

## Adrian Peterson, Ray Rice and Dangerous Opportunity

Many years ago I heard it said that the Chinese word for Conflict translates in English as "Dangerous Opportunity". In recent days, as I have tried to absorb the tragic news coming out of the families of Ray Rice, and now Adrian Peterson, I have tried to make some sense of all of this through the lenses of what I have learned and come to believe from my work in the field of violence prevention, and in my own life. As terrible as recent events have been, I believe they may present us all with a Dangerous Opportunity that could allow for healing and growth, both for the families involved and all of us.

Three points before trying to make any sense, and more important, trying to identify helpful and doable next steps:

1. Based on my work in the violence prevention field the past 25 years, I have found that we frequently regard attempts at understanding and explaining individual and group behavior as excuses for "bad people" who must be "held accountable". For example, the statements that people who suffer traumatic brain injuries may be prone to problems with impulse control, that many (most?) people who harm their loved ones experienced similar harm in their own childhoods and adult lives, or that a large proportion of domestic violence incidents occur when one or both parties are under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, are often angrily received as being excuses for violent acts. The problem with reacting this way is that these statements are *factual and true*. I believe that in order to effectively prevent and appropriately respond to family violence, we need to do everything we can to understand how and why violence occurs. This requires a willingness to operate in a state of constant learning and seeking information that often may lead to uncomfortable conclusions that do not align with our preconceived notions. To be clear: I do not excuse any person hurting anyone else. I do continually seek to better understand how a fellow human soul could get to a place in their life of doing harm to their loved ones, for I believe that only by understanding can we prevent, and ultimately break the intergenerational cycle of family violence.

2. In recent discussion regarding the Adrian Peterson case, the word "discipline" has been used over and over to describe the beating he inflicted on his four-year old son's back, legs, buttocks and scrotum with a tree branch. It is my understanding that the word "discipline" derives from "disciple", and means *to teach*. I believe that Mr. Peterson's contentions that he loves his son, did not mean to harm him, and that he endured this kind of discipline/teaching during his childhood, as well as recent reports that he experienced frequent "paddling" at the hands of his high school football coach. Charles Barkley recently stated that most all African American parents in the South inflict similar punishment on their children. While this may provide a comforting sense of indignation for those of us outside this demographic, the fact is that local and national polls over the past 20 years have consistently shown that the vast majority of Americans, regardless of race or geography, believe it is appropriate, desirable and righteous to hit children in order to teach them to "behave". Hopefully this Dangerous Opportunity will allow us to truly and openly discuss what the ubiquitous practice of physical punishment has actually taught our children, and the behaviors in children and adults that have resulted from equating, and I believe mistaking, discipline with punishment.

3. Given that I am a Caucasian man, I do not feel it is my place to speak about the racial implications of the Peterson/Rice/NFL dilemma. I will say that I believe this must be part of the conversation, and urge readers to read and watch the following:

- Brittney Cooper's article on differences in the realities of African-American and Caucasian parenting:  
<http://www.salon.com/2014/09/16/>

- Cris Carter speaking out on the NFL halftime show the weekend after the Peterson case came to light: <http://www.youtube.com>

- The film *12 Years a Slave*. I could not help but notice the terrifying, tragic similarity between the treatment of the Black slaves in this film and the practice of "whooping" children today, nor the similarity between the wounds depicted on slaves in the film and the photos of Mr. Peterson's four-year old son. Tragic.

### **Understanding and Explaining**

In her book *Violent Partners*, Dr. Linda Mills says that that we almost invariably find four factors in the childhood experiences of people who end up in violent relationships as adults: insecure attachment (the essential connection between infant and their parent); witnessing domestic violence between parents or other care giving adults; being the victim of physical punishment; and being taught and encouraged to be violent. In his initial statement on Adrian Peterson's beating of his four year old son, his attorney stated that Mr. Peterson was disciplining him in the same manner that he had been raised as a child. Certainly both Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson have been taught and encouraged to be violent in their line of work. Recognizing that people as adults play out scripts and roles that they learn throughout childhood and as adults does not condone or excuse these behaviors, but does I believe provide a window to understanding, empathizing, and determining how to best respond and allow for learning, healing and growth.

Dr. James Gilligan ran the Massachusetts State Prison psychiatry program for 25 years and concluded from his experience and study that people act out violently when they are overwhelmed by a sense of shame and humiliation. He says that underlying much male violence is *a sense of shame at feeling shame*. The obvious and easy judgment of Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson is that they are privileged men who have earned millions of dollars being sports icons and heroes, and that they have violated our trust and our investments in them. Based on statements by Mr. Peterson, his mother, his high school football coach and his attorney, it sounds like this strongest of men may have been carrying a good deal of pain in his own life that has now played out tragically, on the most public of stages. The question now is whether we believe the best response as a community is to use shame and humiliation as our response to these family tragedies. As satisfying as it might feel to us, to distance ourselves from their terrible acts, I believe instead we must look into the hearts and pain of these men and their families and offer the possibility of understanding and healing -- both to these men and their families, and to all of the people who carry the scars of family violence throughout their lives.

Over 20 years ago I first heard Dr. James Garbarino, an internationally recognized advocate for the human rights of children, speak at a conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan building on the theme and goal of "A Violence-Free Michigan". In his opening remarks, he said that he had recently been at a similarly titled conference in Illinois, and had said to that audience: "*Well, I guess to achieve this goal, all we need to do is take everyone with a penis and send them to Indiana, right?*" After the laughter and shock in the room subsided, Garbarino suggested that there is more to the problem of violence than gender and hormones, that we need to look individually and collectively into our hearts and souls, including the hearts and souls who do harm to their loved ones and communities, and work to build communities where all people's fundamental needs are recognized and met, starting with our children's.

