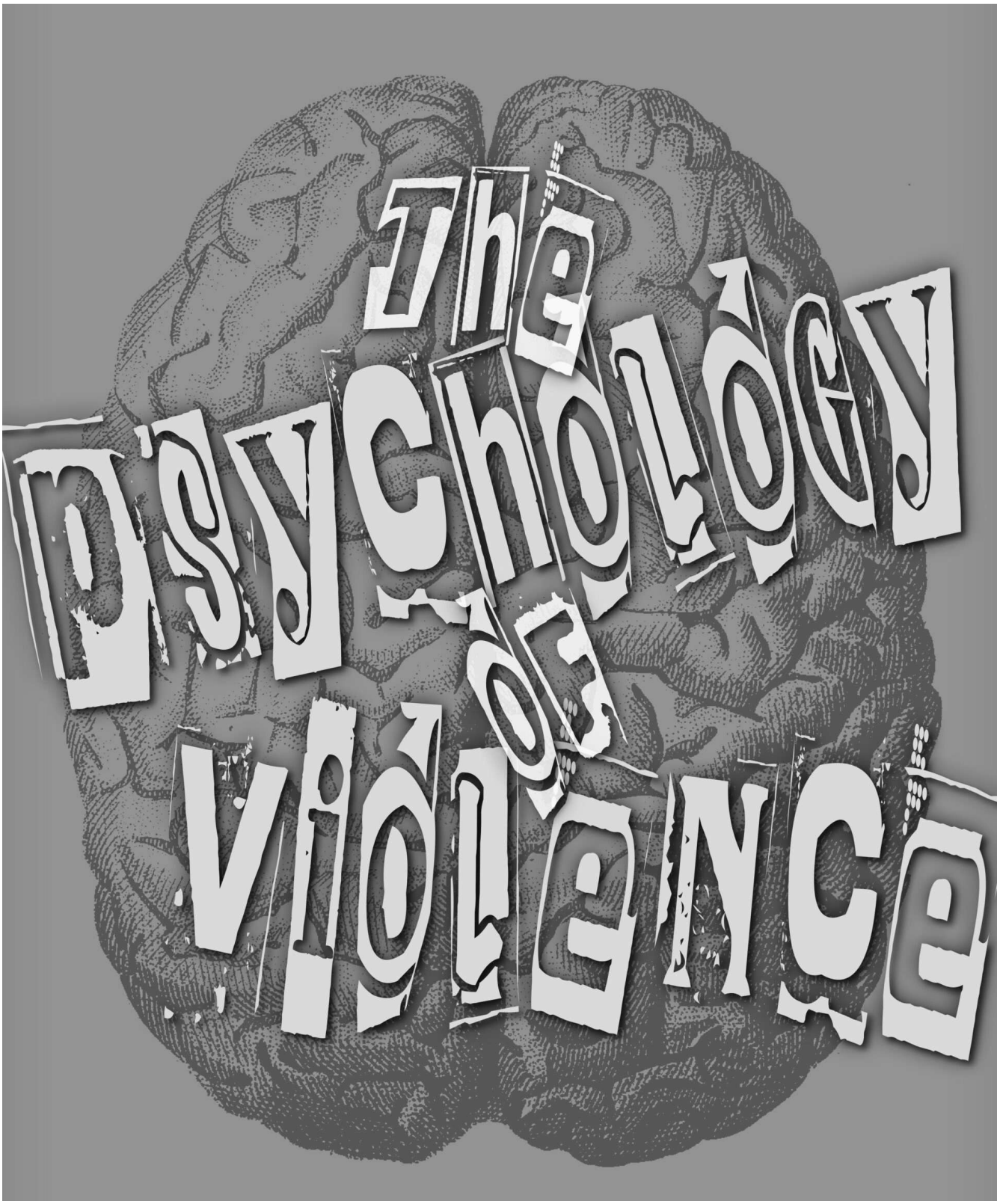
On My Mind: The psychology of violence



At 86, psychiatrist and part-time Vineyarder James Gilligan just published his eighth book, “Holding a Mirror Up to Nature: Shame, Guilt, and Violence in Shakespeare.” For more than 50 years, Dr. Gilligan has studied violence, run healing programs in prisons, written countless articles and book

chapters, and served as an advisor on the topic of violent crime to a range of world leaders and organizations, including Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Kofi Annan, the World Health Organization, and the World Court. He is currently a professor at NYU.

Recently, I had the honor of talking with Dr. Gilligan about violence. Our conversation focused on his thoughts about the connection between shame and violence.

CS: What causes people to become violent?

JG: I have gotten to know thousands of people who committed horrific acts of violence. Most of them had committed violence against individuals, but some had perpetrated war crimes and acts of terrorism, and many had enacted violence toward themselves, often in attempted suicides. Every single one of them had been overwhelmed by feelings of shame and humiliation prior to their acts of violence. Now, all of us have felt shame or felt rejected over the course of our lives. Narcissistic injury throughout life is inevitable. Obviously most people don't murder, maim, and mutilate others. Shame is a necessary but not essential ingredient to violence. The body has multiple defense mechanisms that respond to infection, and the same is true for how we deal with shame and humiliation. Those who respond to it with acts of violence were taught this particular response, so they commit acts of violence in situations in which most others would not.

