

# *Of Peace and Violence*

A Sermon Delivered on March 7, 2010  
by  
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Not only do most people accept violence  
if it is perpetuated by legitimate authority,  
they also regard violence against certain kinds of people  
as inherently legitimate, no matter who commits it.”  
-- Edgar R. Friedenberg*

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**Meditation:** a poem by Alice Walker entitled “S M”

I tell you, Chickadee  
I am afraid of people  
who cannot cry  
Tears left unshed  
turn to poison  
in the ducts  
Ask the next soldier you see  
enjoying a massacre  
if this is not so.

People who do not cry  
are victims  
of soul mutilation  
paid for in Marlboros  
and trucks.

Resist.

Violence does not work  
except for the man  
who pays your salary  
Who knows  
if you could still weep  
you would not take the job.

**Reading:** by the Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron, from *Practicing Peace in Times of War* (p. 18)

Jarvis Masters, who is a prisoner on death row, has written one of my favorite spiritual books, called *Finding Freedom*. In a chapter called “Angry Faces,” Jarvis has his TV on in his cell but he doesn’t have the sound on because he’s using the light of the TV to read. And every once in a while, he looks up at the screen, then yells to people down the cell block to ask what’s happening.

The first time, someone yells back, “It’s the Ku Klux Klan, Jarvis, and they’re all yelling and complaining about how it’s the blacks and the Jews who are responsible for all these problems.” About half an hour later, he yells again, “Hey, what’s happening now?” And a voice calls back, “That’s the Greenpeace folks. They’re demonstrating about the fact that the rivers are being polluted and the trees are being cut down and the animals are being hurt and our Earth is being destroyed.” Some time later, he calls out again. “Now what’s going on?” And someone says, “Oh, Jarvis, that’s the U.S. Senate and that guy who’s up there now talking, he’s blaming the other guys, the other side, the other political party, for all the financial difficulty this country is in.”

Jarvis starts laughing and he calls down, "I've learned something here tonight. Sometimes they're wearing Klan outfits, sometimes they're wearing Greenpeace outfits, sometimes they're wearing suits and ties, but they all have the same angry faces."

**Reading:** by the psychiatrist James Gilligan, from *Violence - Reflections on a National Epidemic* (p. 245)

History is a tragedy, not a morality play; American history, which like all history is largely a story of violence, is a tragedy...

It is remarkable to me how seldom people recognize the extent to which many of the criminals of today are contemporary versions of our own ancestors. For example, in my current home state, Massachusetts, I vary between being amused and bemused by the moral indignation with which some politicians who happen to be Boston Brahmins denounce the scandalous behavior of young male drug dealers. These men are, of course, classic examples of capitalist entrepreneurs, whom one would think would be extolled by the Bostonians as role models for their peers. They are, after all, making fortunes by their business activities, with tremendous returns on relatively small investments, and they often manage to save and invest their considerable earnings as conscientiously as did the Brahmins' own ancestors. The fact is that the ancestors of the latter group made the fortunes on which their descendents are now living (comfortably enough that they do not need to deal drugs) by means of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century equivalents of drug-dealing, such as slave-trafficking, opium-smuggling, rum-running, and killing. If they had not engaged in it, their descendents would certainly not be wealthy enough to have the moral luxury of denouncing "criminality" of the young African-American, Latino, and Asian-American men who are busy accumulating their own fortunes in equivalent ways today.

**Reading:** by the Unitarian Universalist theologian Robert Kimball, from *Restless is the Heart - A Perspective on Love and Violence and Their Intricate Relationship* (p. 120)

One would learn much by asking a person for a list of ten expressions of violence which he or she notices while they are happening and which have some kind of effect upon the person.

Violent acts happen in many ways.

A mother in a supermarket hitting her young child hard in the face with the back of her hand is violence. Unless one was present prior to the act, one does not know what role the child played, in this mix of life, to provoke the deed; perhaps something, perhaps nothing.

A televised news scene of a young soldier pushing his automatic weapon around the corner of a building and blindly firing its load of bullets down the street is violence. The act is one kind of violence. The news scene can be another.

A former secretary of states says that he doesn't mean to "carp from the sidelines." He then goes on to argue that the current administration should make a significant increase in arms in a particular part of the world, and justifies this by saying,

“the true grounds of our arms policy is to support peaceful change.” The remarks are a mix of many forms of violence including violence to language.

An office worker does violence to another office worker by repeatedly telling others (in private) that “she never does any work,” or “she’s so dumb.”....

I am more concerned at the moment with a person’s capacity to notice and mention, in some form, what he or she feels are acts of violence, than with the particular incidents themselves.

