

“Caging Violence”

by Lynn M. Acquafondata

Reading One:

“Roses and Garbage” by Thich Nhat Hanh from *The Heart of Understanding*

Defiled or immaculate. Dirty or pure. These are concepts we form in our mind. A beautiful rose we have just cut and placed in our vase is immaculate. It smells so good, so pure, so fresh. It supports the idea of immaculateness. The opposite is a garbage can. It smells horrible, and it is filled with rotten things.

But that is only when you look on the surface. If you look more deeply you will see that in just five or six days, the rose will become part of the garbage. You do not need to wait five days to see it. If you just look at the rose, and you look deeply, you can see it now. And if you look into the garbage can, you see that in a few months its contents can be transformed into lovely vegetables, and even a rose. If you are a good organic gardener and you have the eyes of a bodhisattva, looking at a rose, you can see the garbage, and looking at the garbage you can see a rose. Roses and garbage inter-are. Without a rose, we cannot have garbage; and without garbage, we cannot have a rose. They need each other very much. The rose and garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose. If we look deeply at the concept of defilement and immaculateness, we return to the notion of interbeing.

Reading Two:

“Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps
On the back of the wind
And floats downstream
Till the current ends
And dips his wing
In the orange sun rays
And dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
Down his narrow cage
Can seldom see through
His bars of rage
His wings are clipped and
His feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
With a fearful trill
Of things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard

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On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
And the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
And the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
And he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied
So he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
With a fearful trill
Of things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard
On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom.

Sermon

Thich Naut Hahn's reading, "Roses and Garbage" speaks of the cycles of nature-- composting transforming refuse into new growth, bringing beauty and hope. Thich Naut Hahn goes on to apply this image to an ugly real life situation. He speaks of a young teenager who becomes a prostitute in Manila to help her family earn money. She feels defiled and impure. She envies other girls who dress in finery, live in good families and do not suffer as she does. Thich Naut Hahn says, "She is like this because other people are like that....No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim it is not our responsibility. The girl in Manila is that way because of the way we are."

I don't often take the time to stop and think about girls forced into prostitution. When I do, it is easy to have compassion for a child and to begin to understand the cycles of wealth and

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poverty that lead to this kind of oppression. Thich Naut Hahn's teaching applies to even more difficult situations as well. I rarely take the time to reflect on criminals who spend years, sometimes lifetimes in prison. I usually I don't meet them on the street. I don't have any reason to visit them in their cells. I feel safe when they live apart, forgotten, in cages, paying for the violence they perpetrated on others. Clearly if anyone is the "garbage" of society, it would be prisoners who have committed violent crimes and sometimes continue to victimize fellow prisoners. We of course would be the roses. Thich Naut Hahn says that there can not be one without the other. He would say we are all responsible at some level for what happens in prisons. Can that be true?

The concept is not easy for most Americans to grapple with because our society is set up largely around black and white, this or that, thinking. In his book, *Violence: Reflections on A National Epidemic*, James Gilligan writes about how the court room aims to distinguish "the "good guys" from the "bad guys" and "the "bad guys" from the "mad" guys". In more formal terms it seeks to determine who is innocent, who is guilty and who is criminally insane. But Gilligan says these distinctions are rarely clear cut and end up limiting our ability to understand and prevent violence.¹ He says, ""All human action (even that of a single individual) is relational."²

Though our country was founded on values which were influenced by some prominent Unitarians and Universalists, our prison and court systems have a long way to go before they truly respect the worth and dignity of each individual. Our systems have not reached a balanced reflection of the justice, equity and compassion we espouse, though some individuals have

¹ *Violence: Reflections on A National Epidemic* by James Gilligan. Vintage Books: NY. c.1997, p.6.

² Gilligan, p. 7.

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advocated for change throughout the centuries. Unitarian, Dorothea Dix began prison reform 150 years ago. When she visited prisons she saw valuable human beings forced to live in disgusting and tortuous conditions. She spoke out to the Massachusetts Legislature, “I come as the advocate of helpless, forgotten, insane men and women; of beings sunk to a condition from which the unconcerned world would start with real horror.”³ In the end her work improved the conditions of prisons and mental hospitals in our country. However, many dark hidden corners of atrocity remain.

The most important contribution our Unitarian Universalist tradition can make is to use our skills at observing the world in wide range of shades of gray and apply it this country’s treatment of prisoners. In prison the cells are distinct, clearly separated units with very little opportunity for daily life choices. The law requires that specific crimes be punished with set sentences regardless of the details of each person and each situation. But the prisoners’ world is filled with subtleties and ambiguities. Looking more closely through Gilligan’s eyes we can observe some of that complexity. Gilligan is a psychiatrist who spent 14 years serving as medical director of a prison mental hospital and then clinical director for the Massachusetts state prison system. He did not anticipate what he would see and learn about prisoners in his work there.

