

Please, Stop the Violence

John Patton

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

A frequent public service announcement on one of the Atlanta television stations pictures an ordinary citizen identifying her or himself as being from a particular part of the community, holding up a hand like a police officer stopping traffic, and saying to the television audience, "Please, stop the violence." The effectiveness of this announcement is highly questionable, but it certainly reflects public concern about the problem. It also expresses a sense of helplessness in the face of the violent events which the station broadcasting the announcement presents as the major part of its local news report. The station's management is apparently convinced of the public's obsession with violence at the same time it presents its plea to stop it.

The violence reported on television is, most frequently, physical assault on another ranging from simple battery to murder, or it may be sexual violence which ranges from repeated verbal harassment to rape. Violence, however, also includes the psychological assault of demeaning words and behavior that belittles another person or which violates that person's rights and sensibilities. In one of its secondary definitions the dictionary also suggests that great force or strength of feeling may also be understood as violence, a meaning which links violence with the rage that often accompanies it.

Much has been said and written about social and political factors contributing to violence in society.¹ As one who has spent most of his ministry in dealing with and discussing pastoral care of persons and families, however, I am much more familiar with theological and psychological attempts to understand violence than with socio-political interpretations of it. Therefore, I discuss violence and the rage associated with it as a failure in the fundamental human calling to care for oneself and for others in families and society. This failure of care contributes to violence in several important ways: 1) by placing it completely outside of oneself; 2) by suppressing the voice of those who might challenge the present structure and conduct of families and society; 3) by failing to establish controls for narcissistic self-interest and expression; and 4) by not taking the future consequences of present action sufficiently into account.

Theologically, human beings were created in relationship to God and with each other. They were given the vocation of caring for the earth, for themselves and for other members of the human community. In an address to the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Parker Palmer used a quotation from Annie Dillard to affirm care as a fundamental part of the human spirit. "In the depths of the human being," he said, "underneath the violence and terror of which psychology warned us, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name. . . the unified field, our complex and inexplicable caring for one another and for our life together here. This is given. This is not learned."² Thus the failure to fulfill this vocation to care may be understood as humanity's fundamental or original sin.

Stating this theological affirmation in a different way, humankind is pictured in the Bible as a steward—one who cares for something in covenant with another. Theologian Douglas John Hall has emphasized this steward image in his work and has noted that the Bible as a whole contains some twenty-six references to the steward or

to stewardship. He believes, therefore, that stewardship is the best symbol for the whole anthropology of the biblical tradition. Commenting on the Old Testament understanding of stewardship, Hall notes that however important the steward may be in the scheme of things, he is neither ultimately authoritative nor irreplaceable. "He is strictly accountable to his lord, and he will certainly be deprived of his authority unless he upholds, in his actions and attitudes, the true character and wishes of this other one whom he is allowed and commanded to represent." Moreover, "to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Luke 12:48b, N.R.S.V.).³ Similarly, another theologian, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, has reinterpreted the doctrine of original sin as rebellion against creation—against what we were created to be.⁴

Within the biblical concept of stewardship, then, there is an emphasis upon the positive nature of the relationship between the steward and the One for whom the steward carries out her task. Because of that relationship the steward is not just a servant but a representative. There is an emphasis also on the responsibility of caring. It involves nurture and development, bringing that for which one is responsible into a better state than was present when the responsibility was given. Stewardship involves a significant relationship and a worthwhile purpose—a relationality which goes beyond present reality and plans for the future of one's self and of those for whom one is responsible. Violence, in contrast to this, involves denial of relationality and any responsibility for the future.

1) Understood as a failure of stewardship and a lack of care, violence is evidenced in families and society in a number of ways. One of the most important is the externalization of it. We do not care enough to acknowledge it and discuss it as something we are a part of. The "stop the violence" hand that is held up on television can be seen not only as a stop sign for violence, but as a symbol of externalization—pushing away the possibility that there may be violence in us that we are responsible for. In the church this appears in the failure to acknowledge the psychological, sexual, and physical violence that may be perpetrated by its members and pastors. One important theory of the externalization of evil is Rene Girard's theory of how societies unconsciously identify and kill a scapegoat in order to deal with conflict within.⁵ In my own thinking, however, I have more often made use of the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein to interpret the process of externalizing what we want to deny as a part of ourselves.

