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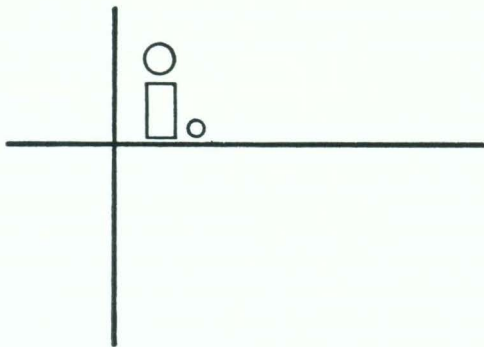# General Education and Violence

By Louis J. Andolino and John H. Humphries

Violence is nothing new to the "American way" although the modern style and the subsequent upheaval of social change may make it seem so. Although violence is with us, and has been since our beginning, its heightened publicity and the increased focus of social concern upon it have had a startling impact on our minds. This condition has resulted, in part, from a mass communication system which continually portrays such things as campus upheaval, urban riots, political assassinations and international slaughter. Therefore, it is not surprising that the issue of violence constitutes one of the land's foremost topics of discussion and concern. This is easily verified by noting some of the major issues voiced in the current Presidential campaign. The question of law and order, for example, is a vital and growing concern to more Americans each year. Since the issue of violence is of such paramount concern to the American public, it constitutes a pertinent topic for academic discussion and analysis.

Because the topic of violence is an interesting and important issue of the day, germane to many fields, including general education, it was decided that the theme of this year's Association of General and Liberal Studies Conference would be *General Education and Violence*. This conference will be held on the campus of the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York on October 26-28, 1972.

Like a sharply cut diamond, there are many facets to the problem of violence. As noted in a report by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice:

Many Americans think of violence as a very narrow range of behavior. It is not. An enormous variety of acts make up the

crime problem . . . No such formula, no single theory, no single generalization can explain the vast range of behavior called violence.[1]

It is the intent of the authors of this paper to stimulate some thought on the subject of violence and its relationship to general education realizing that this inquiry will be dealt with at much greater length at this year's A.G.L.S. Conference.

Any direct casual relationship, in either direction, between violence and general education is difficult to establish due to the lack of empirical tools of measurement; no one has yet devised a widely accepted and satisfactory method of approaching the question of such a relationship. Of course, this fact has not prevented the emergence of distinct "schools" offering different perspectives on such fundamental questions as the relationship between human nature and violence. In illustrating this point, Kenneth Waltz draws a dichotomy between what he distinguishes as the pessimistic and the optimistic thinkers.[2] Those of the pessimistic view can best be represented by the works of Thomas Hobbes and political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau who both posit the theory that violence in the form of aggression is a natural condition of the human species and, therefore, is to be considered an inherent biological trait incapable of evolutionary change.[3] In opposition to this view, the optimists, illustrated by the works of renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead, among others, present convincing evidence that violence in its legal forms, e.g., war, is essentially an invention of man.[4] Moreover, Dr. Mead argues that being a man-made institution, violence as a mode of behavior can be replaced by more humane inventions. These divergent views illustrate the wide variety of thought existent on just one aspect of the subject of violence, pointing to the continued relevance of, and need for, general education to explore this basic human problem.

The primary aim of general education traditionally has been to broaden and humanize students, to encourage them to seek greater understanding and to appreciate the complexities of social issues and problems, such as, for example, the problem of violence. With respect to any problem, it is important to note that toleration of different attitudes is to be preferred over blind rejection of differing views, whatever those views. General education has classically accepted this challenge of providing an awareness of alternative perspectives as a basis for more intelligent and responsible choice of values and attitudes.

In a society noted for its rapid change, for its growing instability and for the uncertainties surrounding its future, the need for comprehension of change itself, and of the forces that are afield leading to alienation is an integral part of the general educationalist's mission. Unless he is to resort to violence, it is imperative that man learn to cope with changes, instabilities and frustrations.

