

November 22, 2015: Trying to hold onto hope

This past week holding onto hope has been especially hard. I have spent the past 25 years of my life working on violence prevention. This coming Spring I plan to leave my secure job and go out on my own to teach and promote what I have learned can work in achieving what may might seem, especially today, to be an unrealistic goal: building peaceful community.

I have observed leaders and communities around our nation, and our world, trying to come up with strategies to prevent and avenge "Islamic extremists" blowing up an airplane full of Russians returning home from vacation, slaughtering concert-goers and people eating dinner on a beautiful Fall night in Paris, and attacking and murdering hotel guests and staff at a hotel in Mali.

After twenty five years devoting myself to violence prevention, and now declaring that this work will be the focus of the remainder of my career and life, what can I say, how can I hold onto hope? I believe it is crucial to be cautious about simple-sounding solutions to complex-sounding problems. And yet, at the end of this sad week and year, I have only one word, one idea to propose:

Empathy:
mentally entering into the feeling or spirit of a person or thing
(Random House Dictionary)

In 1990, the County that I have worked for these many years directed our Public Health department to develop and implement strategies to prevent family violence. The most lasting and powerful approach to come from this work is *The Wakanheza Project*. This work is built on the Dakota (Native American) word for child, *Wakanheza*, which in English translates as "sacred being." *The Wakanheza Project* has successfully reduced and prevented harsh treatment of children, and facilitated peaceful, healthy interactions among adults nationwide in places ranging from children's museums and libraries to domestic violence shelters and detox centers.

I believe that the simple magic of *The Wakanheza Project* is empathy: this approach has demonstrated that when "we" stop regarding others as "them," and instead, try to place ourselves in the situation of another person, we simply and naturally find ways to respond in a manner that reduces isolation, stress and tension, which are often precursors to violence. People and organizations have been moved through this work to intentionally be kind and welcoming in their lives and as a part of their work, built around genuine understanding gained through empathy. It works.

In taking an empathetic approach to the present horrors of our world, *mentally entering into the feeling or spirit* of those who we now dismiss as "Islamic extremists," I believe our first step must be to stop using the label "Islamic extremists," as it makes the work of entering into the feeling or spirit of those who have committed unspeakable atrocities almost impossible. The label also is in my opinion neither appropriate nor accurate, given the fact that the vast majority of mass killings at high schools and colleges and race-based attacks in the United States in recent years and decades have been committed by young white men between the ages of 15-25, many/most of whom I assume were raised in Christian homes given this country's religious demographics. Just as I think it would be a huge mistake to label this history of terrible American violence a problem of "White Male Christian Extremists," I believe the same holds true for our present dilemma.

If we can agree at least for the moment to put this label aside, I believe the next steps in our inquiry are to identify key factors that can lead humans, in other words any of us, to commit acts that are so clearly abhorrent. Perhaps more important, we must identify the fundamental needs of individuals and groups of people that allow us to live in peaceful, healthy community.

In his 1972 book Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence, psychologist and teacher Rollo May suggests that violence arises from a sense of powerlessness:

As we make people powerless, we promote their violence rather than its control. Deeds of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image, and to demonstrate that they, too, are significant.

In his 1996 book Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and its Causes, Dr. James Gilligan, who ran the Massachusetts State Prison psychiatry program for 25 years, echoes May's words, with an emphasis on the relationship between shame and violence:

I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent the attempt to prevent this "loss of face" - no matter how severe the punishment, even if it includes death.

Echoing and summarizing the analyses of May and Gilligan, the field of *Affect Script Psychology* proposes that, when people become trapped in an overwhelming place of shame they will respond in any or all of the following ways: withdrawing from others; acting out against others; harming self; and harming others.

My only source of information about the actions and motives of those who have recently committed such horrific acts of violence upon the passengers of the Russian airliner and fellow humans in Paris and Mali is media reports, and so, of course, I cannot claim any firsthand knowledge of those involved. I also cannot say with any certainty, that the analyses of May, Gilligan and the developers of the Affect Script Psychology are absolutely correct and applicable.

Further, there appears to be more than shame and powerlessness at play in the present situation; two items that come to mind being the power of social media and the internet to recruit and engage people in acts of violence, as well as the apparent distortion of the tenets of a religious faith to promote murder of "others." Before seeing these two aspects as unique to "Islamic extremism" however, it should be noted that many experts on mass killings have suggested that the pervasiveness of internet and media coverage of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at Columbine and other acts and actors of American terrorism may have played a major role in subsequent, "copy cat" attacks. Further, our history as humans is sadly littered with war and atrocities being justified in the name of our own understandings of morality and God.

To my way of thinking, there are two fundamental choices: either dismiss those who have committed these unthinkable deeds as "Islamic extremists" and seek to exterminate them both out of vengeance and to promote safety for the rest of us; or approach the situation using empathy as a tool to better understand how people, including you and I, could commit such atrocities, and at least equally, important, identify strategies and approaches to try to prevent the recurrence of such tragedies.

In their book A General Theory of Love, Drs. Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon, medical doctors with degrees in medicine, psychiatry and neurobiology demonstrate that the fundamental nature of humans is connection and love. They suggest that "modern society dangerously flouts our most basic emotional laws." Humans need connection and community and love - this is science, not a fanciful '60's song.

Dr. James Garbarino suggests that all people have three fundamental needs: Stability (living in a predictable environment), Security (a fundamental feeling of safety), and Affirmation (being recognized, and needed, as a part of something larger than ourselves). In his book Lost Boys, he argues that we all have souls within us, and that, while the soul has gone dormant in those who commit seemingly inhuman, and clearly inhumane, acts of violence, overwhelmed as they are by whatever circumstances may push a person to this point in their lives, the soul and humanity still remain in them.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." As we decide together how to respond to the horrors of the past week, weeks, months and years, I believe that the title of Dr. King's final book poses the question quite clearly: Where Do We Go From Here, Chaos or Community?

My hope and prayer and commitment is that we choose to move toward light, love and community. I do not believe that war and isolationist mentalities and strategies will solve this problem: Because they ignore, and in fact exacerbate what I believe are the fundamental causes of the violence we are seeing as outlined above; Because they tear apart our fundamental needs for community, connection, and love as outlined above; and, Because even if everything written in this essay is fundamentally wrong, there does not appear to be a coherent enemy nation nor clear group with whom to engage in a war that can be organized and won. With whom do we fight, and where?

Finally, we must keep in mind that the people who committed the horrors in Paris and Mali went in knowing full well they would die as the endgame of their actions. I believe the psychology of a person and group choosing to commit murder/suicide must be approached quite differently than instances where someone is trying to get away with something. It is difficult to threaten someone who has already chosen death. I believe our approach must be to create a country and world where we all have the opportunity to live in a connected, affirming community.

Of course we must all do what we can to identify and stop the people who planned these attacks from carrying out the next attacks they are most surely planning now, and we must interrupt the recruiting of young men and women who are being used as the tools of terrorism. But I believe the best way to end the successful recruitment of youth to kill and be killed is to avoid increasing the sense of shame and isolation among people who have been forced from their homes by providing refuge, welcome and safety, just as my family was offered refuge in this country when they were forced to flee their homes in the face of Eastern European Pogroms and Nazi Germany.

In the words of Dr. King, our community, country and world can and must choose to drive out darkness with light. We can and must drive out hatred with love.

Donald Gault

Building Peaceful Community

November 22, 2015 (The 52nd anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy)