



Online Newsletter

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The Tip of the Iceberg

There is a quotation I'd like you to hear, and then afterward, I'll tell you who wrote it, and when. "...the inhabitants of the United States have been repeatedly and constantly told that they are the only religious, enlightened, and free people. ... consequently they have an immensely high opinion of themselves and are not far from believing that they form a species apart from the rest of the human race."

Does this ring any bells with you? Well – it was written 175 years ago by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic analysis of American culture – Democracy in America. Isn't it amazing how little we have changed! I hear some of today's political candidates spouting that same kind of thinking.

It is true that we are a nation of many accomplishments; we have put men on the moon, and have developed amazing communication technologies. Some parts of our culture are soaring, but others parts are barely crawling. For example:

Poverty: Ghandi said that poverty is the greatest form of violence. We have the highest rate of relative poverty among both children and adults, and the largest gap between the rich and the poor of any of the major economies. Homelessness is a plague, and has increased 2 – 3% in the past two decades. Yet, the US has the lowest rate of public subsidized housing of any of the industrialized nations. 13 million American children do not have enough to eat. The number of people living in poverty rose by 1.1 million last year.

Health Care: Among all the developed nations, we alone do not provide universal health insurance for all of our citizens, and our rate of infant mortality is nearly the highest, second only to Latvia.

Crime: We have a murder rate roughly ten times higher than in western Europe. No other developed nation has a homicide rate that is even close to that of the U.S. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that there has been an increase of 40% in hate groups since 2000.

Are you aware that for every 100 civilians in the population, there are 90 hand guns? Again, we compare badly with other nations; the closest to us was Yemen, with 61. Further, in 2002, 67% of murders in America were committed with a firearm.

Another figure of significance – we imprison 726 per 100,000 of our population. The second highest were Russia and Bermuda with 532. The numbers in Western Europe ranged from 142 down to 91. Should this not be telling us something? That something is not working in our criminal justice system? We call our prisons “correctional” institutions, but in 2001, nearly 70% re-offended within three years of release. Our system is more interested in punishment than in rehabilitation, and it’s not working.

Professor James Gilligan has been on the faculty of Harvard Medical School since 1965, and a leader in studies of violence for much of his career. His books on violence and violence prevention would make good required reading for any serious student of this subject. He says that our country is afflicted with an epidemic of violence. All of these conditions – poverty, health care, crime – create anger and despair, and are a breeding ground for violent behavior. And for me, what stands at the tip of this enormous iceberg we call violence is our willingness to commit a deliberate planned homicide. The fact that it is legal doesn’t change the nature of the act.

There can be no denying that an execution is a violent act. We have failed to understand what Martin Luther King, Jr. said, that “the ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy....Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.” Incidentally, Dr. King’s family members are outspokenly opposed to the death penalty. I repeat: an execution is an act of violence. And we are the only one of the western industrialized countries that still retains the death penalty. In fact, one of the conditions for membership in the European Union of over forty nations is that they must abolish capital punishment because it violates evolving standards of human decency.

Is it any wonder that so much of the rest of the world looks at us with apprehension when they see our capacity for violence, coupled with the frightening power of our weaponry?

True patriots want to see their country with clarity, and try, lovingly, to correct its mistakes. So, I am speaking not in the spirit of America-bashing, but as one who finds it painful to see our America being called the most violent of all the Western industrialized countries, and to see us comparing so poorly to our sister nations in significant areas of human rights.

However, there is some news on the horizon that indicates there may be a change coming. Less than a month ago, the state of New Jersey abolished the death penalty. Also, New York State has no effective death penalty since their state Supreme Court declared their method of lethal injection to be unconstitutional. Presently, Texas carries out more than 60% of all executions in the country. This is a rise from the past 37%, but not because Texas has changed, but rather that the rest of the country is slipping away from support for the death penalty. Further, the Federal Supreme Court is currently examining two cases, both claiming that lethal injection is “cruel and unusual”, and therefore unconstitutional. We’ll know their decision, probably in June. My prediction is that, as in many of their controversial cases, their vote will be 5-4, really 4-4, with one swing vote in the middle. It might

very well be the vote of Justice Kennedy, who a couple of years ago cast the deciding vote to abolish execution of minors. In California, the Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice is examining the death penalty, with public hearings taking place in Jan, Feb, and March.

There are all kinds of rationalizations offered to justify capital punishment: some say it will prevent future murders, but the evidence does not support this; some claim that supporting a person in prison for life costs too much, but real examination of the figures shows that the costs of a death penalty trial far exceed the costs of incarceration for life without possibility of parole. Stripped of all the excuses, the real reason in our society is a desire for vengeance, a desire to get even, to punish.

When a murder is committed, we have a sense of outrage, specially when the circumstances are particularly horrible. Our value system had been violated, a precious life has been lost and can never be regained. It is a highly charged emotional issue. How can we view a person who has gotten so lost, who has offended us so much? The behavior can never be condoned, but if we could begin to understand the person, it might make it possible to feel compassion rather than hatred.