To start with he found that the men he worked with experienced a blurring of the boundary between life and death. He wrote, “For the violent...the usual dichotomies between life and death, this world and the other world, rationality and irrationality, pleasure and pain, reward and punishment, the body and the soul, self-preservation and self-destruction, have totally broken down.” These men had experienced “death of self, which occurs while the body is still living. So we speak of them as “the living dead,” biologically alive yet spiritually and

³ http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/dorothea_dix/

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emotionally dead.”⁴

Most importantly and most surprisingly to me, he found that this did not happen because they committed a murder. These men committed a murder or multiple murders because they already lived in this state. They felt incredible anguish at seeing others alive, but not being able to attain life themselves. He said, “Some had told me they feel like robots or zombies, that they feel their bodies are empty or filled with straw, not flesh and blood, that instead of having veins and nerves they have ropes or cords.”⁵

What causes human beings to become the “living dead”? The prisoners Gilligan worked with had experienced violence inflicted on them or those close to them since early childhood. Many had seen at least one parent or other close relative murdered as they watched. Many experienced physical and sexual abuse by their parents, relatives or close friends. Some experienced extreme neglect and debilitatingly violent punishment from caregivers. For example, as a child, Donald C. was passed around nude at his parents parties and used as a “sexual party favor”.⁶ Gilligan wrote, “Without feelings of love, the self feels numb, empty, and dead.”

As I hear this I see the image portrayed in Maya Angelou’s poem. “A caged bird stands on the grave of dreams”. In many cases, future criminals buried their dreams long before they committed a crime. The bars that cage in those people come primarily from perpetual neglect, abuse, shame and despair, not iron.

Gilligan observed that the “living dead” murder as a fruitless attempt to come alive again. Often violent criminals engage in vicious self mutilation, as well, violently cutting themselves

⁴ Gilligan, p. 37.

⁵ Gilligan, p. 33.

⁶ (p.47)

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and swallowing multiple razor blades. They use this as an attempt to feel something, anything.

Unfortunately the cycles of abuse do not always stop at the prison door. Gillian describes a man he worked with, Lloyd A. who first served time in prison for a minor, nonviolent crime. He acted in rebellious and provocative ways towards the prison guards. They responded with harsh, dehumanizing punishment. He spent most of the last two years of his first sentence in solitary confinement with no lights and no proper sewage system. Then instead of releasing him gradually into the community, having him live in a residential facility for a period of time and helping him develop job skills, they simply let him go at the end of his sentence with no warning and no preparation. A few days later, Lloyd A. hitchhiked. He killed one of the students who picked him up and nearly killed the other one.

When the caged bird opens his or her throat to sing, he “sings with a fearful trill” which sometimes involves acting out a lifetime of rage and humiliation by slitting another person’s throat.

Gilligan wrote, “punishing someone in the way that he was punished does not protect the public; it only sends a human time bomb into the community where he is primed to explode the moment he resumes his first contact with other human beings.”⁷

Hopefully that’s an extreme and isolated situation, but it might not be. Last week the government released a study finding that 12 percent of youth in juvenile detention facilities around the country report sexual victimization. Thirteen centers have particularly high rates with nearly 1 out of every 3 inmates reporting some type of sexual abuse or victimization. Most of the victimization involved staff abusing the youth, rather than youth victimizing each other.⁸

⁷ Gilligan, p. 148-150.

⁸ <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/01/07/national/main6067416.shtml>

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Would a youth who commits another more violent crime after being abused in detention be fully responsible? Was Lloyd A solely responsible for his own violent actions? Or are these individuals not at all responsible because of the way they suffered at the hands of others? If I had the task of sitting on these juries, I would find it an impossible role. Who am I to either condemn or acquit under these circumstances? Often murderers are both the filthiest garbage and roses who someone has stomped on repeatedly.

Yet the question remains, what does all of this have to do with me? It's one thing to see aspects of the rose in what appeared to be only garbage, but do we also find aspects of garbage in the beautiful roses? I treat my children with love and respect and attention. I provide them what they need to prosper. I reach out and help others. I'm not part of the problem. This must be where Thich Nhat Hanh has it wrong.

Kathy Larson wasn't part of the problem either. On May 14, 1998, her husband, Bill, went to work as usual as director of human resources at Grace General Hospital in Winnipeg. He tried to work out a disagreement over the dismissal of a hospital maintenance employee. Dissatisfied with the process, the former employee returned in the afternoon and stabbed him to death with a hunting knife. On a website about restorative justice, Kathy describes the intensity of her grieving process.

She wrote about going through "A journey where one can become entrenched in the emotions of bitterness, rage, blame, and self-pity. " The perpetrator seeded negative emotions into this family's life through his actions. All of a sudden this beautiful person took on emotions from the dark side of life. The rose wilted and began to decompose. Kathy Larson wrote about the struggle to make something positive come out of all of this. She said, "These emotions seem natural given the circumstances surrounding Bill's death."

