

Violence Against Children

Marvin Bram

Introduction The axioms from which the following remarks derive are democratic politically, egalitarian socially, and redistributive economically. The question of cultural axioms will come into play in the discussion of democracy.

The matter of violence done to children by adults, its origins and its remedies, will be taken up principally for the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – although a look at origins will take us to other places and times. In future the Symposium will expand its spatial scope to other parts of the world.

It is the aim of the Symposium to advise decision-makers in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres, in the first instance those of American society. That advice will consistently focus on lowering levels of violence variously defined and considered.

Origins The usefulness of examining origins is to make a diagnosis of violence that implies its amelioration. The first step in so doing is to expand the time-scale to be surveyed. A serious diagnosis must begin with the entire career of genetically modern human beings, or else pathologies will be overlooked or given incorrect weights, and therapeutic possibilities will fall from view. We will look at about 35,000 years of pre-civilized human activity, before the coming of cities, and then at 5,000 years of civilized life. We will look at these two periods from the points of view of the enculturation of children by the family and of the further enculturation of children by institutions outside of the family. What is the relationship of children to adults in the family before cities? in the civilized family? What is the relationship of children to adults in the older and newer sets of extra-familial arrangements for enculturating children, moving them from their multi-potential childhoods to the specific adulthoods sanctioned by the societies in question?

Let us characterize the 35,000-year-long, pre-urban era, often called the paleolithic and neolithic periods after their technologies – once called the savage and barbarian periods after the prejudices of early investigators – let us call that time the kinship era, after its social organization. “Kinship” means that what urban peoples call political, social, economic, and cultural arrangements are made not by specialists or professionals, usually strangers to most persons, but by the elders of clans. Authority rests in elders who are known to you, not, say, in elected or appointed persons who are not known to you. Genetically modern humanity had little or no need for political institutions like states, social institutions like cities or schools, economic institutions like markets, and cultural institutions like museums or orchestras for most of the time human

beings have occupied the planet. There is no reason to believe that these absences represent deprivations, or that their later presences in the forms we have them were inescapable.

The post-kinship era, characterized exactly by presences like cities, schools, and markets, was inaugurated between five and six thousand years ago in present-day Iraq. Alexis de Tocqueville remarked of nineteenth-century America that the nuclear family by itself cannot resist the impingements of modern political and economic institutions: the father, mother, and their children must be surrounded by some intermediate, protective body of persons in order to be safe from unacceptable levels of control. In fact, those modern political and economic institutions could not have been created in the first place unless the original protective body of persons, the clan, was broken into its constituent and susceptible parts, its nuclear families. The first civilization, in the Middle East, and all subsequent civilizations elsewhere, were constructed on the break-up of their pre-urban clans. “Kinship” means the clan and the village; “post-kinship” means the nuclear family and the city.

In the kinship era, children were raised by the clan and they were further enculturated by the clan. Uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, grand-uncles, grand-aunts, all joined parents and siblings in raising a child. Break the clan, and the parents alone raise the child, and further enculturation is given to the school and teachers – in the first civilization, that of Sumer in Southern Iraq, called “school-parents” – who are strangers to the child. There can be no deeper difference in how human beings grow up.

Our interest will be in whatever suffering children experience at the hands of adults in nuclear families and in schools.

We can only proceed if we admit to the unnecessary and remediable suffering of children in twenty-first-century American nuclear families. The acknowledgment must come from the society as a whole, and the society is loath to confess that it is not protecting its children adequately, let alone loving them adequately. So we will stipulate the fact: we do not raise our children correctly; our children suffer unnecessarily; we can do far better for our children.

In 1948 the Social Commission of the United Nations decided to look into the needs of children in jeopardy. In 1950 John Bowlby took a position with the World Health Organization in order to produce a diagnostic study of the mental health of children in the West. His *Maternal Care and Mental Health* appeared in 1951. In 1965 an abridged and revised version of Bowlby's book, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, was published with the approval of the WHO. The principal cause of the suffering of children emerged in Bowlby's studies as the deprivation of loving maternal attention. Bowlby's observations and his conclusion regarding maternal deprivation confirm the earlier work of Ian Suttie in his *The Origins of Love and Hate*, from which these two excerpts [London, Free Association Books, 1988, pp. 73, 45]:

...the "taboo on tenderness"...is the leading feature of our own culture and the main reason for the substitution of the power technique for that of love.

and for emphasis:

...the reliance upon power in lieu of love characterizes and perhaps vitiates our whole culture and tradition.