Perhaps the place to start is with the mystery of individuality. If we can appreciate some of the factors that led up to “who we are” in the present, perhaps we can extend this effort to understand to all others. Just recently, I have worked with a course on the biology of human behavior. The word “unique” takes on new and deeper meaning when we consider the vast number of variations stemming just from our biology. Our genetic makeup, hormones, our nervous system, our fetal environment, and so on, began to shape us from conception. And then all our experiences, our environment, even our nutrition add to the complexity. An experiment in a British prison showed a significant reduction in violent behavior just through a change in food. One predictor of adult anti-social behavior is being an unwanted child. One gets the realization that there but for the grace of God go I.

Can you look back on your own life, and think for a moment of all the people who influenced you – parents, teachers, friends, heroes you selected as a model? You could even add to the list those who caused you pain because they also taught by providing a model that you decided not to follow. We will probably not penetrate all of the influences that shaped us, but we need to realize that our accomplishments (and looking at this group, I know there have been many) did not happen in a vacuum. We had help.

Likewise, the individuality of those who have committed a murder, for whom the shaping elements have interacted in a painfully negative way, had another kind of “help”. We may not know or understand the details, but we can say for sure that these are suffering people. We can never condone murder; justice demands that there must be consequences. But justice and vengeance are not the same. Incarceration may be required for the protection of the rest of us, but we can isolate such a person without indulging in the spirit of punishment and vengeance. Can we see the behavior – murder – as deplorable, or in Buddhist terms, “unskillful”, and still not judge the person as being evil, as being unworthy to breath the same air as we do? I am convinced that we all, no exceptions, do the best we know how, given the “causes and conditions” of our lives at the time. Can we extend our capacity for compassion to everyone, with sorrow for two lives, the murdered one, and the murderer?

I wonder how many of you have heard of the work on “Non-violent communication” taught by Marshall Rosenberg? He writes about the relationship between language and violence. He cites

studies which show that “there is considerably less violence in cultures where people think in terms of human needs rather than in cultures where people label one another as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and believe that the bad ones ‘deserved’ to be punished”. It takes work and effort to really hear the language of our own culture, where we are surrounded by judging and blaming. We take it for granted. If we were to focus our attention, we might be in for some surprises. Not long after I started to study Rosenberg’s work, I had an “oops” moment when I heard myself say something that I quickly recognized did not meet the standards of “non-violent” communication. We all have something to learn.

And we tend to be just as harsh toward ourselves as we are toward others. This gives rise to guilt feelings, which are self-punishing, and non-productive. I think I told you before about a wonderful picture on the cover of UU World Magazine showing a small New England church with a sign out front which said “We don’t do guilt.” We can be grateful that our UU church does not impose guilt feelings on us, but how many of us still have carry-overs from the guilt-ridden teachings of our childhoods? It would be more appropriate to look back on our pasts, and when seeing something we wish we had not done, recognize the mistake, not with guilt, but with remorse. Remorse gives rise to learning, which sets us free to avoid the mistake in the future. If we can forgive ourselves, we can then learn to forgive others.

Recently, I saw a film called “Forgiving Dr. Mengele”. It is a true story of Eva Kor, who during WWII was sent, at the age of ten, along with all her family, to Auschwitz concentration camp. Some of you here are too young to remember the horror the name “Dr. Mengele” calls forth. He was a sadistic torturer, who inflicted ruthless mutilation and unimaginable pain on his prisoners. Upon entering the camp, Eva and her twin sister were pulled aside, and saw all the rest of their family disappear forever. Dr. Mengele sought young twins for his experiments. He would inject one of them with noxious substances, saying he wanted to observe the differences later on. Understandably, his victims, including young Eva, hated him with a passion. Eva’s sister died prematurely as a result of her treatment. As Eva grew older, she realized how much energy her hatred cost her, and learned that she could find a different way of dealing with the past. She actually forgave Dr. Mengele, and discovered that she, for the first time, felt a wonderful sense of freedom. Instead of seeing herself as a victim, she took back her power (and those are her words – “took back my power”) and began spending her energy speaking all over the country about the foolishness of vengeance. What a triumphant story! And it said to me that when we ask for vengeance, we give power to the one who has hurt us. Let’s hold on to our own power, and have the strength to try to understand, hard as that may be, to be compassionate, and to forgive.

I think we all recognize that in any UU congregation, we will not all be agreement on any issue. Our freedom to disagree is one of our blessings. For those of you who feel, for reasons of your own, that we should have capital punishment, would you be willing to consider that as public policy, it may be hurting this country? That it may be adding to the climate of violence that damages our quality of life? That it may undermine respect from our allies when they see us doing something they regard as barbaric? For those of you who are on the fence, would you be willing to do a little shifting of vocabulary, and substitute “consequences” for “punishment”, and “justice” as differing from “vengeance”? And for those who feel that we would do well to abolish executions, would you be willing to act on that conviction and give support to our UU organization, UUADP, that is working so hard to keep denominational awareness focused on this issue, and to maintain our presence at General Assembly? I know that a number of you have joined us in the past, and I hope you will continue.

I hope to be able to have patio dialogue with you, today or sometime in the future, particularly with those who have questions or doubts. I appreciate the opportunity to present my thoughts to you, and hope that what comes from my heart will reach yours.

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