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There is something both frightening and fascinating about violence. We read the papers and watch the news reports of acts of violence and shudder. Some of the violence is committed by criminals or the mentally ill, like the man I read about in yesterday’s paper, who opened fire at the Pentagon, wounding two police officers before he himself was fatally shot. His parents, who were well aware of his mental health history, are convinced his actions were “caused by an illness and not a defective character.” The day before, I read about a string of deadly explosions in Iraq, that were designed to undermine the country’s upcoming parliamentary elections. The Deputy Interior Minister says, “Terrorists wanted to hamper the elections, thus they started to blow themselves up in the streets.”

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Violence is a bad thing. It is committed by bad people. Or good people, who in moments of malice or confusion, commit bad deeds. Either way, as members of a civil society that seeks to uphold liberty and justice, we hold people accountable for their actions. Our justice system is designed to uphold our moral ideals, protecting the innocent and punishing the evil-doer.

Things get a little more complicated in the case of politically motivated violence. Then one person’s freedom fighter is another’s suicide bomber, one person’s soldier is another’s insurgent, one person’s effort to restore order is another person’s oppression.

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You would think that religion would provide the perfect antidote to violence. All the great religions of the world implore us to practice love. They teach us to be generous and kind. They urge us to be understanding and forgiving. Whether Jesus or Buddha or Mohammed or Confucius, they each offered compelling ethical ideas. In their lives they each provided plenty of examples of how to put these ideas into action.

And yet some of the deepest seeds of violence are found in religion itself. Religion can become the engine that drives our most violent acts. Whether yesterday's crusades that sought to re-capture Jerusalem, or notions of manifest destiny that allowed European settlers to imagine this country was given to them by God, killing the native inhabitants was considered a part of this divine plan, or today's suicide bombers who believe they are carrying out God's will.

How can this be?

The religious scholar Lloyd Steffen grapples with this question. As Steffen sees it, the seeds of violence can be found in the earliest scriptures of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. (*The Demonic Turn - The Power of Religion to Inspire or Restrain Violence*)

Take, for instance, the story of Cain and Abel in the fourth chapter of Genesis. Cain and Abel are humankind's first brothers, sons of the first parents, Adam and Eve. Cain, the older brother, was a farmer and worked the soil. Abel, the younger brother, was a shepherd, who tended a flock of sheep. When it was time to present a sacrificial offering to God, Cain brought some fruits of the soil he had worked. Abel brought some fat from the firstborn of his flock.

As the story goes, God accepts Abel's sacrifice approvingly, but does not look favorably upon Cain's. The story doesn't say why God acts this way, why there doesn't seem to be enough blessing to go around. The story does say that God's disapproval leaves Cain feeling angry and dejected. Rather than complaining to God, Cain focuses his indignation at his brother. Out in the field he attacks Abel and kills him.

As Steffen puts it, this story of sibling rivalry "exposes the costly, even lethal consequences that can follow in the wake of competition for divine favor."

In the story the god Yahweh clearly creates conditions for a deadly conflict. Yahweh seems oblivious to the emotional dynamics that invariably flow from a show of divine favoritism. The story of Cain and Abel is not the only one that demonstrates a holy partiality. This first divine act of showing preference is followed by many more. In fact, these acts emerge as a major theme throughout the Bible. They find their fullest expression in the theological notion of "covenant," a central idea in Hebrew thought that conveys the idea of a specially chosen people, and a series of contracts God establishes with them to cement their relationship. God made a covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses and with several others throughout the scriptures. Covenant is a compelling religious idea. However the idea of covenant invariably raises the problem of the insider and outsider, those who are part of the covenant and those who aren't. Including some inevitably means rejecting others.

The story of Cain and Abel also reminds us that religion can be a cause for violence. And this point is not a curious aside or a minor detail. This point is made in one the most central foundational religious stories that speaks to our most basic human origins, as far

back as the first brothers of humanity. The story suggests that God “can arouse hostility and resentment, and that even acts of worship can provide occasion for violence, up to and including murder.”

The power and danger of religion is in some ways similar to the phenomenon of fire. Religion becomes an incendiary and potentially violent force when the notion of God, the notion of an Absolute Reality, is confused with Absolutism. Absolutism is when we believe we are in possession of absolute truth. Absolute truth provides us the ultimate justification for any action we believe is grounded in that truth. We tell ourselves, the ends justify the means. For the sake of freedom we may fight wars. And for the sake of God we may kill.

Lloyd Steffen says, religion is both powerful and dangerous. It can serve to create community, but just as easily it can be a force of divisiveness. Religion can serve as powerful motivator for violence or for nonviolence. In and of itself, religion is neither moral or immoral. Rather, the way individuals choose to interpret and practice their religion makes all the difference.

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Violence becomes a moral issue, as we debate whose actions are just and whose are unjust. We grapple with questions of good and evil, of right and wrong. Over the centuries our moral debates and discussions have changed. Areas of agreement and disagreement vary - whether the issues revolve around land-ownership, slavery-trafficking, rum-running or opium-smuggling. But what has remained is the phenomenon of violence.