It was the first civilization in Sumer that installed the power technique in lieu of kinship. That is our civilized “tradition.” Another admirer of Suttie’s, the anthropologist Ashley Montagu, acknowledging that “the potentialities for aggression exist in all human beings at birth [but] such potentialities will remain nothing more *unless they are organized by experience to function as aggressive behavior* [italics mine; from Montagu’s *Learning Non-Aggression*, NY, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 7]. It must be the case, then, that twenty-first-century America organizes innate aggressive potentialities so that aggressive behaviors result.

Remedies We have our imperatives. One, overcome the tenderness taboo. This will crucially involve the restoration of loving maternal attention to infants and toddlers. Though men appear more gripped by the tenderness taboo than women, the main address is still to mothers, who must help insure a next generation of men upon whom the grip is loosened. Two, dismantle the organization of those innate potentialities that yield violent actualities. This too points to mothers, of course, to fathers and father-figures who celebrate aggression, and to the culture-at-large.

We recommend the following action:

- 1) that an educational campaign be designed by the Office of the Surgeon General to reach all mothers – an unprecedented campaign indeed – exhorting them, following the WHO Report, to remain with their infants every hour of the child’s day, holding them as much as possible skin-to-skin, moving about with them, singing and talking to them, expressing their tenderness in every way, and to remain with their toddlers as much as they possibly can, putting their infants and toddlers before thoughts

of this or that adult life-style;

2) that tax incentives be designed to facilitate restoring joint families, bringing sibling families together in houses that can accommodate several families, bringing grandparents together with their children and grandchildren, and bringing single parents together with other single parents with their children,

all with a view to supporting mothers so that children will receive continuous, tender care.

School The child then goes to school. The matter of school is quite as ticklish as the matter of criticizing parents, since who can challenge the virtue of “educating” the young, of “self-fulfillment?”—two terms meriting retirement. In nineteenth-century England, when universal primary schooling was being debated much more forthrightly than it has been in twenty-first-century America, schooling was to have little to do with education and nothing to do with self-fulfillment; the aim was the instilling of obedience to authority. We certainly have other aims now, but we have not surrendered that one, and the other aims are problematical.

Let us look at one deeply problematical additional aim, one that lies beneath virtually all school curricula, and connects us to what appears to be the separate question of another, and perhaps even more consequential “curriculum,” that of television. The aim is competence in analysis – analysis in reading non-fiction and fiction texts, analysis in the social and natural sciences, and analysis in mathematics. The basis of the analytical procedures common to the humanities and the sciences is the syllogism; we have this from Aristotle more than two millennia ago, and it has remained the case to the

present day. Reasoning syllogistically is commendable unless it drives out other uses of the mind. Unhappily, inside the schools and largely out of them, reasoning syllogistically has indeed driven out other uses of the mind.

What of imagining richly rather than syllogizing? I doubt that any primary- or secondary-school teacher would say that he or she actively discourages imagining richly, but, after all, syllogistic reasoning is testable, and imagining isn't. And since tests are proliferating and classroom time is short...

It may surprise someone to realize that a healthy imagination is a necessary condition for coping with violent feelings, for *dis*-organizing the actualizing of violent behavior. Here a profound subtlety of the kinship world is revealed: yes, violent feelings were had; no, they weren't inevitably expressed in the real world. Violent feelings were expressed in an *imaginary* world, specially created for such expressions. Hence frightening masks, violent gestures, obscene shouts, but no one injured. This is the catharsis Aristotle should have been interested in. Instead, and possibly knowingly, he made the decisive contribution to the displacement of the imagination by analysis, and surely unknowingly, to the increase of violence done in the one world left to those whose imaginations were to be crippled, your and my real world.

Television-watching attacks both analysis and imagination. Analysis must be weakened in order for puerile advertising messages to do their work. That they do their work as well as they do, as measured by exquisitely correlated advertisements-to-profits, is testimony to their success. That a child's own image-making time is taken up by television image-making, with an often noticed diminution of imagining at other times, is robbery, and may constitute child-abuse.

In 1939 E.B. White, shown one of the first television images in history, said, “television is going to be the test of the modern world.” After the war, the Senate Subcommittee on Communications and the National Institutes of Mental Health decided to investigate the psychological and social consequences of television violence. In 1968 John Pastore, chairing the Subcommittee, asked the Surgeon General to appoint a Select Committee to establish the effects of television violence on children. The Surgeon General’s Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior began its work the next year and in 1970 concluded that a child’s television-watching habits are primary predictors of aggressive behavior in adolescence. The Advisory Committee’s Report was given little press, and in at least one important instance, was misrepresented to the public. Since 1970 the Report has been corroborated by hundreds of studies, and both quantitatively and qualitatively television programming is now worse than it was in 1970. And we are injuring the children of much of the rest of the world as a function of the extremely profitable export business in television programs. E.B. White was prophetic: television *is* the test of the modern world.

