

THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE
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A few thousand years ago a young agile king-to-be, David, was slaying Goliath in the Near East

A long time ago, in a Galaxy far, far away, the young Jedi Luke Skywalker crawls into his ship, sets sail for the Death Star and, closing his eyes, saves the day for the righteous underdog freedom-fighting Jedi.

And in the film “The History of Violence,” a film set in the relative here-and-now of 2005 in Millbrook, Indiana, small town good guy Tom Stall, working in a diner behind the counter during a robbery, surprises us all by getting the better of two bad guys. It’s actually an amazing scene. He smashes a coffeepot on the head of one gun-wielding robber, and deftly slides across the counter to take out another bad guy ready to kill a waitress. We realize in an instant that he is not the talented novice our above heroes are, he has done this before.

This fifteen-year-old film is now available on Netflix. It’s an interesting take on heroism, and as the title suggests, the legacy violence leaves.

We love our heroes for their courage, skill, and quick reflexes.

And we should. I am no pure pacifist. I feel violence, or physical aggression in the face of evil, is at times necessary, even courageous. I can stand and say I am grateful for those who have the bravery to put themselves second to a broader cause, and to defend what they think is right. Even if it at times is with fists or a gun. Some bullies, after all, don’t reform without a bloody nose or two.

Here is where the sermon begins.

What we miss in the credits, of course, and don’t feel when people have the adrenaline pumping through their bloodstreams, is the sorrow and anger of Goliath’s loved ones and tribe of Goths for the loss of their hero.

We don’t feel their newfound shaken vulnerability. We don’t feel, in that moment that Luke hits his miracle shot, the thousands of lives lost on the Death Star. We are not yet over the glow of the moment to foresee that in the next film, “The Empire blank, blank ____,” and I suspect that you can finish my sentence with “Fights Back” with upgraded evil.

It’s hard to think with all that enthusiasm, that all the children lost in battle that will have no dads or maybe moms tomorrow. That truth kills that buzz.

We are of course just about at the tail end of the holiday that glosses over the violence of basically stealing, and conning, and murdering our way across a continent, with a mythic meal of good will. Where everyone in the scenes we remember gently passes the potatoes.

In the film “The History of Violence” we are introduced to a seemingly classic good guy. The film opens with the intent of impressing upon us that diner owner Tom Stall loves his wife and kids. It is only until a fifth of the way through the film that we learn anything new. And the unpacking of his full story is revealed when he is forced to defend himself and others in a violent assault in his diner.

In this scene, our protagonist violently handles the two assailants with such remarkable skill that his actions draw the label of hero, attract the attention of the press, and because of this brave “unlikely” act raises the attention of crime figures back east. Crime figures who know Tom Stall not as the beloved small town business owner and family man, but as the former Philly hit man Joey Curacco. What is revealed to us watching is a

man who is not what he appears. A man who, unbeknownst to his wife, has been living in the witness protection program for turning states' evidence against the mob.

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The second two-thirds of the movie is punctuated by creepy encounters with the gangsters from Stall's past who continue to increase their threats on Stall, and as the pressure mounts on him, scene by scene we get to witness the creepy and violent return of Joey.

The real story of the movie and hence its title "The History of Violence" is that although initially in the movie Tom, or better, Joey's, violence benefits him, as it likely did in his youth when he was a killer, the legacy of those behaviors slowly and unwillingly pull him back to being a killer again.

In this one interesting particular anecdote or example of the manner in which violence comes back to haunt us, we see the universal truth that, sooner or later, violence fast becomes a downward spiral where an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.

Not being able to walk away from violence is such a basic and repeating pattern of human nature. It is almost cliché.

When I was an undergrad, I majored in "Corporate communications." . . . Corporate Communications.

I know—hard to believe for me too.

For a while, with no real intention of ever landing there, I found myself in college training to be in the corporate world. In fact, near the end of my senior year I was selected by my teachers to be interviewed by the then highly respected Arthur Anderson corporation. Apparently, they did not know that I was, in my spare time, sticking Popsicle-sticks in the campus ground protesting the number of nuclear warheads we had ready to fly.

I get, and worse, even then got the irony.

The worst of this "BS" in Corporate Communications was a course called "Instructional Systems Design." ISD, as it was known, was set up as a foolproof model for designing earlier computer training programs and other independent training efforts. In essence, it is the technique of breaking down tasks into enough simple steps that eventually any skill can be taught to anyone.

