Chapter 1

Preventing and Transforming Violence: Mindfulness and Conflict Skills

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ABSTRACT

The authors have spent careers preventing and transforming violence, as a lawyer for public schools, treatment leader for repeat violent juvenile offenders, victim offender mediator and army lieutenant colonel. Here they share the field tested insights they have gained over a combined fifty plus years of service. They also elaborate Gandhi’s nonviolence (actual and envisioned) so that readers will start to fully appreciate what is required for sustainable nonviolence. He offered several practices, tools and ideas that have significant potential to help the contemporary world embrace nonviolence as a complex growth filled way of living, one that promises to help the human race sustain and enrich their civilization(s).

INTRODUCTION

While nonviolence has a relatively long and noble history, particularly as a political strategy introduced by Gandhi in South Africa and India for liberation from oppression, as well as a spiritual lifestyle, its tools for effectively confronting, diffusing, preventing and otherwise managing violence are less well known and practiced, particularly outside of the professions tasked with responding to violent crime. A close study of Gandhi reveals he himself practiced mediation and related skills, but while acknowledged, they are not promoted and taught like his embrace of nonviolence as a political strategy. Sadly, even parents and teachers are not taught these skills and approaches enough to prepare them for the violent tragedies erupting in schools and communities.

Instead, too many parents, teachers and adults still believe that their children will only be prepared to protect themselves if comfortable and ready to respond to aggression with aggression. Innumerable
children, as were their parents, are being physically and sexually assaulted in their homes, churches, schools and communities. In short, they are being raised and taught by violent adults who rationalize, justify and promote violence. Is it any mystery that the world is as violent as it is? Nevertheless, truly amazing is how nonviolent the world simultaneously can be. Human effort (advocacy) and oversight have resulted in greater nonviolence, not simply as a potent vehicle for justice but also as a safe and sustainable way of life. This chapter will introduce research explaining violence and how human beings create and then review several research based insights regarding what is needed to build nonviolence at all levels of life: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup (family, tribe, gender, culture, religion), intergroup (between cultures and religions) and within other increasingly complex social systems.

RESEARCH REGARDING VIOLENCE

In the United States (hereinafter “U.S.”) it is common to hear people attribute violent behavior to mental illness. Perhaps psychologists have created diagnoses for those who violently harm themselves and others, but the research that will be shared here has little if anything to do with sickness. Readers do not need to be doctors or therapists to respond and make important difference in the face of violence and potential violence.

The most predictable indicator of violent behavior is past violent behavior. If someone has been violent, they are more likely to be violent again than someone who has never been violent. A child who shows violence towards other children or animals should be a concern. They need intervention, likely intensive, to prevent violence and victimization.

Punishment fails to accomplish what many parents, teachers and authorities intend. At its worst, harsh and violent punishment models and teaches violent behavior (Erbe, 2004).

Discipline, on the other hand, at its best encourages and rewards positive behavior while asserting and holding moral boundaries against violent behavior much like skillful mediation, or conflict facilitation by a third party. Many parents and teachers need to be taught this nonviolent approach to parenting and teaching, especially if they were raised with violent examples. Once again, intervention, likely intensive, is needed to break multigenerational cycles of violence.

One in three women and one in four men are physically assaulted by their intimate partners in the U.S. every year. One in five children, boys and girls, are sexually assaulted. About forty percent of children raised violently will grow up to be violent as adults (Erbe, 2004). Once again, intensive intervention like the nonviolent parenting and teaching described above is needed to break this cycle.

Research in the U.S. indicates that men are more likely to be physically violent while women are psychologically violent (Eagly, & Steffen, V. 1986). They are both violent (Frodi, A., Macaulay, J. & Thome, P. 1977). Is this what we are teaching our children: that to be a man is to be ruthlessly violent and a woman untrustworthy and manipulative? The world’s most popular and profitable movies indicate so. Bloody violence and “mean girls” mesmerize and entertain many.

The cultural spillover theory posits that youth in a violent culture will demonstrate violence (Erbe, 2004). Their culture teaches, models, rewards and glorifies. Social learning theory strongly resonates (Erbe, 2004).

This cultural and social learning does not only occur in the family (tribe), schools and childhood neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, U.S. research correlates military service with potential violent behavior (Erbe, 2004). With the U.S. industrial military complex becoming the primary path to education and