We recommend the following action:

- 1) that regarding elementary and secondary schools, curricula be revised to put the cultivation of imagination in balance with the cultivation of analysis. This is not to say that strengthening art and music programs will do the trick. They should be strengthened. But whole courses of study in fundamental practices of imagination must be installed at every level. Just as the kinship world provides insights into the imagination and violence, it speaks to curricular balance. Let strong new programs

call for the practice of imagining that one is both oneself and another – an animal, a practice children take to in an instant, or another person, the practice that lay at the heart of the kinship world, and deserves to ground any fully human community. To feel one’s own inner life and the inner life of another person may be the apex of that use of the mind we’re calling the imagination. It is not at all difficult to construct exercises that strengthen this faculty. At the same time, the analytic faculty can be strengthened more efficiently – efficiency being a hallmark of analytic success – such that the school day can actually be shortened. The lengthening of school days and school years, along with the current testing craze, are signs of the adult world’s failures of imagination. A shorter school day can mean more student involvement in the community, in particular with public libraries. Teachers can then spend time freed for them in afternoons to tailor the next day to each individual student; one-size-fits-all curricula insult children and only confirm again an adult-world failure. Finally, the imaginative and analytic faculties will stand to each other in a relationship better than simple balance. Because of the grounding status of the imagination that permits identification with others, we will have a “curriculum of kindness,” children achieving analytic competence that is always in the context of their deeply understanding and helping each other.

2) that regarding television, we once again appeal to the educational responsibilities of the Surgeon General’s Office. It may be impossible to

legislate away the affronts to the human condition supplied children and adults by the networks and cable stations. The affronts are pervasive and the risks of censorship dangerous to free speech. Mothers and fathers must pull their children, and themselves, away from television. Their good faith to their children can be tapped if a massive educational campaign explaining the real damage being done to mental functions is waged and probably repeatedly waged. Interests will be threatened, it goes without saying. The pressures of the tobacco industry were resisted to the enduring honor of the Surgeon General's Office. The effects of television are more insidious than those of tobacco, and if we are to take seriously Jefferson's warning that only whole, fully functioning citizens are capable of self-rule, a warning that E.B. White must have had in mind, television threatens democracy itself.

Nothing can contribute more to the health of a society's political, social, economic, and cultural institutions than the repair of that society's responsibilities to its children. It is our judgment that the foregoing recommendations will move twenty-first-century America toward such repair.

A selection of letters

To the Office of the Surgeon General:

There are two closely related matters concerning the first two years of life that I believe warrant the attention of the Office of the Surgeon General. They are

- 1) the unacceptably high incidence of caregivers in and away from the home striking children of that age, and

- 2) the unacceptably high incidence of children of that age being placed before television and computer screens.

First, Two dozen countries have acknowledged the research on the corporal punishment of children -- research largely done at laboratories like that at the Geffen Hospital at UCLA by such researchers as Dr. Allan Schore -- by passing federal legislation addressing such punishment. Vigorous national educational campaigns on nonviolent parenting complement the extension of assault law to children. Striking children too often leads to their becoming violent adults. The personal and social costs of failing to address this are enormous.

Second, the entire American pediatric institution condemns placing infants and toddlers in front of television and computer screens. Again, this practice prejudices against the child becoming a physically and psychologically healthy adult.

The Office of the Surgeon General, now in the lead in addressing childhood obesity, can become the champion of American children comprehensively. No other agency has the resources effectively to educate adult Americans in raising their children truly compassionately.

Yours sincerely,

To two hundred members of the House of Representatives:

I am taking the liberty of writing to you mindful that your first responsibility is to your own constituents. My request of you refers to your complementary responsibility to the country as a whole. Surely the welfare of children transcends both locality and party affiliation.

Twenty-four countries have acknowledged that the corporal punishment of children can no longer be countenanced by civilized societies, not only on prima facie grounds, but because research has shown unequivocally that children who are struck are likely to resort to violence habitually as adults, threatening the health of the entire society. In 2000, Germany, one of these twenty-four countries and the country whose draconian childrearing conventions had historically blighted its own society and other societies, added the following two sentences to its federal code: "Children have the right to a non-violent upbringing. Corporal punishment, psychological injuries, and other humiliating measures are prohibited." A two-tiered program followed on passage of this provision, the first disseminating non-violent childrearing techniques widely in all media, the second providing extensive parental support throughout the country.