We were all taught in medical school that all human behavior is the product of interactions between biological, psychological, and social determinants. People who react to shame and humiliation with violence lack a sense of self-worth and self-respect (the psychological determinant), and have been taught violence in their homes and communities (the social determinant). Pride is the opposite of shame, and a necessary antidote to the production of violence. Education, having a respectable job, feeling respected in the community all make violence much rarer statistically.

CS: Are there particular characteristics of the violent people you have worked with?

JG: The people I saw in the prisons were poor, many illiterate, and mostly members of demographic groups that are exposed to systematic humiliation and lack of respect. They were black, Hispanic, and poor whites. By and large, they had been unemployed and unemployable. One other thing that is extremely important: They had experienced a horrific level of child abuse that I had never even imagined. Many were the survivors of attempted murder at the hands of their parents or relatives, or had seen murder in their families.

One man, a Native American who was imprisoned in the South, was involved in one of the worst prison riots in decades. He killed others, was sent to a maximum-security prison in Massachusetts, and showed up in the mental health office where I worked. His nose had been broken multiple times, and his body was covered in scars. He described that when he was a child his mother threw him out the window, attacked him with an ax, and set him on fire. "I guess she wanted to kill me,'' he said, ''but I just didn't die.''

CS: Why would people who have been treated horrifically turn around and do the same thing to others? They know how terrible it is to be the victim of violence.

JG: The man I just described had been taught that violence was normal behavior. What we think of as offense is what people like this man think of as defense. What I discovered was that no one feels more innocent than the criminals. Most inmates I knew who had committed violent crimes had been victims before they became perpetrators. They saw themselves as victims, and in reality they were. The more horrendous the crimes, the more innocent they felt. The capacity to feel guilt is one of the main

inhibitors of violence. You would have to lack the capacity for feelings of guilt and remorse about hurting others in order to be emotionally capable of hurting them.

CS: Do you know of any successful methodologies for helping violent people to change?

JG: When I did a survey of what programs were most effective in preventing future acts of violence and preventing recidivism, one program, and only one, prevented recurrence of violence: getting a college education in prison. Our study of more than 200 inmates who had committed homicides and rapes and then got a college degree found that not one had gotten arrested anywhere again. And that was not unique to Massachusetts. Indiana found the same thing, and so did the California state prison system.

It makes sense, and gets down to the psychology of humiliation and shame. Education is one of the most direct routes to attaining respect from oneself and from others. Any degree of education helps. If you understand the cause, you understand prevention. Giving people nonviolent means of gaining self-respect and pride is the most effective way to prevent violence. Again, the opposite of shame is pride.

CS: Tell us about your experience working in prisons.

JG: I got involved in prison mental health in the early ’70s. At the time, Massachusetts prisons had a war-zone level of violence. They were hotbeds of riots, fire-setting, hostage-taking, murder, and mass rapes. The state supreme court and the federal district court in Boston found that the major cause of the violence was untreated mental illness, and they ordered that the prison system provide mental health services. They invited a Harvard-based team of mental health professionals to provide mental health services to the prisons. We found that the prisons were filled with psychotic disorders, character pathology, and depression. The conditions in prison precipitated, or at least exacerbated the psychiatric illness. Solitary confinement leads to delusions and other psychosis. In the early 1970s, of the 600 prisoners in the maximum-security prison where I worked, there was on average one homicide per month, and one suicide every six weeks. We called it the maximum-insecurity prison. After the initiation of our program, there were zero riots, zero hostage-taking. We went 12 months at one time with no homicides or suicides.
The problem appeared to be solved. But federal courts can’t keep telling the states what to do, and in 1992, federal oversight was withdrawn. After discovering that getting a college degree was 100 percent effective in reducing violence, William Weld came into the office of governor promising to lock up violent prisoners forever. He claimed that offering free education in prisons would be a motivation for people too poor to go to college to commit crimes in order to get sent to prison. It was a flashy way to get votes.

CS: I’m guessing his ideas didn’t work so well …

JG: No, they didn’t. You see, punishment is intended to shame. But the more severe the shame and punishment, the more violent we become, both as children and adults. The biggest mistake at the core of the criminal justice system is the idea that punishment will deter violence. Whereas in fact punishment is the most powerful stimulant of violence that we have yet discovered.

When I asked prisoners why they committed murder and other acts of violence, they universally told me that it was because they had been disrespected. As one inmate told me, “I never got so much respect as when I pointed a gun at a dude’s face.” He was willing to go to prison as the price of gaining instant respect. It is a learned response to humiliation. When Governor Weld came into office, he fired most of the social workers and psychologists. The state went back to business as usual, and rates of violence increased. I resigned in 1992 because I didn’t want to preside over a charade.

