, not just scientific or psychological or humanistic work. It is sacred work.

The Greeks have a word for it, "temenos." Originally, it referred to a piece of land, often a grove, set apart and dedicated to a god. In Jungian psychology, temenos is a place where one meets one's unconscious, a place endowed with meaning and purpose. I think it is helpful for us to consider this Congress such a sacred space, a ritual space, a hermetic vessel in which work is done. In ancient times, human beings entered and left a ritual space over a ceremonial threshold, or limen. Entering it required some ritual preparation by the worshipper. The physical location also needed some preparation to set it apart. All these things we have done; we prepared ourselves for weeks, we journeyed, we registered, we crossed

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the threshold with our badges, into this hall that was decorated with flowers, banners, microphones, etc. Once inside that ceremonial place, both time and space become changed and charged with a higher purpose.

Being in this holy psychic space facilitates transformation. Enjoying ritual space is an intimate and imaginative act, and it requires heat of some sort, like the heat of desire or the passion for love, truth, spirituality, beauty, and art. Ancient healers and their modern counterparts, psychotherapists, have recognized that to change people in a deep and lasting way one must affect them on an emotional level. Intellectual insights without gut and heart insights are virtually useless.

Another important aspect of ritual space is that it is clearly demarcated from the rest of the world. In both Western and Eastern traditions, the walled garden often symbolized the inner self or soul of man. Walls and fences offer protection, wholeness and centeredness. Mandalas, marriage bands, crowns on royalty, halos of saints and angels, etc., are examples of circles representing states of perfection and unity. By the same token there is always the danger, and we must guard against it, that a circle becomes a paranoid enclosure, a protection against what is feared, like circling the wagons against Indian attacks or excluding a certain type of person from this club or that university department. I don't think that this Association has ever been guilty of excluding anyone who wanted to belong to it. But we should keep in mind that being on the side of angels, i.e., motherhood and babyhood and in opposition to all the evils of the world, once in a while makes us feel as if we are the only good and decent people left on this planet.

In this ritual space we shall experience the whole gamut of feelings from sadness to joy, we shall learn a lot about ourselves, our jobs, our world. We shall make friends. Hardly anyone will leave here without being affected in some way. This process will be facilitated if we do our utmost to support the ritual space of the Congress by keeping it intact and adding heat to it. Therefore, we should make every effort to avoid creating leakage out of our container. I am talking about protecting the energy system that builds up in a room such as this when men and women earnestly and passionately talk about issues that deeply affect their lives. We want to keep that excitement here, with us, so that we can build on it each hour and every day. I encourage you to spend time with other participants during breaks, dinners, and free time. Try to stay with people from the conference. Keep talking, feeling, cooking.

You will need that heat and strength to deal with the subject matter of this Congress: Birth and Violence. The statistics alone are shocking. Here are just a few to start you off. Did you know there are more gun dealers in America than gas stations? That homicide is the leading cause of death among young African American males? That, according to the FBI Uniform Crime Report, in 1960 the violent crime rate was 161 per 100,000 people. In 1992, that rate was 758 per 100,000 people, an increase

of 371%. [Updated to 2016, this rate was 386.3 per 100,000 people. Sounds great, compared to 1992, but the rate in 2016 represented a 3.4% increase over 2015. Is this a potential precursor to a return to the levels of violent crime experienced in the early 1990s?]

But violent crime as reflected in law enforcement statistics is just the most visible tip of the iceberg of human destructive behavior. Other forms of violence which are often just as awful do not get reported to the police. For example, the Anti-Slavery Society in Sidney, Australia estimates that between 104 and 146 million Asian children, some as young as four, are forced to work in appalling conditions in factories mostly in India but also in Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and other Asian countries. Recently, here in California, the FBI discovered the existence of sweatshops where immigrants were held in virtual slavery and forced to work 12 to 14 hour days with little or no pay. Surely, the people who enforce such conditions on others are violating them in the worst way. And what about the millions of women and children who are the victims of sexual and physical abuse in their own homes? Isn't that violence? Even more prevalent and destructive than all of the above is the violence that leaves no physical scars, only deep psychological wounds: The mental torment of put-downs, sarcasm, cruel criticism, and harsh words said with contempt. As bullets kill the body, so humiliation and degradation kill the spirit.

Murdering a person is tragic for that person and their family and friends. Doing violence to a child's self-esteem is, in a social sense, a potentially worse crime. Those who injure a child's spirit create a human being filled with anger and rage: a walking time bomb who is ready to explode at the slightest provocation and thus perpetuates this horrific chain of violence.

Just a few weeks ago I watched on PBS, "A Bill Moyers Special: What Can We Do About Violence." Obviously, this is becoming a hot topic. At one point Moyers was interviewing young killers in a prison. Many of these youngsters said that they loved violence. One guy said, "When I saw a fight, I would jump in, I didn't care who was fighting." Another young man was asked by Bill Moyers why he had killed.

"Were you on drugs?"

"No, I was not," answered the prisoner.

"It was a fight then," offered Moyers helpfully.

"No, it wasn't a fight. I was just in a real bad mood, I just unleashed all my anger."

"How did you kill him?"

"I killed him with a piece of wood."

"What were you mad at?"

"Everything. It started when I was 11 and my parents divorced, after that I was filled with anger and resentment."