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Kathy Larson wrote, “fortunately, these emotions did not prevail and block the healing process. At some point along the journey, I recognized that if I did fall victim to the clutches of anger and revenge – so would my sons. I was not prepared to sacrifice their futures.” In addition she found that the justice system “does not bring inner peace and healing. In reality, it can be a deterrent if one becomes hooked into it. The process of healing can progress naturally when one avoids the emotional entrapment of revenge,” she said. At some point she took responsibility for her own wellness and healing and found ways to bring joy and happiness back into her life and her sons’ lives again.⁹

I don’t know anything about the killer of Bill Larson. Both of the accused murderers of the Petit’s family had recently come out of prison after serving time for burglary. They were on parole. I don’t know specifically what happened to them in prison. We do know that beatings, gang rape and other abuse in prisons are common. We do know that one of the accused men had suffered rape in his earlier years. Gilligan quoted a man as saying that murder is not an event, but one point in a process.¹⁰ It sounds like there were many potentially pertinent points in this process for these two men.

The Report of the “Commission on Safety and Abuse in American Prisons” published in 2006 begins with a quote by senator Richard J. Durbin about why what happens in prisons matters to us. He says, “Most of us in Congress and most Americans do not spend a lot of time thinking about the conditions of the prisons across our nation, but we should. We should, because...what happens inside jails and prisons does not stay inside jails and prisons.”¹¹

⁹ <http://www.sfu.ca/crj/kathy.html>

¹⁰ Gillian, p. 135.

¹¹ <http://www.prisoncommission.org/>

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Maya Angelou poetically linked prison and the free world as well by juxtaposing the image two birds in a way which makes the visions and emotions overlap. Whether it points to physical prison bars or the bars of oppression and victimization does not matter. What matters is that prison exists side by side with the free and unencumbered world, and one can easily merge into the other.

Where do I come in? Where are the links of responsibility between the free world and the prison system? Breaking cycles of violence can only happen when we understand how those cycles develop and continue. We can only break the cycles when we understand societal responsibility. Societal responsibility means me and you, our roles.

Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the role of the disparity of economics in his example. Economics plays a role in our treatment of prisoners as well, but in a different way. Violent criminals have often suffered extreme childhood abuse. And yet the people in our society who are trained to investigate child abuse and work to change and rehabilitate abusive families are often paid poverty wages. The turnover rate in these fields is high. The Commission on Safety and Abuse in American Prisons reported that correctional systems offer wages to their officers which compete with Wal-Mart¹². The state of Louisiana paid the lowest starting salary in 2006 at \$15,324. But no state paid a higher starting salary for correctional officers than New Jersey at \$36,850. Combine that with intense, crowded facilities without enough backup, it leads to high turnover and poorly trained employees.

Why is this true? Because people like you and I, average Americans, do not want our personal taxes increased to pay for services that benefit criminals. We want to cut costs and “reduce waste”. The system will not change unless people who have never committed a crime,

¹² *The commission on safety and abuse in america's prisons*, John J. Gibbons/Nicholas de B. Katzenbach
commission co-chairs June 2006 (<http://www.prisoncommission.org/report.asp>). p.71

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nor ever been a victim of a crime, nor ever worked in or visited a prison are willing to give up something to improve life for others—for correctional officers and other prison worker, for case workers and those who work with abuser as well as for prisoners themselves.

Why is this true? Because many of us are quick to distance ourselves and condemn abusers rather than taking the time to see them as whole people like ourselves. What if our society treated abusive parents with love and respect, reaching out with compassionate options to help them break the chains of generations of violence and oppression, so that their children may learn to choose a healthy life?

What if prison systems were designed to keep society safe not just by locking people up, but by treating inmates for mental illness and addiction, and providing education? What if we treated prisoners with love and respect regardless of whether “they deserve it” or not? It’s not about being altruistic. Many of these prisoners will get out and live as our neighbors or our family’s neighbors one day. They can only act from what they have learned and experienced in life thus far. In addition, the way we treat others affects the quality of our personal lives. When we reach out with love, compassion and optimism we can grow hope for ourselves..

Shining a light on the dingy, frightening corners of human life helps to expose problems and lead to change. What makes it especially difficult is that this work also exposes the fragile, dark and hidden corners of our own souls. We can not have one without the other. But it works the other way too.

We have opportunities every day to notice when people we come in contact with are in distress and take the time to listen. We can develop friendly interactions with adults and children. People are much more likely to ask for our help if they already know we care about them. We can work in more proactive ways as well. After I spoke at a Unitarian Universalist church last

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weekend, congregants began talking about writing letters to a young man in prison who is the son of one of their members. Some considered the idea of advocating for change because the system locked this young man away for 60 years for a crime which did not physically harm another human being. It is important to work for reforms in the system to help the people we already know and their families. It is equally important to work to help the sons and daughters of people we have never met because all human life is intertwined.

The problems in the system are overwhelming. But when we reach out with love and compassion and mutual respect we can heal broken places in our own hearts and we can work towards making the world a safer and more compassionate place for all people.