In Klein's theory the infant's first attempt to organize experience is described as a paranoid-schizoid position. It is a nonreflective state of being in which thoughts and feelings are not personal creations, but simply events that happen. One's symbols are identical with what they stand for. The infant in this position does not interpret experience, but reacts to it, splitting off that which he or she is unwilling or unable to experience in the self. This is not pathology but a necessary process which an individual must go through and which establishes discontinuity between loved and feared aspects of self and others and without which the infant could not feed safely and would die.

Klein's other major "position" or state of being is the depressive position which does not leave the paranoid position behind, but which more or less successfully establishes a dialectical relationship between the two. In the paranoid-schizoid position, sadness is simply not a part of a person's emotional vocabulary. The omnipotence of that position allows for everything to be "taken back" when a new

emotional state is entered. In contrast, the “depression” of the depressive position is a feeling of sadness that, in fact, one’s omnipotence is not real. History cannot be rewritten. Feelings of loss, guilt, sadness, remorse, compassion, empathy, and loneliness are all burdens that are unavoidable. One does not overcome the depressive position; it is a realistic orientation to life as it is, one that is quite similar to a Christian theological view of human being.⁶

Although Klein’s theory is an interpretation of the developmental and adult experience of individual persons, it is not difficult to see how television and the tabloids reenforce and encourage the paranoid-schizoid position that has been a part of our development. They externalize and emphasize violence as a phenomenon which we should be fearful of but at the same time fascinated with. The good guys and the bad guys should be identified in a stereotypical way and kept separated. The media seem to be saying that it is important that the public not be allowed to grow up and see life as it is—a mix of good and evil both internal and external to themselves. The failure of care may be seen in this externalization and distancing.

2) The failure of the human vocation to care may also be seen in the denial of voice of those who might challenge the present structure and conduct of families and society. Having voice—a means of expression—is the way persons and groups discover their identity and how they can contribute to and find fulfillment in the relational system of which they are a part. Those in power tend to universalize their own behavior as normative rather than recognizing it as particular and contextual. A person, gender, race, or class that is in power holds on to that power by not being able to see things any other way and, therefore, failing to experience shame over the way things are. The empowerment of those who have been ignored and oppressed allows practices which were assumed to be normative for everyone to be seen as part of a particular and arbitrary context rather than the way things naturally are. It has been in relatively recent years, when women were acknowledged to have a different point of view which had as much validity as men’s, that violence toward women and children began to be taken seriously as a major social and pastoral problem.

The recent literature on the pastoral care of women has focused upon the reality of male abuse of the less powerful and has also brought out important insights about how the patriarchal system has involved women in that abuse. The thing that has been most surprising to male pastors or other counselors who have been told stories of past sexual abuse is the abused woman’s anger at her mother for the mother’s complicity in the abuse. So often the mother tolerated the abuse or could not believe that it was happening because of her conscious or unconscious awareness of her own or her family’s vulnerability if she attempted to stop the abuse. She was aware that she and her children might be turned out without any means of financial support—that their overall life situation might be worse than if nothing was done. The anger of the adult woman who was abused as a child, therefore, could be seen as focused on the social system which gave women little power or credibility as well as upon the particular family member who was the abuser.

In their research for the book *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues commented that they did not intend to be collecting information on sexual abuse, but found that in their interviewing, “women spontaneously mention childhood and adolescent sexual trauma as an important factor affecting their learning and relationships to male authority.” Of the seventy-five women interviewed, “38

percent of the women in schools and colleges and 65 percent of women contacted through the social agencies told us that they had been subject to either incest, rape, or sexual seduction by a male in authority over them. . . . Often the denial and silence that had been imposed upon them in the incestuous relationship carried over into present interactions with teachers who had power over them.”⁷ The lack of care that contributes to violence may be expressed both through externalizing the violence and in suppressing the voice of those who suffer it.

3) The failure of care resulting in violence is also seen in what may be called narcissistic lack of control. Care for self and others involves both the expression of one’s voice and the ability to control it. Certainly there is a difference between psychological and physical violence, but when words and behavior that belittle another person and violate that person’s rights and sensibilities go on for a long period of time, they are themselves violent and often lead to physical violence. Historically espousing the sometimes inappropriate suppression of anger, the church in the second half of this century has learned that the expression of anger can be a good thing.⁸ What we have not done as well, however, is to understand the difference between anger and rage and the importance of different responses to them.

