

## Considering Violence

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It would be hard to make the claim that violence is not a normal part of human behavior. We only have to look around us, and not very far at that. It's everywhere. We see it on television and in the movies. Closer to home, we see it on our local news. Reports of violence and its consequences fill the airwaves. Sometimes we see it in our homes.

There are the big examples, like the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the largest single act of violence ever committed, killing approximately 135,000 people. Then there is the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis in the Second World War, and 1.5 million Cambodians were murdered in the 1970's as a result of a plan to reshape a pastoral Buddhist nation into a centralized labor collective state. And then there's the Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, and more.

But there are also the smaller examples we see every day – unless we avert our eyes. Just this week there was a report of a New Jersey man who suspected his wife of infidelity and murdered her in front of their two young children, and eventually killing himself. A man was shot with a handgun early Thursday morning on Bethlehem's Fourth Street. The day before, a man was shot in the hip. Nearly every day we hear reports of some injury or death resulting from either a felony or a fight, and the perpetrator and victims are rarely strangers to one another.

No, it doesn't seem likely that we can make a case for violence being abnormal. It's too common for that. We might not like it. We might disapprove. We might try to stop it, but we have about 5,000 years of history that suggests that it's not going away.

Some of the oldest stories at the heart of our civilizations are about violence, betrayal, and murder. The Bible tells the story of Cain, who killed his brother, Abel, out of jealousy and anger. It tells the story of Joseph, whose resentful brothers considered murdering him but decided to sell him into slavery instead – a sure death sentence anyway.

These stories had twists, though, that might seem odd to those who expect Old Testament morality to be based on punishment and retribution. In Cain's case he is sent into exile but protected from vengeance by a special mark. In Joseph's case, Joseph eventually ends up as a powerful Egyptian administrator to whom his unwitting brothers turn for help during a famine. And far from punishing them, Joseph forgives them and gives them all they need and more.

The message here seems to be more harm reduction and reconciliation than harsh judgment. Even the ever-popular Bible passage used to justify proportional retribution, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," turns out to mean something different from what many usually assume. It came during a time of lawlessness – sort of like America's wild west – when the response to a theft or an injury might be to murder an entire family or wipe out a whole village in revenge. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was intended to limit response to no more than the original offense, not as a requirement for revenge.

When we see violence as an enduring dimension of human behavior, we can begin to see its patterns and depths. For example, violence is not a simple single thing. It is murder, of course, but it's also hitting, striking, punching, slashing or stabbing that doesn't result in death. We find it in physical dominance through direct or implied threats we may call bullying. But when we take a look at bullying, we see that it includes hateful speech as well as physical aggression.

So complete is the integration of this kind of social violence into human society that researchers have found one song – one song that's shared by every culture they studied and it always has the same meaning: na na-na na na.

So subtle are the layers of violence in our culture that it's hard to find a place where they cannot be found. We can even find self-inflicted violence. Some people can internalize violence so completely that self-injury seems normal to them. Some people cut themselves. Others abuse drugs or alcohol.

Some people pull their own hair. I'm personally familiar with this one. I experienced a particularly stressful time when I was in sixth grade. I was in a class taught by a teacher who thought the best way to encourage learning was through intimidation and stress, an approach that drove me nuts (and it was a short trip). I

had no idea of what I was going through or how to deal with it. But I found that if I pulled large bunches of hair out of my head the pain seemed like a warmth that tingled down my body, soothing me and making me feel better. There was often a large pile of hair under my desk by the end of the school day. No one noticed. Fortunately, the seventh grade was less stressful and the pulling stopped.

Some people do a kind of self-injury that doesn't involve hair-pulling. They become so accustomed to feelings of shame, sadness, depression, or guilt that they can generate them all on their own. They can live on the razor's edge of emotional trauma where the slightest suggestion of criticism, pain, or sadness can cause an upwelling of negative feelings that seem unavoidable, even natural. But it is still a form of self-injury.

So, where do all these impulses and feelings come from? How is it that they can seem so authoritative and urgent?

Well, for this we need to return to the primordial ooze at the dawn of time and evolution. Single cell creatures functioned with a very simple set of operating instructions. Everything they encountered was either good, bad, or neutral. Everything either was food to be eaten or things that wanted to eat them. Anything else was neutral.