Our country needs something like an EPA, an Equal Protection Amendment to the Constitution, extending all protections of the law to Americans from birth, with particular attention to assault law. Our children deserve this protection, first. Second, the stakes for all Americans are high, violence taking an insupportable toll on our society.

I would be happy to discuss the research that points to the necessity of an EPA with you. My hope is that you or a colleague will find it possible to move such an Amendment in the House. The national conversation can then begin.

Yours sincerely,

To the President:

Memorandum #1

Dear President Obama:

The first of three memoranda issuing from discussions since 2004 of the Geneva, NY, Peace Symposium (www.genevapeace.org) follows. The subject of the first memorandum is the improvement of the lives of children.

(1) Parenting

We urge the new administration to look into augmented provisions for parental leave. One year at full pay or two years at half pay would go far to guaranteeing the parental attention that all children require and deserve.

In 1999 and again in 2004 the American Academy of Pediatrics advised its membership to discourage parents from permitting their infants and toddlers to watch television, on grounds of physical impairment of the susceptible central nervous systems of the very young. Television programming has recently been designed to engage exactly this population. The First-Amendment issues are knotty, of course, but the matter of the physical, and unavoidably the psychological impairment of our children, should, at the very least, alert the Surgeon General's Office to its educational responsibilities.

The Geneva Peace Symposium supports the Roots of Empathy initiative (www.rootsofempathy.org), pioneered in Canada and currently being administered in a three-year program in Seattle. The effects on schoolchildren throughout Canada of the carefully introduced presence of infants in their classrooms have been profoundly encouraging. There may be no problem in the modern West more pressing than the growing empathy deficit that this initiative brilliantly addresses.

We also support the "attachment parenting" orientation to parenting created over fifty years of worldwide research. Attachment parenting emphasizes continuous closeness of the child to the mother or father, indeed, it advises "wearing one's baby," or in neuroscientific terms, establishing continuous right-brain to right-brain communication, particularly of the baby to the mother. We point too to the absolute necessity of ending the corporal punishment of children between birth and three, once again on grounds of the physical and psychological impairment of our most susceptible and helpless

population. Growing evidence connects adult violence with childhood corporal punishment, therefore of social problems of many kinds with this one matter, striking young children.

The nuclear family can be overstressed in its parental obligations. For that reason, we believe that tax incentives should be considered designed to bring far-flung extended families together. Such incentives would relieve pressure not only on nuclear families but on institutional daycare, which presents serious problems of its own.

(2) Education

With regard to the empathy deficit referred to above, and to questions of mental life and a viable social order, we advise a re-ordering of the priorities of K-12 education, placing the cultivation of empathy at its center, as its organizing principle.

The implicit organizing principle of American education may be characterized as “method.” Method – in the natural and social sciences, in the humanities, even in the arts -- can be taught mechanically, and it can be tested. That is convenient, and in the degree of its convenience, disrespectful of the full humanity of children. In particular, the testing regime under No Child Left Behind, represented to the public as raising up disadvantaged children, disadvantages them further. Albert Einstein and others who cannot be faulted on their mastery of method have argued that something deeper than method must precede it: then and only then will method not only be perfected but guided toward a humane social order. That something-deeper-than-and-prior-to-method is the power of the imagination to occupy someone else’s shoes -- empathy. Method will not be sacrificed when empathy becomes the spine of the educational system; it will be put in its proper context.

We would mention that the Geneva Peace Symposium is working exactly on a “curriculum of empathy” that loses nothing of the rigor of traditionally conceived areas of study, and contextualizes these areas so as to remedy the empathy deficit that can potentially render moot any gains in test scores that ignore their contextualization.

Sincerely yours,

Marvin Bram, Murray Heaton, George Joseph, James Joy, Steven Lee, Thelma Pinto, Ann van der Meulen, Mark Venuti: the Geneva Peace Symposium

Memorandum #2

Dear President Obama:

The second of three memoranda issuing from discussions since 2004 of the Geneva, NY, Peace Symposium (www.genevapeace.org) follows. The subject of this second memorandum is American society.

(1) The perfection of our democracy

Discussions of liberty, equality, freedom, and democracy are centuries old and often enough contentious. We find that the way these matters are taken up by Rensis Likert, Founder, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, and Frederick Thayer, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh to be especially cogent. They raise the problem of hierarchy to eminence, displaying the ironies and harms of hierarchized social, political, and economic institutions. The efficiencies sought by aggregating persons into hierarchies are often bought at the expense of the full humanity of those persons. Likert's and Thayer's prescriptions for careful de-hierarchization speak to the restoration of such full humanity as Thomas Jefferson told us is necessary for our democracy to deserve the name.

