

The Foundation is Love

I recently read a remarkable book: “Evil. Inside Human Violence and Cruelty” (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997), by Roy. F. Baumeister, a professor of social psychology. He takes a scientific approach in trying to solve a riddle as ancient as Cain and Abel: Why is there evil and violence in the world? His analysis, based on hundreds of studies and observations, applies to situations ranging from schoolyard bullying to domestic violence, bar fights and road rage, street crime and serial killings, all the way to war and genocide. Baumeister takes the unusual approach of attempting to understand the origins of violence from the perspective of the perpetrators. This is never to excuse their behavior but to fathom their motives, explore the environments that lead to evil, and suggest ways to manage, if not contain, it.

Baumeister finds four roots of violent behavior. The first is easiest to understand: violence conducted as a practical means to a desired end. You want money quickly, mug someone and steal a watch or wallet. You want more territory and wealth, invade your neighbor. Genghis Khan just wanted power, respect, and loot. If a city surrendered quickly, that was that. If city fathers decided to fight back, Khan’s minions slaughtered every man, woman, child and dog - no wasteful siege needed, and it sent a clear message to the next towns over.

The second cause is related to egotism and revenge. Criminals and dictators alike have a high sense of self-esteem, not low. Think of Saddam Hussein, street gang leaders, wife-beaters. Their sense of themselves is, however, exaggerated, and if such persons are challenged, embarrassed, ‘dissed’, especially in front of bystanders, they react violently, take revenge. Too many drinks also pumps up self-esteem, and loosens self-control. On a national scale, we see how the proud but sensitive nation of China reacts angrily if it feels humiliated. All humans want to be treated with respect; some of us lose it if we’re not. What others call ‘revenge’, perpetrators call ‘self-defense,’ claiming they are the real victims. The cycle of violence thus continues, becoming more brutal with each round. Israel and Palestine are locked into such a cycle.

A third cause comes from the True Believers and Idealists. Lenin and Stalin, Hitler, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, all wanted to build perfect societies. They burned with moral certainty and righteousness; woe betides anyone who got in the way of the Truth. “It’s always the good men who do the most harm in the world,” wrote the novelist and historian Henry Adams. Centuries ago, it was Christian Crusaders, today militant Islamists. “Anyone not with us is against us....God on our side.”

The fourth root Baumeister calls “The Joy of Hurting.” Unquestionably, some people get an addictive, sadistic thrill from making others suffer, or from killing. Baumeister asserts that this accounts for only a fraction of all the violent acts in the world. Most soldiers refuse to shoot prisoners, others suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. It is known,

however, that if a powerful authority figure tells someone to humiliate or do physical harm to another – in service of a ‘good cause’ – that person is more likely to comply, even if distressed. Think Abu Ghraib. Sadism comes after the evil has begun, not as a first cause.

Baumeister looked at all the data and concluded that ‘Pure Evil’ is a myth. Nearly all that we call evil begins with understandable, even (to the perpetrator, at least), rational thinking. But then how does violence become more virulent? When the Ku Klux Klan first started, it was just bands of high jinks practical jokers. As the groups grew, and the humiliation of defeat in the Civil War sank in, jokes played on freed black men became more humiliating, then more violent. In modern times, genocides have always been preceded by lesser massacres, expanding when other nations just stood by or did little. Genocide takes much planning and logistics; few individuals do the actual killing but many do small, seemingly harmless jobs supporting the big operation: bookkeeping, driving a train, guard-duty, sorting clothes. Being part of a group effort suppresses doubt any one individual might have, and we are taught from infancy to obey authority. Even the language used by perpetrators of violence is moderated in order to neutralize dissension: ‘ethnic cleansing,’ ‘final solution,’ ‘water boarding.’ People we hate are dehumanized in biologic terms as ‘vermin,’ to be exterminated, a ‘cancer’ to be cut out. People not taking an active role in genocide just want to get on with life, “not get involved.” You could be punished for being a hero. Your family could get hurt.

Once started, how to contain evil and violence? The human being is by nature not a pacific clover-munching species. But humans have the capacity for guilt; feeling guilty ahead of a possibly violent act strengthens self-control. Society can’t eliminate evil but can minimize its excesses. Yet, we’re doing a poor job of even that. Since the end of WW II we’ve seen over 175 wars, only rare interludes of peace. The body count from war and government violence has been the highest in history, well over fifty million, and we’re staring into mouths of cannons still.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in his Nobel Prize address, insisted it was possible: “Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time; the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Man must evolve for all human conflicts a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.” Will the message prevail?

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