For example- (Step 1) squeeze the toothpaste onto the brush. If the toothpaste adequately covers thee-fourths of the bristles go to step 2: if not. repeat step 1. (Step 2), Wet the toothbrush. (Step 3) If the toothpaste and brush are sufficiently wet, then place the toothbrush in your mouth, and . . . well you get it...

The funny thing about ISD is that it might have been the thing I learned that stuck with me the longest. To this day it professionally helps me to train the challenged folks I work with, and personally to think through emotional problems and see where and how patterns repeat.

It helps me to accept in myself, and show to others that some things naturally have, and will, lead to other things.

Here is where the sermon turns from prelude to theme.

In simple behavioral terms, when we look at percentages, if we were to survey the consequence of violence It would most often look something like this. An act of violence takes place, and in that moment, be it a punch or a trigger pull, there is a release of pent-up energy by the perpetrator. There is relief, followed by deep sadness, loss, anger, and, quite naturally, often more violence by all parties.

Breaking down action and its consequence, we can help corporate hires learn new skills. Teach developmentally disabled folks how to brush their teeth, And we can chart how people and nations move in the direction of increased anger and violence.

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In the most violent and angry minds, minds that never have learned to pause, the cycle can be so short that there is a near-direct correlation between something like, "She brought over her mother-in-law" and "I felt I had to hit her."

One of the chief techniques of working with people with anger problems is to invite the angry person to pull apart the antecedents of their anger, and the violence itself. In undoing, space between triggers and retaliation must be built.

I want to say it again. In regards to violent behavior there needs to be inserted a pause between the antecedents of anger and violence. Undoing violence and largely anger, a moment, a time-out between when the person who believes that a provoking event has happened, and a violent response has occurred.

Even more simply, what is required is that the person owns their feelings, and understands that their violent response is a choice, and not a natural consequence of the prior action.

When these models of separating the pattern of action, feeling, and consequence, it is the sequenced equivalent of taking a deep breath.

A former parishioner who worked to counsel domestic violence perpetrators would begin his group counseling sessions by asking, "When is it was ok to hit your spouse."

The answer is of course, (short of self-defense) was, "never."

But, when he asked domestic violence abusers that question, he said it took forever for the abusers in the support group to get there.

When he was successful in reforming the violence of a former abuser, he shared that the violent person came to understand that in the future those feelings and the behaviors that connect to them are a choice. And that it was one of these many choices not made that had led them down a road to them being in this abusers anger management class.

It needs to be learned that anger is a stupid emotion. It is nature is to remove the feeling that there is a choice to be made. For example, "I gave her the finger because she cut me off on the highway." But when the smoke clears, if we are paying attention, we can see that there is always a choice about how to respond to an event.

A tough choice. Maybe even a choice that one needs to pick up the sword and return the violence, or whack someone with a coffee pot. I'm not above that being an option. But, to not be ruled by anger means that violence must be understood as a choice.

I want to invite you to pause for a minute to think about the situations in your own life which you need to add some choice to a sequence of action and response that you want to change.

Maybe on this Thanksgiving Weekend that is or was a pattern within your family. "I will not take the bait of my brother, which will inevitably lead to trouble, and my mother being disappointed." Or maybe "I speak my mind." I don't know what you need to work on, or what choice you should make.

What makes making a choice in the concept of anger so hard is that, as researcher Dr. Albert Ellis describes, anger is an emotion uniquely connected to the nervous system. And although the consequence of the person receiving the anger might be minimizing, if not traumatizing, anger generally makes producing the violence feel powerful. Anger is exciting.

We might, as Dr. Ellis suggests, be so unconsciously committed to anger because anger brings with it an energy other emotions don't.

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Of the seven hard-wired basic emotions that cross-culturally appear on the faces of all humans—surprise, contempt, disgust, happy, sad, fearful, and anger—anger provides a momentary rush of power, potency and with it a momentary cessation of doubt that no other feeling brings.

If you are not sold that anger is an emotion with a uniquely blinding, intoxicating quality to it, think for a minute how hard it would be to design a video game that, rather than demanding the fact reflexes of shooting, demanded evaluating and negotiating some of the more nuanced feelings. Feelings like sadness, fear, or disgust.

Think about how hard that would be to continually do.

For us to diminish the pattern of violence that exists where it exists, we have to really remember how uniquely tempting and immediately short-term exhilarating anger and violence is.

As we remember in our initial images from heroes past, anger, psychologist Dr. Ellis suggests, almost always results in an adrenaline rush that literally inflates your sense of importance and urgency in relation to others.