(2) The status of women

The administration should use all appropriate means to encourage passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in the relevant states.

Federal and state statutes should be combed to insure gender-neutral language in their details.

The UN has done fruitful work on equal rights for women. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action offers both domestic and international recommendations for insuring gender equality. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women should be ratified by the Senate. Movement toward equal pay for equal work and guaranteed parental leave and job protection should be accelerated.

(3) The status of people of color

Increased attention must be paid to the integration of K-12 schools.

School curricula should be re-designed to place the support of empathy at their heart. The section **Education** in our first memorandum argues for the necessity of such reform. A far deeper "toleration" will result from bringing the society's empathy deficit to an end.

The construction of community centers designed so as to insure diversity in their use should be encouraged.

(4) The status of the poor

Beginning with Tom Paine, discussion of the amelioration of the suffering of the poor has taken up (a) the short-term question, involving the redistribution of wealth and (b) the long-term question, involving education. The first matter requires the perfection of the

graduated income tax as the principal instrument in a capitalist society for protecting the lives and dignity of the poor. The second matter requires an additional look at K-12 and adult-education curricula. They must more realistically prepare everyone for a fulfilling place in the economy. As they stand, most of these curricula fail to do so, particularly regarding the poor. The vanguard of this effort is occupied by the most thoughtful of our community colleges. They must be supported.

(5) The status of religion

It is imperative that the separation of church and state be strengthened and made more clear to everyone: we are not a “Christian nation”; we have no state religion. In particular, all religious symbolism and observance must be removed from our public schools. The separation of church and state does not weaken private religious practice, but protects it from government entanglement.

The re-design of K-12 curricula to emphasize empathy will derivatively emphasize religious toleration. The analytical rigor that will follow from such re-designing will make more clear not only what must be tolerated in a liberal democracy, but what must not be tolerated.

Sincerely yours,

Marvin Bram, Murray Heaton, George Joseph, James Joy, Steven Lee, Thelma Pinto, Ann van der Meulen, Mark Venuti: the Geneva Peace Symposium

Memorandum #3

Dear President Obama:

The third of three memoranda issuing from discussions since 2004 of the Geneva, NY, Peace Symposium (www.genevapeace.org) follows. The subject of this third memorandum is the world community.

(1) The poor elsewhere

The US must meet its obligation to the Millennium Project to provide 0.7 % of our GNP for the termination of the world’s worst poverty. We would like to say a word about what constitutes “wealth” in other parts of the world, so that what the developed world’s notion of wealth not be projected elsewhere with ironic results. The West is in the habit of exporting its view of the world, which among entirely well-meaning people tends to mean Western-style schools, Western agricultural methods, Western cultural values, *et al.* Millennium funds used this way will fail their purpose. “Wealth” foundationally refers to food, clothing, and shelter. What is done with worldwide wealth redistribution must help the poor (a) grow their own food within a few yards of their living-places. If “horizontal” gardening is impossible because of the poverty or scarcity of soil, then “vertical”

gardening must be taught and financed. Bringing the poor into a national or international market for foodstuffs would be counterproductive and would increase the vulnerability of the poor. Such necessities as (b) clothing and (c) shelter should subscribe to the same imperatives: the poor will extricate themselves from their straits when they grow their food, make their clothing, and build their living-places, themselves.

(2) The environment

We are impressed by the international Earth Charter Initiative (www.earthcharter.org). We encourage the administration and members of Congress carefully to study it.

We are dismayed by the status of the US automobile industry. Once the backbone of our manufacturing economy, the industry appears is failing. The failure is theirs; Detroit has been slow – to close onlookers, pathetically, ludicrously slow – to engineer the correct, i.e. twenty-first- rather than nineteenth-century, vehicles. For example, research is proceeding apace in other countries on compressed-air-powered vehicles. We must remember that not only is internal combustion a curse on the “external” environment, but the electromagnetic fields generated by electric motors in plug-in electric cars may prove harmful to our “internal” environments. These are caveats well understood elsewhere. MDI in France is working toward compressed-air power for public transportation. The domination of the enormous personal-transportation sector of the world economy by, say, India or China exploiting Australian compressed-air technology for a readily available, inexpensive car, will move the US still farther away from manufacture.

Sincerely yours,

Marvin Bram, Murray Heaton, George Joseph, James Joy, Steven Lee, Thelma Pinto,
Ann van der Meulen, Mark Venuti: the Geneva Peace Symposium