Perhaps too simply stated, anger is a response to a specific condition: an affront, an injury, a denial of self-expression. It is focused upon the offending condition and is expressed as a result of the offended person’s choice to say who he is and present his point of view in order to correct what is wrong. Rage is different. It is not simply anger raised to a higher degree of intensity. It is intensity with intent to destroy the perpetrator of an offending action. There are many theories of the origin of human aggression and the rage associated with it. The theory of psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut continues to be one of the most attractive and useful.⁹

Kohut argues against the familiar theory of aggression which suggests that “a tendency to kill is deeply rooted in man’s psychobiological makeup and stems from his animal past.” It is, he says, a “comforting illusion that human pugnacity could be easily abolished if only our material needs were satisfied” and contributes “little to the understanding of aggression as a psychological phenomenon.” To the contrary, Kohut sees rages as an interpersonal phenomenon related to shame. Human beings need the empathic response of others in the first few months of life in order that the self may be adequately structured. Similarly, empathy or care is needed throughout life in order that persons may be emotionally nourished. When appropriate care is received early in life, one learns the way in which empathic others experience the world and attempts to adopt this way of knowing other persons through what he or she experiences with them.

Shame arises in the process of trying to meet relational needs early in life. The self asks for care, and for one reason or another fails to receive it or receive enough of it. The result of not receiving it is shame at one’s vulnerability and at the strength of one’s need for care by the other. The first defense against that shame of exposure is a denial of the need, followed by distancing oneself from the other, and a compensatory turning back to the self as a substitute for the rejecting other person. “I don’t need anybody,” is substituted for the experience of shame. Narcissism, the human phenomenon of the self’s overconcern with itself, involves a person’s attempt to substitute self-care for care by a significant other which has been experienced as absent or inadequate.

Everyone reacts to shame-provoking injuries with embarrassment and anger, but

the target of our mature aggressions is experienced as separate from ourselves. The narcissistic person, in contrast, cannot recognize the person or group that has shamed her as a center of independent initiative with whom he happens to be at cross-purposes. She shows total lack of empathy toward the offender and an unmodifiable wish to blot out the offense which was perpetrated against her.

Although Kohut's interpretation of narcissism is based on an understanding of patients in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, it grows out of the fact that narcissism is a very prevalent condition in society. Christopher Lasch's more familiar theory of narcissism is also psychologically based. He notes that whereas prior to midcentury psychotherapists were primarily concerned to free persons from their over-rigid super-egos, today they are more and more confronted with chaotic, impulse-ridden persons who are more promiscuous than repressed, who avoid intimacy because of fear of further disappointment. They cannot successfully mourn because that might cause them to remember lost love objects and their dependency upon them. Their deprivation of these lost or inadequate carers, they assume, gives them the right to entertain fantasies of their omnipotence and the right to exploit others. To defend themselves against rage is their most pressing emotional need.

Lasch believes that the narcissistic elements in many of us are more strongly developed than in earlier times because of changes in family life and patterns of parenting. This is further encouraged, he argues, by an indulgent, therapeutic culture and by capitalistic commercialization best symbolized by the familiar message, "you deserve the best today." This narcissistic culture understands its members to deserve the satisfaction of consuming what they want and assaulting those persons or things that get in their way. The recent literature on the pastoral care of women has focused upon what might be called the narcissistic entitlement of the male for abuse of the less powerful—women and children. This picture of the narcissist and the narcissistic culture is in direct contrast to the biblical image of the steward who is strictly accountable to his lord for bringing that for which he is responsible into a better state than was present when the responsibility was given. His life involves a significant relationship to others and a commitment to developing a worthwhile future for all.

4) Finally, persons, families and society may fail in their human calling to care by not taking the future sufficiently into account. Their focus of concern may be too much upon the present or the past, and the consequences of action taken may not be adequately considered. Failing to care for the consequences can be understood theologically as denying or ignoring the fact that persons are a part of history and live in a web of interconnecting relationships. They are responsible for their past, present, and future and have further responsibilities for the future of others. Human caring involves anxiety about the future. Not to be in touch with this existential anxiety is to be less than human.¹⁰ Both families and societies have responsibility for developing and consistently applying consequences for inappropriate and violent behavior.

The day this article was written, I noticed two things on the editorial page of the morning paper. One was a letter criticizing a police officer's comment after a drive-by shooting that "this type of thing just happens." The letter writer appropriately insists that "none of us . . . should ever regard violent crime as something that 'just happens.'" Accepting events as "just happening" is clear evidence of the failure to care. The lead editorial on the same page was devoted to driver education and was an argument for a graduated licensing system which allows youths to earn driving

privileges on a gradual basis. It noted that a sixteen-year-old is not motivated by the abstract concept of traffic safety. What was advocated was a teenager-parent driving agreement. In the agreement, which came from AAA auto club, there were a series of specific conditions and consequences related to the privilege of driving. Each family would be expected to give sufficient care to the situation to develop an agreement of their own. For example, for the privilege of driving, the teenager would be required to pay for all or a certain percentage of the cost of fuel, the increase in insurance premiums because of having a driver under twenty-five years of age, fines and penalties for infractions. Loss of privileges would occur for certain specifically described circumstances.

The first reaction to such an agreement is, perhaps, that it is an awful lot of trouble. If teenagers would simply do what they should do this wouldn't be necessary. The facts of the matter are, however, that teenagers and most of the rest of us don't do what we should do without an awareness of the consequences of our behavior. My own memory of the teenaged driving period with my children is that it was one of the most anxious periods of my experience as a parent. It was also one of the most satisfying because—more than at other times in our relationships—we had worked out a contract about driving that involved us in anticipation of certain circumstances and their logical consequences when they occurred.

This approach to parenting is similar to that which is presented in the classic book on parenting, *Children the Challenge*¹¹ in which Rudolf Dreikurs presented a system of logical consequences for behavior which emphasized care and responsibility on the part of all involved in the family system. A structure of logical consequences for behavior expresses the reality of the social order rather than the power of those enforcing the result. Rationality is emphasized in contrast to reaction, and the system of consequences which is developed involves the family in taking into account the future, not the past, as the most important consideration.

I do not assume that Dreikurs' theory of parenting which was developed for families is simply applicable to the larger systems in which violence takes place, but there are elements which help us understand violence and could contribute to stopping it. In an election year, candidates for office who previously may have been involved in a realistic analysis of problem situations regress to Klein's paranoid-schizoid position. The good guys and bad guys have to be separated, and evil is projected outside of us. The claim to be tough on crime and to correct what has happened in the past and punish those responsible for it is the order of the day.

In contrast to this, stewardship or responsible care for the society of which one is a part calls for involving as many elements of the community as possible in planning for a less violent future by taking responsible action now. The emphasis is on planning for the future rather than the politically popular settling a score from the past. The imprisonment required by the courts may always be seen as punishment for the perpetrators of violence, but it is best interpreted as the logical consequence of crime and protection of society from future violent behavior. The cost of violence is loss of freedom for those who cannot control their behavior. For the society of which they are a part, the cost is paying for their separation from society and for developing a system in which the consequences of violence can more adequately be taken into account by all its members.

Violence in the family and in society is perpetrated by persons who have little

awareness of who they are as persons or who are consciously denying what they know themselves to be. A person is violent toward others when he or she is aware only of the present, of satisfying immediate desires, with no sense of what can be gained or lost in the future. Whatever ways we work toward “stopping the violence,” must be based on a belief that we are created for a purpose, that we are in a responsible relationship to others, and that it is appropriate to have anxiety about what lies ahead. Developing a concern for future consequences should be understood as expression of care, a recognition of human relationality and the very human anxiety that comes with responsibility for one’s own future and, to some degree at least, the future of others.

Notes

¹ See, for example, *Violence in America: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. Janelle Rohr (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1990).

² Parker Palmer, in an address to the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, November, 1987.

³ Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (New York: Friendship Press, 1990).

⁴ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1994).

⁵ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972).

⁶ R. D. Hinshelwood, *Clinical Klein; From Theory to Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁷ Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 58-59.

⁸ Carroll Saussy, *The Gift of Anger* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995).

⁹ Heinz Kohut, “Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage,” *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 27 (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1979), 379-392.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 42.

¹¹ Rudolf Dreikurs, *Children the Challenge* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964).