

Violence and Non-Violence Huston Smith

Violence can occur in many spheres of life and I will note three: the public sphere (the crisis in the Middle East is a current example of that), the interpersonal sphere, and the personal sphere (we can be violent towards ourselves). I'm going to begin with the public sphere. The greatest danger or threat to peace in the nineteenth century was nationalism. The greatest threat to peace in the twentieth century was ideology as nations lined up on both sides of the iron curtain. But with the collapse of ideology and the end of the cold war, the greatest danger to peace in the twenty-first century is going to be ethnic conflict.

As a student of religion, I'll say these conflicts are not really religious anymore. When new religions emerged—Buddhism out of Hinduism, Christianity out of Judaism, and Islam out of those two, there were religious wars because it was differences in theology that brought the conflict. But now, despite what the media tells us, these are not religious wars. They are political wars. In the Middle East today the Muslim couldn't care less what the Jews believe. Actually the difference in beliefs between the two factions is negligible compared with the burning issue of hatred and the memories of atrocities unavenged.

I caught a news clip when Bosnia was a centre of ethnic conflict and it went like this: The interviewer said, 'Are there any Serbians here?' (This was in a Serbian village.) The interviewer then said to the Serb, 'Are there any Muslims in your village?' She said, 'No. What would you do if there was one?' 'Well! We would tell him to leave and if he didn't, we would kill him.' 'Why?' 'Because that's what they did to us four hundred years ago.'

This is the burning factor in ethnic conflicts today: atrocities that have not been avenged. And somehow or other, we're going to have to stop driving ahead while looking only at the rear-view mirror, but that's going to be very difficult to do. Fortunately, with enough problems to make one despair, we do have great heroes and we have great successes. The chief among them is Mahatma Gandhi, who freed a continent through non-violence from the 200 years' oppression of colonialism. His followers were Martin Luther King, who succeeded in the basic aim of the Afro-American freedom movement in the USA, and Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The latter made a wise statement when he was elected president. He said: 'There has been great suffering caused by the Caucasian Afrikaner to our people and we can't just sweep it under the rug. However, there can be no future without forgiveness.'

I'll stop discussing the public violence and move to the interpersonal. This is affected so much by the press, television and video. The amount of violence that doubles for entertainment is just horrendous. I've heard that the mothers are thinking of getting together and organizing a march maybe across the Bay Bridge or somewhere else to boycott the advertisers that turn to violence as the chief mode of selling products. Here is one incident that happened a few days back. We work closely with Tibetan immigrants, and actually have a single mother and her son living in our basement apartment downstairs.

And she was telling us about another Tibetan family she knew. They have a boy, four years old, and one of the children during a visit said something that the four-year-old didn't like. He went out into the kitchen and got a butcher knife and came in and said: 'I'm going to kill you!' What appalled the Tibetan in our house telling this story was that the boy's mother laughed. The narrator was appalled that this has become a laughable matter in our culture. In interpersonal relations, so much depends on the words we use.

In the book *Non-violent Communication* the author points out how much depends on language—the tone and the words that are used—some can push levers of anger and others may have an opposite effect. I'll tell you a different incident that happened, again, a few days ago, the day when the trains weren't running from Berkeley to San Francisco. I needed to go to an editorial conference and I don't drive in the San Francisco area. I went to the Berkeley station and got the news that there were no trains. There were hardly any people at the station. I needed to get the word to my publisher that I wouldn't be there for the one o'clock appointment but my ears can't manage modern phones. I tried, and a taped voice gave me some choices and I couldn't figure out what I was doing. There was a man near by and he may have been a street person. He certainly was a very poorly dressed Afro-American, and I approached him. This wasn't out of my virtue. It was out of my need. I needed help. And so I explained my situation and asked him if he would listen to the response and tell me how to proceed. At first, at my approach he seemed sort of alarmed and uncomfortable. But when he found a person in need and that he could help, his manner changed completely. He was just as helpful as he could be, and my message went across. I thanked him sincerely. And that happened to be one of the 'up' moments on interpersonal communications.

And now I want to come to what we don't think about as often. I may not have thought about it if I hadn't been married to a psychologist. The third is the private dimension of violence. There can be violence to one's self, born of self-hatred. There was a book I came upon, written by a psychoanalyst. I can't even remember the title, but it had a shocking thesis that often people's major problem is they set up actions that are sure to fail because this would reinforce their deep conviction that they personally are worthless. Psychological studies have shown that people when asked to put down their good points and their bad points invariably have a far longer list of bad points—maybe three times longer than the list of virtues they acknowledged.

Now all of this—and here I come to my concluding thesis—comes down to the modern behavioural model of the human self. Dan Goldman, who is the Behavioural Science Editor for the *New York Times*, says that the closest we come to having a model of the human self is Freudianism. And it is not an inspiring model because, as you know, it proposes that the basic human drives are sex and aggression. Human beings are animals who draw pictures of themselves in their mind and then spend their life to living up to their pictures. Now, with such a poor model of the human self, is it any wonder that we are seen to live and behave badly? What I just want to say is that not all human history has depicted humans living in terms of a poor model of the human self. Quite the opposite. Until the modern era, everybody, all the other cultures—and this is an area I have some expertise in—believed that we human beings were descendants from the

Divine. And that means that we have the reflection of the Divine within us. I will give you just two examples coming out of this traditional view. We have a six-year-old grandson in San Jose and once a month we drive down to recharge our batteries by keeping him out of school. We don't go on the same day because neither of us is willing to share his attention with the other. And this story, again, comes from Kendra the last time she went down. When they went to the neighbourhood playground, they found two children already on the swings and slide. A girl of about eight and a boy, maybe five, presumably her brother. And you know how children are. Without patience or preliminary, the girl asked Kendra, 'What are we?' Kendra squinted a little bit and said, 'Well, I don't know ... Vietnamese?' 'No.' 'Korean?' 'No!' with a touch of irritation entering. And when Kendra ventured a third mistaken guess, the irritation erupted.

The girl said, 'No, what are we?' Kendra, at that point, thinking that maybe if the girl knew the answer she would paraphrase the question a little bit better just said, 'I give up. What are you?' And the girl said, 'We are brother and sister, and so we love each other. And our grandmother tells us that if we love her, when we become grandparents, our grandchildren will love us.' Well, out of the mouth of babes. In our secular, cynical times it may take a child who hasn't been too much indoctrinated—and maybe one of Asian extraction too—to first of all pose the right question: not 'who are we?' which points to differences, but 'what are we? what is our basic nature?' And her answer was equally on the mark. Our basic nature is relatedness.

We are all brothers and sisters, and the heart of that relatedness is love. Now this is a view of human nature that can inspire. A very encouraging sign in the West is a revised theory of human nature that stems basically from the work of a little-known psychologist, Ian Suttie, a Scot who spent his life in studying child development. And his thesis was that Freud's postulate of the two basic drives—sex and aggression—was wrong. From years of watching infants, he became convinced that the primary impulse in the child is an outreach for communion and communication.

In that earliest situation the only thing it has to give to its mother is its body and its adoring eyes on her face, which of course elicit an adoring returning gaze. The infant will gurgle and smile and then the mother's response is escalated in seeing that. That response is a mode of flirtation. And Ian Suttie said that is the most primitive, most original outreach from the child. No one knows Suttie but everybody in psychology knows the person who picked up his theory, John Bulby. And so I leave you with a note of hope that perhaps our uninspiring vision of our self will be replaced by the traditional inspiring vision of goodness as being the most fundamental element within us.