To focus again on the phenomenon of violence—as it might be understood as a result of high quality general education—it is arguable that, under the conditions of modern civilization, the aggressive component in man is no longer biologically adaptive in the way that it was when men were nomadic hunters. But, on the other hand, the rate of biological change is slow. No major mutation has occurred to render us radically different from our prehistoric ancestors. We possess the same instinctive equipment which served to insure the survival of men for whom existence was a perpetual struggle. Therefore, it is possible to link man's peculiar aggressiveness with his dependency; and to suppose that paranoiac people think of themselves as weak and their imagined persecutors as strong. Part of the human proclivity for paranoid beliefs may be phylogenic rather than ontogenic. For man, as a species, is singularly ill-equipped with natural means of defense or attack. His skin is thin and sensitive compared to the hides of many mammals, and he lacks even sufficient hair to keep himself warm. He has no horns, his nails are not strong enough to use as claws, and his teeth, though well adapted for mastication, are too small to be effective as weapons. No wonder men are prone to regard themselves as weak and ill-protected. In terms of comparative zoology, they are both.

Because of the development of his brain, man has been able to compensate for his natural lack of aggressive and defensive equipment by the invention of weapons. The invention of primitive weapons was necessary; and if it had not taken place, homo sapiens might never have persisted, let alone evolved. Indeed, man the unspecialized and unprotected primate, has had to be clever in order to survive; but his cleverness has overreached himself. Modern weapons are far from direct substitutes for teeth and claws; and though the cynic might call the hydrogen bomb adaptive, in that it may solve the problem of overpopulation, he can hardly maintain that nuclear weapons promote the survival of man in the same manner as a spear or hand ax did when these weapons were first invented. Moreover, as Konrad Lorenz has pointed out, it is just because human beings are so ill-equipped with natural weapons that they lack strong inhibitions against injuring their own species.[5]

It seems that better armed animals are more protected by inhibitions against intra-species aggression; and if men had tusks or horns they would be less, rather than more, likely to kill one another. The artificial weapon is too cerebral a device for nature to have provided adequate safeguards against it. Nevertheless, traces of inhibiting mechanisms do remain in that many humans recoil at kicking an enemy when he is down, or even feel pity for, and extend help to, a wounded opponent. But all traces of this "decent" behavior disappear as soon as a moderate distance is interposed between contestants. It is obviously true, for example, that most bomber pilots are humanly no better or worse than any other men. The majority of them given a can of petro

and told to pour it over a child of three and ignite it would probably disobey the order. Yet, put a decent man in an airplane a few hundred feet above a village and, he will, without compunction, drop high explosives and napalm and inflict appalling pain and injury on men, women and children. The distance between him and the people he is bombing makes them into an impersonal target, no longer human beings like himself with whom he can identify. This concept of "distance" in the modern age is succinctly noted by Anatol Rapoport.

> Although the theoretical strategists of nuclear warfare cannot be accused of injuring other human beings in the way that a bomber pilot can, the terms in which they discuss the "unthinkable" show the operation of the same kind of mechanism. "Distance" from other people need not be physical; it may be psychological. The human faculty of abstraction removes the content of a problem and enables the strategists to discuss nuclear threats and counter-threats as if human beings were not involved at all. The new word "megadeath" may be useful in abstract strategic discussion; translated into the actual experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it becomes an obscenity.[6]

In a related fashion, it is extremely unfortunate that the complexities of western civilization tend to produce collective man rather than individuals. Thus, the mergers between such entities as aircraft firms, automotive manufacturers and other producers of technical products exacerbate this condition and produce an environment that is psychologically unhealthy. While the enormous size of these companies tends to reduce the opportunities for men to realize their separate identities, it also diminishes the possibility of rivalry which exists when a small number of firms are making similar, but not identical products. Due to this innate complexity of modern society, education must then provide students with the requisite understanding of this phenomenon so as to enable them to cope and make rational decisions. Here general education espouses the values of a broader undergraduate curriculum which exposes students to the kinds of complex depersonalized systems in which they will, in all likelihood, be living and working; essentially this means providing each educated person with the critical capacity to cope.