Evolution progressed and simple nervous systems appeared. This added depth and complexity to the simple evaluations. We have the beginning of pleasure and pain – things to desire and things to fear, as well as those that are neutral and mostly don't matter.

Although these nervous systems increased in complexity over time they were still based on the simple survival algorithm that classified stimuli into the categories of positive, negative, and neutral. This is the province of what has been called the "lizard brain" in humans. The brain stem including the hypothalamus and amygdala, the emotional circuitry also called the "limbic system" that is the province of what has been called the "four f's," – fight, flight, food, and . . . reproduction.

The four f's represent very real aspects of human experience and violence will continue to be normal as long as we experience the fears, hungers and passions of the limbic system as authoritative sources of self-knowledge. These judgments

are rooted in a dualistic information processing protocol that precedes logic, reason, or creativity.

When stimulated, our limbic system can generate strong feelings that are real, but not necessarily appropriate. I remember a time when I was on the high school wrestling team. We were working out, exercising together. We'd done a period of work on the floor – leg lifts, sit-ups, and so on – and then we stood up. I think we were starting to do jumping jacks. I noticed that the boy on my right hadn't gotten up. So, from a feeling of what seemed to me like playful teasing, I poked gently poked him a couple of times with my toe. Suddenly, before I knew what was happening, he was on his feet, raining punch after punch on my face and head. Others stepped in and pulled him away, but my confusion endured. I had never before encountered someone who considered physical violence to be a normal, automatic response.

I didn't know what life experiences led him to feel that way, but it was clear that he believed that I deserved a beating.

I've since learned that violence can be encouraged by circumstances and experience. Someone who was beaten as a child is more likely to beat his or her own children as adults. We're all aware of the power of mob psychology to override normal impulse control to commit acts of violence that no single individual would have done alone.

And the ravages of war can so overwhelm the capacity of the limbic system to understand or interpret the situation that all semblance of reason is lost, as Claude Anshin Thomas related in his book about his experience in Vietnam, called *At Hell's Gate*:

*During basic training I was taught to hate. On the firing range we were shooting at targets that resembled people. We were learning to kill human beings. We had to be taught how to do that – that is the work of the military. . . .*

*I focused my range on the enemy. The enemy was everyone unlike me, everyone who was not an American soldier. . . Soldiers are trained to see anything other as dangerous, threatening, and potentially*

*deadly. You dehumanize the enemy. You dehumanize yourself. My military training ultimately taught me to dehumanize a whole race of people. There was no distinction between the Vietcong, the regular Vietnamese army, and the Vietnamese population. . . . The only experience I had with the Vietnamese people was that they were my enemy. Every one of them: shopkeepers, farmers, women, children, babies. . . .*

*On [one] occasion the infantry unit that our company supported began to receive heavy automatic weapons fire from a village, so they radioed us and asked for help. We flew in a heavy-fire team . . . opened fire, and without thought destroyed the entire village. We destroyed everything. The killing was complete madness. There was nothing there that was not the enemy. We killed everything that moved: men, women, children, water buffalo, dogs, chickens. Without any feeling, without any thought. Simply out of this madness. We destroyed buildings, trees, wagons, baskets, everything. All that remained when we were finished were dead bodies, fire, and smoke. It was all like a dream; it didn't feel real. Yet every act that I was committing was very real.*

Killing is a very real thing. But in order to be able to kill, people need to separate themselves from reality. This is accomplished by allowing our lizard brain impulses to overpower our minds. When the lizard brain is in charge, it takes charge of rationality and bends it to its own ends of rationalizing, justifying, and committing mayhem – whether against an enemy, a friend, or oneself.

Unfortunately, our culture is so thoroughly dominated by this kind of thinking that it can be difficult to imagine anything else. We base our decisions on the belief that violence can only be controlled or contained by violence. Our legal system is based on it. Our prison system is based on it. When one violates a law, one is punished. What is prison but another kind of violence, a kind of violence that doesn't take a person's life but takes away its freedom, its hopes, its dreams.

The lizard brain's limbic policy is control through violence, dominance, and repression – and if we look carefully at our culture, we can clearly see that this kind

of thinking is at its root. In our quieter hours we know that violence only begets violence. We cannot end war by fighting any more than we can end hunger by doing away with food. As Einstein said, "You cannot simultaneously prepare for war and plan for peace. If war really solved anything, wouldn't the world already be at peace?"