A song from the 70's sung by Ry Cooder had the refrain, "The very thing that makes you rich, makes you poor". Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson have been stars in one of the most brutal "games" ever invented. The NFL now says that roughly 1/3 of all NFL players have suffered, or will suffer head injuries - injuries that many researchers have connected with loss of impulse control which can often result in violence toward self and family members. Think of how we marveled at how rapidly Peterson recovered a few years back from a devastating knee injury and surgery, returning to the top of the game in a matter of months, and think of how each of these men would pop up and shrug off vicious hits from defensive players, game after game, year after year. To the extent that Linda Mills' contention holds true, perhaps the same childhood factors that may have made these men so "tough", which allowed them to excel in this vicious game and for which we have so admired them, may have also played a role in their ending up being caught in the cycle of family violence and their recent, terribly public downfalls.

Finally, in the book The Tipping Point, Malcolm Gladwell describes *The Fundamental Attribution Error* - the notion that when we look at people's behavior, we tend to overestimate the importance of background and character traits, and underestimate the importance of immediate situation and context. This idea suggests that small changes in environments, in immediate situation and context, can have profound impacts on human behavior. The challenge is to be able to see clearly how the environments of the American family, and now the NFL, may have contributed to the tragedies in these two, and so many American homes.

### **Prevention, Restoration and Healing**

Putting these ideas together, I have been a part of and provided leadership to work over the past 25 years in our local Public Health Department that has developed highly successful strategies to prevent and reduce violence in organizations and businesses ranging from children's museums and libraries to emergency shelters and mental health agencies. We have worked with dozens of such facilities around the Twin Cities and the country to create effective, sustainable actions that have been demonstrated to significantly prevent violent and harsh behaviors among parents, children and young people. This approach has been built around a question informed by The Fundamental Attribution Error: *When are you seeing recurring and predictable stress, tension and conflict in your work?* We have learned through these efforts that when problems keep happening in a predictable pattern, that there are often simple

explanations to be found in the immediate environment. For example, by paying attention to parents and children and helping them when stressful situations arise in museums, libraries and domestic , what previously seemed to be inevitable meltdowns and conflicts have largely disappeared.

Thinking about the NFL, we know that the day Adrian Peterson was deactivated that there were 31 other NFL players who had been suspended for reasons ranging from family violence to violations of drug and other team/league policies. What we also know is that professional football today is a brutal, hyper-masculine game; that many players have suffered and are suffering head injuries; that many players are using significant amounts and mixes of a variety of alcohol and pain-killing and other drugs; and now the revelation that at least some of these men experienced violence in their own childhoods. Adding all of this up, the behaviors we are seeing , resulting in at least 32 suspended players in the league, begins to look less like a group of individuals acting badly, and more like an epidemic being caused both by the histories of these men and the immediate, unhealthy context in which they "play" the game of football and, perhaps more precisely, gladiator.

Dr. Martin Luther King said, *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."* Let us remember that up until this past Friday, Adrian Peterson was literally the picture that the Vikings have used to sell the public on building a new billion-dollar stadium in Minnesota; Rice was a hero in Baltimore. We now appear to be going down the path of shaming, vilifying and casting off these gladiators and their families. We harshly judge Adrian Peterson for using shame and violence to "discipline" his four-year old son; we are disgusted by the violence exhibited by Ray Rice's punching of his then-fiancée. Has our rage so blinded us though that we do not see that our response, the vilifying condemnation of Peterson and Rice, derives from the same fundamentals of shame, violence and punishment for which we have condemned them?

To the extent that the contention of James Gilligan and many other other psychologists and students of human nature holds true, that violence arises out a sense of shame and humiliation, I believe the last thing we should be doing now is to use public shame and humiliation toward these men and so many others who have harmed their loved ones. How could this do anything other than to result in more violence and harm?

To quote Dr. King again, "Where do we go from here?" How do we take the Dangerous Opportunity of these terrible, public tragedies and seek healing and restoration for the families of Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson, and for everyone affected by and caught in the intergenerational cycle of family violence? I suggest two possible steps:

1. We can act today to come together as community and communities for honest and healing conversations about family violence, allowing for all of us, as Cris Carter suggests, to recognize and learn from mistakes each of us, our parents, and their parents have made in the name of caring. Together we can develop and practice new shared agreements on parenting and intimate relationships built on peace, love and our inherent humanity and connection. We can discern the difference between discipline and punishment. We can agree together to teach and guide our children with firm yet unconditional and gentle love. We can learn how to be together in our intimate adult relationships,

sharing our hope, fear, and yes, anger without the use of physical or emotional violence. We can learn to understand and forgive one another. Let us work together to create and own these standards as a community and communities, instead of relying on laws, shame and coercion.

2. I encourage players, owners and leaders of the NFL to re-examine what this "game" has become, and through rules and collective agreement move it back to being a true sport, rather than the ultra-violent spectacle it has become. By taking this courageous and necessary action, we can reduce the incidence and severity of the horrific injuries repeatedly suffered by NFL players, and increase the potential for these men to find the way to peace and respect in their family relationships.

I challenge us all to decide to move past our judgments and self-righteousness and see these terribly public tragedies as the canaries in the coal mine, casting light on the damage that family violence and the now violence of the NFL are inflicting in our homes and on our world. May we have the courage to take advantage of this Dangerous Opportunity to understand, forgive and commit to healing for the families and friends of Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson.

We have the power, ability, and the responsibility to learn from these tragedies; we can choose to grow and change. We owe nothing less to Adrian Peterson's son and Ray Rice's wife; to Adrian Peterson and Ray Rice; and to all of us caught in and impacted by the cycle of family violence -- a cycle which can, and must, be broken by, as Dr. King taught us, light and love.

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