Anger and violence has a potency with it. As the author of the popular 2004 book "War is the Force that Gives Us Meaning" experienced personally, a violent life-threatening crisis can make you will feel strong, be lifted from whatever anomie, depression, and feeling of powerlessness you feel.

So, violence provides the beautiful lovely seductive offer of keeping us at arm's length from the real solutions which generally will mean accessing some emotions that are hard to hold. In nearly every case of violence studied by Dr. Ellis, the person who is the victim of violence experiences either the shrinking spirit and esteem of the victim, which feels good, and/or a response of violence which keeps the adrenaline flowing. Essentially in terms of one of my college Instructional Systems Design models, a loop is created,

To miss that anger is empowering, potent, and has a propensity to justify itself as an immediate and natural consequence of being wronged is to not so much to misunderstand the person who is angry or violent, as it is to misunderstand the pattern of the emotion. So when the kids in the hood state "Don't hate the playa, hate the game," they speak a truth.

If we were to employ this pedantic model following 9-11. We get hit. We feel violated and hurt. We in fact understandably, accurately ,began to use blaming language. And connect a violent response as a natural and appropriate punishment.

What if that game had played out a more positive way? We get hit. We feel violated and hurt. We speak of our anger and hurt as the result of the attack. We pause long enough to think about if and who we want to hit back, and before we publicly ask ourselves the question of what response best serves the future.

What if in so many cases of gun violence we had done that? Would we have so many murders? Would we have had a war in Iraq? A war pretty broadly thought to be a mistake motivated by a false calculation that allowed our leaders to use our anger to justify a political end.

What if that pause had led us to consider the consequences of our reaction with a clear concern for the impact of our behaviors? And if we did that would we be more-or-less the Christian nation we understand ourselves to be, would we be more or less a world leader today.

Violence is, of course, a spiritual issue not because of the “Thou shall nots” that frown upon it from antiquity.” I suspect the “thou shalt not kill’s” were there in some of the first words written down are there because violence

even in the time of Moses had an understood folk wisdom about the cycle it almost always begins.

In response to the Amish school shooting in 2006, Craig Smith notes that we get an example of the courage, strength, and gift and peace taking the path non-violence requires. In 2006 America the Amish community was

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shaken to its core as a man entered a schoolhouse, tied up ten young girls, and then proceeded to slay them. Methodically, one-by-one they were shot execution-style until ultimately the shooter turned the gun on himself and the horror-filled air rang silent.

After the smoke settled and they mourned and cried and then went about the grim task of hand digging the graves in which their children would soon be laid to rest, they drove their horse and buggies to the grave sites and buried their dead kids. Every last shovelful of dirt was gently placed on the coffin with the same care and attention as it was removed by the love of a father, brother or uncle.

They made a choice to live their faith and trust in God. Knowing full well God loves them and has forgiven them, in turn they forgive others—even when it means the loss of something as precious as a child. They knew hate produces darkness and eclipses the light of God in man. They chose to walk in light and not in darkness. Walking in darkness can only produce more evil. They didn't blame or criticize. They didn't look to gain advantage in order to destroy their opponent. No—they loved and forgave and chose to walk in light. As Craig Smith notes, when I think of conscious choices and countless hours of extraordinary athletes, musicians, or surgeons, I think about the time and sacrifice that went into the training that produced greatness.

Gandhi said strength does not come from physical capacity as much as it comes from indomitable will. He also said that those that can stand firm against the disharmony that comes from without must first stand firm against the disharmony that comes from within. For one's own soul is generally the most difficult soul to control.

Let's start to dismantle the violence bomb by modeling layers of pause, layers of separating our anger from our chosen response. And here I think is the payoff that doesn't figure in. I have seen it in my own life. The feeling of taking intentional steps to purify oneself from acting violently, is in itself an energy-creating phenomenon.

In this light what we might find, to use the language of efficiency, is that ending violence personally and collectively is a short cut to peace. And because we live in an interdependent world, violence almost never works to end a problem for long.

Because today we are here to lift up that anger and violence are not a given but a choice, I would like to close with a quote from recent former President of Starr King School for the Ministry, The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker's poem, “Choose to Bless the World.”

*The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
A simple moving forward into the world
With the Intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition, a confession of surprise, a grateful acknowledgement
That in the midst of a broken world,
Unspeakable beauty, grace, and mystery abide.*

There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life, even yours.

*And the there is injustice, anesthetization. or evil
There moves a holy disturbance, a
A benevolent rage,
A revolutionary love.
Protesting, urging, insisting
That which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless that world live their lives as a gesture of thanks
For this beauty
And this rage.*

Amen.