This would all seem hopeless if there wasn't a better way, but there is another way. Humans evolved a cerebral cortex which makes complex creative thought possible. Of course, given the degree to which the lizard brain's dominance has been established, our higher brain functions are usually enlisted on the behalf of those primal struggles, the four f's. Adding imagination to the mix, though, makes it possible to fear entirely new things, like death or shame or social inferiority. We can even learn to reclassify neutral feelings as negative by calling them boredom.

But when we can make our home in our higher brain functions, they can give us a way to safely contain the powerful emotions of the lizard brain. We can open ourselves to new ways to manage them that don't involve guilt, repression, shame, domination, or violence. But this can be very, very hard to do – after all, we are attempting to transcend millions of years of evolutionary priorities. It doesn't happen just because we may think it's a good idea.

This is where religion comes in; this is what it is for. Our cerebral cortex gives us the ability to think creatively, see the connections between things in ways that the lizard brain cannot. The lizard brain is concerned with self and survival, perhaps extending that to immediate family. Everything else is either a resource to be used or a threat to be contained.

But our higher brain functions can expand our sense of self beyond those narrow limits. Religion is intended to encourage this kind generous expansion through imagination and empathy. It encourages us to base our values, actions, and decisions on a logic radically different from the limited purview of the limbic system. In the words of the Third Zen Patriarch, "To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. . . . Simply say when doubts arise 'Not two.' In this 'not two' nothing is separate, nothing is excluded. No matter when or where, enlightenment means entering this truth."

This doesn't mean that we exclude our primal valuations of positive, negative, or neutral from our minds, but that we use them as sources of information rather than seeing them as authoritative. We can learn to see them as an integral part of living in the world rather than as a source of truth.

Of course, religions are often hijacked by those still enmeshed in the limbic policies of management and control. It's easy to see when this happens because then they become systems of shame, guilt, and violence, rather than enlightenment, peace, and joy.

The thing about the religious strategy of putting our cerebral cortex in charge over our lizard brain instead of the other way around is that it takes practice. It doesn't come about because we just happen to decide that it's a good idea. It represents a radical departure from the way we use our minds to evaluate our experience of the world.

And so it takes practice. We're all already really, really good at using our brains to justify our impulses; so good, in fact, that we will usually be able to convince ourselves that's not what we're doing; that we're just dealing with reality. Using our higher brain functions to understand and integrate our emotions and impulses involves a change so radical that it's been called transformation rather than growth, more like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly than a puppy becoming a dog.

This transformation is so radical that, for many, the best way to describe it is through the metaphor of death and resurrection. Because our limbic system thinks it's in charge of survival it will tell us in no uncertain terms that putting any other part of our brains in charge is madness – an abdication of our responsibility to survive.

This is where the sayings like, "Whoever would save their life will lose it," comes from.

There's another saying from the teachings of Jesus that illustrates this challenge. It's from the *Gospel of Thomas*, which was suppressed by some early Christians who favored a religion based on belief more than one that focused on the practice of doing the hard work of transformation.

This saying refers to a lion, which in this context, refers to the powerful impulses and emotions of the lizard brain. It points out the risk of making the wrong choice as to which brain we put in charge of ourselves.

It says, “Blessed is the lion which the person eats and the lion will become person; and cursed is the person whom the lion eats and the lion will become person.”

If we allow ourselves to be eaten by the lion, if we allow our primal passions and impulses to set our agendas, those passions will rule our lives, even if we use our intellect to construct elaborate explanations of how reason is really in charge.

But if we eat the lion, we take charge and possession of those impulses. We don’t lose them, in fact their strength becomes our strength, but in ways that can serve higher ends than the lizard brain can imagine.

One of the most persistent messages our lizard brain gives us is that if we give control of our lives to our higher creative functions, we will lose our power and passion, the depth and vitality of our experience. Don’t believe it. The avenue of religious, spiritual practice can bring us to a place far beyond violence, beyond judgment, beyond fear and anxiety, where we can live freely in loving, joyous selfhood and community.

As Rumi wrote, “Beyond our ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase, ‘each other,’ doesn’t make sense anymore.”

I’ll meet you there.

May it be so.