

FRONTIERS

Violence/Non-Violence

VIOLENCE is a very human trait. Like rage, fury, anger, hate, joy and love, it arises from our deepest emotional roots. Like all forces coming from the core of our being, it is not to be forgotten, slighted, or denied. The shivers and chills it sends through us and the outpouring of energy it releases in us are real. It has a valid place in marshalling our energies in extreme contests of survival. But the costs it imposes upon us make it an unwise part of our nature to nurture, encourage, use indiscriminately, or give primary place in society as we have done.

Modern violence is sophisticated. It is often silent and rarely visible. Whether our escalatingly violent technologies of war or our subtly violent economic technologies, the direct effects are often separated from us in space or time, and its effect upon our lives is rarely visible. Yet both individually and as a society we are deeply affected by the violence we unleash.

We *are* aware of violence in our cities—the brawling, mugging, rape and murder violence of the powerless—but much less conscious of the far greater violence which has been institutionalized throughout our society. The obvious violence of the powerless striking out against the repressive forces they have no other means to contest is trivial compared to the violence pervasively used to "administer" the far reaches of our country's global economic empire, or our economic and military support of repressive dictatorships in other countries. We reacted with horror to the German genocide of Jews, but blot from our memories the equally genocidal murder of civilian populations we accomplished in subjugating the Native Americans, in the firebombing of Dresden, Berlin and Tokyo, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; our saturation bombing of Indochina, and our current support of equivalent, if less dramatic atrocities in Latin

America, Asia and elsewhere. All that seems far from home.

Yet closer to home the same tendency toward violence almost universally underlies our actions. We blithely apply massive doses of herbicides and pesticides to our fields and forests, disregarding their violent disruption of ecological balancing forces, and unhealthy impacts on workers, nearby residents, and the ultimate consumers. We innocently buy inexpensive imported goods, blissfully unaware that we are supporting intolerable working, living, and social conditions forced upon their makers throughout our economic empire, and that we will ultimately have to compete against such violent production conditions.

The massive doses of poisons and antibiotics we employ in futile attempts to eliminate rodents and diseases are equally violent in their conception and impact. That they cause resistance to develop and breed more formidable diseases rarely enters our consciousness. We choose such methods instinctively because our immensely powerful technology has made them possible, and because it has lulled us into ignoring the real impacts of our actions.

We would scarcely call violent the anesthetized torture we and our pocketbooks undergo in a dentist's chair until we compare it to the alternative of simply eating less sugar. Few would consider our medical practices to be violent until we consider the impact on us of the more virulent diseases bred by our antibiotic chemical medicine, and our dependence on surgery and corrective actions rather than preventive health care. Would we consider our transportation system to be violent? Compare the death and mutilation caused each year by the automobile to the alternatives, say, of a European city providing mass transit and built to minimize the need for transport. What of our governmental violence toward Native Americans standing up for their legal treaty rights; or toward anti-war activists speaking out against a corrupt and immoral war

we instigated and waged? Or our economic policies encouraging capital-intensive processes that eliminate jobs and cause the economic disenfranchisement of growing numbers of Americans?

The concentrated power which characterizes our society is increasingly vulnerable and unstable, and gives rise to ever more violent means to protect or exploit that vulnerability. Increasingly, it molds our society at home into the same forms of violent action and suppression we have seen emerge from our actions abroad. We are being asked to work closer and closer to the starvation wages we have imposed abroad or lose our jobs and factories to those same competitors. Our police forces have changed from the "law-keeping" British Bobbies to the armored, brutal, identity-hidden riot police of today. Para-military authority is increasingly being granted to power companies to protect nuclear power installations. Diplomatic installations and corporate headquarters are being fortified. Surveillance of employees and shakedown of airline passengers are now routine. The frequency of assassination of political leaders is increasing, and the practice of living behind locked and guarded gates, with barred windows, chainlink fences and barbed wire is becoming more common. A single terrorist or computer malfunction can threaten the lives of millions.

This state of siege affects the very marrow of our lives. Anger, violence and frustration all cause us to tighten up inside—and draw us away from anything which might distract our energies, which might question or cause us to hesitate in our total commitment to a course of action. This cuts us off from the object of our violence from any respect, love, concern, understanding, empathy, or conscience that might lead to questioning our acts. It similarly, however, cuts us off from other people and experiences that can give meaning, value, joy and happiness to our lives.

In that isolation produced by violence, we cannot discriminate between courses of action that are ultimately destructive and those that are life-enhancing. It leads to estrangement—a truthful sense that we are no longer capable of being a trusted part of the great cosmic dance of our world. It leads to further isolation, frustration, and inner rage at finding no real value, love, respect, meaning or happiness in our lives or the world around us. It emerges finally as violence from our own hand.

Violence is destructive and destabilizing—it cannot form the basis of a durable society. It brings its own downfall eventually as its effects emerge and as the value of nonviolent attitudes, actions and technologies becomes more obvious. Even as the violence in our society escalates today it is losing its power. Seeking the roots of our violence, we are slowly learning that we must co-exist with others—and are developing peaceful ways of mutual accommodation instead of violent and futile warfare. Accommodating to conditions rather than overwhelming them demands more of us, but can be ultimately more successful and awaken new sensitivities, skills and understanding. The deeper understanding of the needs and relationships of others required for co-existence helps open us to acceptance, love, and veneration of life rather than separating us from those things with which we interact. It draws us closer to the rest of creation and into a richer, subtler, and more varied world.

Non-violent technologies are emerging to replace violent ones. Replacing bulldozers with crowbars to demolish buildings allows salvage of building materials as well as other economic savings. Selective logging, manual thinning and portable mills are beginning to make possible continually usable forests and more effective use of forest growth. High fertilizer and machinery costs are causing us to replace chemical monoculture farming with diversified crops, crop rotations, green manures and interplanting, while also replacing an industry of farming with a

culture of farmers. Replacing sugar and dentists with self-discipline creates a whole new generation of stronger more self-directed people as well as giving impetus to a cuisine with richer and more varied tastes than mere "sweetness." Simpler and more self-reliant living lessens our demands on others while it heightens our own abilities.

The change we are undergoing today in the material and resource base of our culture is threatening the vast disparities of power which lie beneath our society, its values and its actions. Pressure toward a new, more equitable and dispersed distribution of power is developing, and with it an awareness of the need to find peace with ourselves and our surroundings. In another age we could accept the violence in our society as an unavoidable privilege of the powerful. Today things have become too interconnected. Our world is being melded into a single and awesome organism, and its eddies of power have become too complexly interwoven with the needs and well-being of every individual to ignore their flow. We are beginning to find that more durable and less violent ways to relate to others hold far greater reward than the concentrated power and violence of our recent past.

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