CS: Where did you go after that?

JG: In 1994, I ran an experiment with violent inmates in San Francisco. It was an unprecedented program. For six days a week, 12 hours a day, inmates were engaged in intensive group therapy and education. Each inmate wrote a one-act play about their life histories that led them to violence, about the horrific acts of violence they had endured, and how they had been treated like dirt. The plays were performed in the prison and at Grace Cathedral. They also practiced poetry writing, painting, and all kinds of nonviolent creativity. As they told their stories, they gained skills and self-esteem. They learned how to think and talk about what had happened to them. Year to year, in-house violence was reduced from 60 percent to zero. The rate of reoffending was reduced by 83 percent, compared with a control group in an ordinary jail. The program won a major national prize for "innovations in American governance" from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. It has been replicated in New Zealand, Poland, Singapore, and other countries, but seldom in the U.S.

CS: Can you talk a bit about group, as opposed to individual, violence? About, say, Putin attacking Ukraine?

JG: Political violence is similar, but somewhat different. When individuals are humiliated, they commit acts of violence against individuals. When people feel that their group is humiliated, they commit acts of violence against groups. Hitler felt that Germany was humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I. Osama bin Laden said that 9/11 was payback for 80 years of humiliation and contempt from the West. Putin felt humiliated by losing the Cold War, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As he said with regard to the war in Chechnya, "We will not tolerate any humiliation to the national pride of Russians."

So what should we do? It is a moral and psychological dilemma at this point. We have been threatened with the use of nuclear weapons since WWII. There is an unprecedented danger to the human race. If we could go back in time, we would offer Russia respectful help in rebuilding its economy after the Cold War. We did that with Germany after WWII, and now have one of our most powerful allies, and Europe has had the longest period of peace in a thousand years. At this point, the situation in Ukraine is best solved in a face-saving way that shields Putin from shame. Zalensky has tried to offer that to him, and so far it has not been enough. Still, I think the least violent outcome can only come through negotiations. I have had the experience several times of negotiating with hostage takers in prisons without ever having a fatality, and I've learned from that experience that the only alternative to violence is words — meaning negotiations, discussion, dialogue. Of course that is more difficult with dictators who take whole nations hostage and have killed thousands already, as Putin has done with Ukraine. But I still think our priority should be to attempt to create the conditions in which negotiations could be possible.

CS: What is going on with the individual soldiers who commit atrocities?

JG: I would divide them into three groups. There are the psychopaths who lack conscience and are more than happy to commit acts of violence, when given permission, and even rewarded, for it.

Then there is the group who do have a sense of moral values but commit atrocities because they are ordered to violate their internal codes. Those individuals are highly vulnerable to PTSD, and wrestle with psychological pain for the rest of their lives.

Then there is the third group. They don't want to be there. It is a matter of kill or be killed. They are dismayed and helpless. Often they feel humiliated by the success of the resistance and the killing of their comrades.

Primo Levi, who was in Auschwitz, wrote about this. Most of the German captors were not by nature psychopaths. But if you take an entire nation and expose them to endless propaganda with no other source to inform their ideas, you get otherwise normal human beings to behave in ways that they never would have otherwise.

Remember: Violence is a learned behavior. Instincts, when they exist, are universal. They don't explain why the U.S. has a homicide rate that is seven times as high as those of Western Europe. That can only be explained by the fact that we have been much less successful than they have in protecting people from the most humiliating degrees of economic inequality and relative poverty, racial discrimination, child poverty, and the most punitive criminal justice system of any democratic, economically developed country on earth.

CS: Any final words about violence in general?

JG: I have often wondered why psychiatrists have neglected to study violence, and fail to see it as a mental illness. Freud never studied violence. Our diagnostic manual mentions suicide multiple times in the index, but homicide is not mentioned once. Part of the problem is that when we think of crime, we think about punishment. We see crime in moralistic terms. We see it as evil. As soon as we think in a moralistic framework, we stop thinking in a psychological framework. In fact, violence toward others is a symptom of psychological illness. It is a public health problem, like cancer or heart disease.

Violent committers have been taught that they are weak if they pursue help. And we are taught that these guys are untreatable or not interested in treatment. What I discovered in the prisons was that they are eager to have someone understand the story of their lives. They would say that we were the first people in their lives who wanted to listen to them with respect. And lo and behold, they stopped their violence. And similar to alcoholics in recovery, they wanted to lead groups themselves, and to teach new inmates what they have learned. They are hungry for help, and when they get it, they renounce violence and become equally hungry to help other people.

Dr. Charles Silberstein is a psychiatrist at Martha's Vineyard Hospital and Island Counseling Center, where he is the medical director. He is board-certified in general, addiction, and geriatric psychiatry. He writes regularly about issues Islanders have with mental health.

Laura Roosevelt is a poet and journalist who writes regularly for Arts & Ideas magazine and Edible Vineyard. She currently curates The MV Times' Poets Corner.