James Gilligan’s is acutely aware that in this country, in particular, violence is a pervasive reality. His perspective on violence is informed by his training as a psychiatrist, and his work as director of mental health in the Massachusetts prison system.

Writing in 1996, he reminds us that the United States, for many years, has had the dubious distinction of having the highest per capita imprisonment rate in the world. Significantly higher than the next two highest ranking countries, of this period: the former Soviet Union, and former South Africa - both of which were police states. In the past fourteen years, the U.S. incarceration rate has continued to rise dramatically.

There are significant differences in the level of individual and collective violence across various of the world’s societies. There is plenty of empirical evidence that violence can be prevented. This country, however, does the worst job at it. Every other democracy, and every other economically developed nation on earth does a better job than the United States.

In order to prevent violence, we first need to understand it. Gilligan says,

“Even the most apparently “insane” violence has a rational meaning to the person who commits it, and to prevent this violence, we need to learn to understand what that meaning is. And even the most apparently rational, self-interested, selfish, or “evil” violence is caused by motives that are utterly irrational and ultimately self-destructive. We cannot prevent this violence... until we can recognize what those motives are.” (p. 9)

Part of the problem, in Gilligan’s mind, has to do with a distinctly American connection between punishment, violence and justice.

Most Americans consider the violence involved in law enforcement and in the prison industry, as necessary evils in order to protect and restore justice. State sanctioned and institutionally enforced, it is considered a very different kind of violence than, say, the violence of the bank robber, the gang member, the drunk boy-friend, or the terrorist.

In this point Gilligan sees matters differently. He believes, all violence is an attempt to achieve justice, or what the violent person perceives as justice. It may be justice for himself or for his family, or his country, or his religion. In some way, every violent act is an attempt to receive retribution or compensation. Violence is linked to a sense of entitlement, a sense that one has a right to act this way - either to correct an earlier injustice, or to prevent an impending injustice.

Gilligan believes firmly, “the attempt to achieve and maintain justice, or to undo or prevent injustice, is the one and only universal cause of violence.”(p. 11) It is for the sake of justice that we seek revenge and punishment. In this way, the same motives underlie the violence committed in prisons and battlefields, as well is in our streets and neighborhoods.

Gilligan writes,

“What is conventionally called “crime” is the kind of violence that the legal system calls illegal, and “punishment” is the kind that it calls legal... Crime and punishment are conventionally spoken of as if they were opposites, but both are committed in the name of morality and justice, and both use violence as the means by which to attain those ends. So not only are their ends identical, so are their means.” (p. 18)

For Gilligan, violence is not a moral issue, that can be effectively addressed in ethical arguments. Rather than trying to address violence by asking, “How can we attain justice?” or “What is good and evil, just and unjust?” we should ask, “What are the causes of homicide and suicide and assault; how do they vary from one context to another; and how can we use that knowledge to reduce the frequency with which people inflict those kinds of injuries on themselves and others?”

Violence should be considered a public health issue, like an illness that needs to be treated, like a wound that needs careful medical attention, that needs to be gently cleaned and bandaged so that it can heal.

Gilligan has learned that those who commit violence are also victims of violence, and who perpetuate violence by trying, often in tragically misguided ways, to restore a sense of justice. In order to break the cycle of violence, we should not ask how much punishment a criminal deserves, but rather how we can help a violent offender survive without further violence. Violence is a tragedy. It is a tragedy both in the lives of individuals, and in the history of our civilization.

Many of the European settlers who came to these shores, and took possession of the land through violent means, Gilligan writes,

“many of these new immigrants’ own land was stolen, and they themselves [were] refugees from attempted murder... Most people came here because they knew they were in danger of starvation, pogrom, warfare or genocide... So most of the ancestors of ours who murdered and robbed the native Americans were themselves victims of theft and attempted murder in the countries from which they came.” (p. 244)

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Pema Chodron says, “if you look back at history or you look at any place in the world where religious groups or ethnic groups or racial groups or political groups are killing each other, or families have been feuding for years and years, you can see - because you’re not particularly invested in that particular argument - that there will never be peace until somebody softens what is rigid in their heart. So it’s necessary to take a big perspective on your own righteousness and your own fundamentalism when it begins to kick in and you think your own aggression and prejudice are reasonable.” (p. 21)

Violent acts happen in many ways. Violence happens in our supermarket aisles and in our news reports. Violence happens in the halls of government and in our work place.

Each of us has been a victim of violence. And each of us has committed violence.

May we strive for greater understanding  
of the motives that drive us and drive others.  
May we see that every person carries hurt and longs for healing.  
May we soften what is rigid in our hearts  
That we may learn to walk a new path,  
A path to peace.

Amen.