When we speak of violence, let us remember that we are speaking of behaviors and attitudes that are brutal and cruel without regard to the feelings or rights of others, with no thought given to how these acts will affect others now or in the future. The perpetrators of violence pretend to themselves that their victims fully deserve what they are getting. They brought it on themselves. Or, it's them against us. If they had the chance, the perpetrators think, they would do this to me. I'm only protecting me or what's mine or my country. Also, often the victims are perceived to be subhuman, such as women and children, or different in a religious or racial sense.

Obviously, viewing this sorry state of affairs we can detect the interplay of complex social, political, psychological, ethnic, cultural, religious, and biological forces. Scientists are usually attracted to the study of one of these areas and spend their whole life developing an expertise in that area until they come to believe that they have found the philosopher's stone, so to speak, the ultimate, the definitive answer. It reminds me of the story of the five blind men and the elephant. If you have heard it before, just bear with me. An Indian rajah asks five blind men to examine an elephant and then tell him what an elephant looks like. The first blind man happens to touch the leg of the elephant and so he describes the elephant as being like a tree with wrinkled tough skin; the second blind man feels the tusks of the elephant, the third the tail, the fourth the ear, etc., and they describe him accordingly. And each of them, of course, speaks of the whole elephant in terms of the part that he examined. Much scientific research is like that, narrowly focused and lacking synthesis. Proponents of divergent perspectives, theories or solutions hardly ever talk to each other and therefore, never gain an overview of the subject.

The literature on violence illustrates well this attitude of compartmentalization. For example, James Wilson, Professor of Public Policy, UCLA, says that 60% of all serious crimes in the U.S. are committed by 5% of young males. These boy-criminals are characterized by low verbal IQ, poor school performance, early drug experimentation, few friends, and parents with criminal records. I am sure that this is true. But, what is the cause of these children's low verbal IQ, poor school performance, parents with criminal records, etc.? Is it all due to sociological factors, as Prof. Wilson seems to think? Speaking of parents, did you know that two out of five children today are brought up in fatherless homes? The problem is even worse in the African American community where three out of five children live in father-absent homes.

Another example of scientists basing their theories on a narrow experience of violence may be gleaned from the remarks of Deborah Prothrow-Stith, M.D., Harvard School of Public Health. She advocates primary prevention of violence by focusing on social and cultural issues such as changing the way we deal with anger, changing the way we define

the hero, and changing the way we respond to conflict. Secondary prevention would entail locating children at risk and then offering them remedial education, counseling, and adult mentors. Tertiary prevention is the domain of the criminal justice system which, by putting the criminals behind bars, attempts to do some damage control.

Do you get the feeling that we missed something here? Before we try to change how a youngster deals with anger should we not inquire as to the antecedent causes of his anger, where and how did it really begin? To my mind most of the existing models, explanations, and prevention and treatment programs that deal with violence in our society do as much good as closing the barn door after the horses have left. It is too little, too late and too costly. It is like trying to rebuild a house after it was hit by an earthquake from the first floor up neglecting the cracks in the foundation.

Let's deal with the foundation first. Isn't primary prevention about preventing the disease from developing in the first place? And where does a person first experience feelings of love, rejection, anxiety, and sadness? Where does a person first learn about people and the world? Where are basic character traits formed? It is axiomatic to me that the answer to all these questions is: prenatally. The moment we are conceived we start to develop physically and mentally and are affected physically and mentally by our environment.

Prof. Wilson, who I quoted earlier, also said the following about young offenders: "They tend to have difficulty putting themselves into another person's shoes and feeling as they feel." In other words, they are incapable of empathy, they lack a conscience. Conscience, love, and trust are precious flowers that only thrive on loving, caring prenatal and postnatal communication. I don't think that we would be far wrong if we conceptualized human destructive behavior as a disease of bonding.

I do not claim that dysfunctional bonding is the sole cause of violence. Obviously, the causes are multi-factorial and one should try to deal with all of them. It is not my intent to minimize the effects of poverty, deprivation, disruption of families, unemployment, the influence of television, and other social and cultural factors. What I am suggesting is that the one area of study, in fact the area that may be responsible for a large part of the problem, has been virtually ignored by those responsible for understanding, preventing, and controlling violence in our society. Therefore, it falls upon us to make this information available to them.

To explore the origins of human destructive behavior is a daunting task. Yet this is what we have met here to do. I believe we can accomplish it. We are bound together by our history, by common goals and shared ideals. We are not assembled here by chance. We are here by choice, in this special place and time, in this temenos, in this ritual space made sacred by our dedication to help unborn children and their parents develop their full human potential. The antidote to violence is love and it needs to start at conception.

I would like to end by reading to you a short poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado.

The wind, one brilliant day, called
to my soul with an odor of jasmine.

‘In return for the odor of my jasmine,
I’d like all the odor of your roses.’

‘I have no roses; all the flowers
in my garden are dead.’

‘Well then, I’ll take the withered petals
and the yellow leaves and the waters of the fountain.’

the wind left. And I wept. And I said to myself:
What have you done with the garden that was entrusted to you?’

Anyone who challenges scientific or religious (sometimes there’s not much difference) theories and practices runs the risk of criticism and rejection by his or her colleagues or friends. If, in spite of such obstacles and hardships, you do go out into the world and attempt to change things for the better, whether you succeed or not, at least when the wind, one brilliant day, calls on your soul with an aroma of jasmine, you will have in your garden some beautiful roses growing instead of dried up petals. Together we can find ways to promote and protect the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of unborn babies and children. In the context of our discussions on violence let us resolve to put our energies into creating healthy babies not crowded jails. I say, let us BUILD BABIES, NOT JAILS.