Coping is goal-oriented, problem-solving behavior that occurs when a stressful stimulus interrupts important plans of action. It represents the continuing and usually successful struggle of an individual or a group to meet environmental demands for change. Hence, coping usually accomplishes tasks or goals with adaptive consequences.

The concept of coping is crucial in understanding violence and in pursuing alternatives to violence, since most aggressive behavior represents an effort to resolve conflicts. Coping begins when there is a

disruption in an individual's or a group's on-going plan or activity, when an important non-routine or unexpected event occurs that alters usual plans of action and creates a disequilibrium or stress that calls for revision of plans. The type of disruption varies.

Coping always represents the effort of the individual or group to solve the problem or resolve a conflict. It involves the planned application of the individual's or group's skills, including technical, manual, cognitive, and interpersonal, to solve problems in the present and in anticipated situations. Factors within the person that are associated with goals and their attainment modify coping. Important personal factors are the individual's current internal state and "set," his particular past experiences, his maturity and the skills and abilities with which he can tackle a task.

General education can play an important role in attempting to develop these particular factors. Knowledge of the characteristics of goals and the means to their attainment similarly is important. In particular, recognition of the possibility of selecting alternative goals or approaches is crucial. One of the core undertakings in general education is to show students that alternatives do exist and that in many instances it is a matter of understanding and becoming familiar with viable alternatives.

The inability to cope or to conceive of alternatives has, unfortunately, brought about the continued utilization of violence on the part of individuals and groups; this situation has become, as it were, an indelible blemish on man's historical progress. Moreover, there are many indications to support the assumption that the endemic social problem of violence has increased rather than diminished over time. Those living in the United States, for example, are daily confronted with this basic fact of life. The continuation of the war in Vietnam, the underlying tensions associated with race relations, the frequency of political assassinations and attempts, the unsafe streets, and the growth of organized crime are but a few examples of the magnitude of the continuance of violence in our own society. The unfortunate truth is that violence is with us and little hope seems forthcoming to bring about a solution to this dismal state of affairs. Finding the causes of and possible solutions for all forms of violence is hampered by the acceleration of change in an already complex society. Institutions as well as individuals find it increasingly difficult to cope with the alterations which occur in the social and personal fabric. Foundations are shaken. Values are changed. Beliefs are questioned. Instability becomes a more obvious fact of life. The reaction of both institutions and individuals to this heightened climate of change is generally an attempt to adjust to the new environment. Unfortunately, unable to discover or create a new reality, both institutions and individuals demonstrate a noticeable proclivity toward simplistic, inherited dogmatic answers, which, in turn, creates rigid individuals and institutional belief systems.

This reliance on unexamined dogma further perpetuates the cycle of violence, as divergent views are not tolerated. Pockets of conformity result, each viewing itself as the sole possessor of truth, and the idea and behavior of violence is rationalized and vindicated on the grounds of moral certainty. In carrying the new sword of truth, the individual or the group perceives all deviating schools of thought as "evil." Toleration of other views then becomes an unacceptable course of action. Very frequently one dogmatism replaces another and individual loyalties shift from one presumed-infallible, doctrinaire creed to another.7 The point is simple; the blind dogma-focused search for a means of devising a new system to cope with change has a profound and depressing history of merely substituting one system for another. The sad conclusion to be drawn is that violence has seldom solved social problems—instead, it seems to be an outgrowth of individual or group frustrations over imagined or real circumstances. It has all too frequently been man's inability to cope with social and personal events that has caused him to seek out violent methods of solution.

Committed as this country is to the notion of participatory democracy, with the ever widening involvement of the citizens in the affairs of the day and in the decision-making processes dealing with those affairs—with the enfranchisement of youth, minority groups and women—it is more essential than ever that the average citizen be aware of and knowledgeable about the issues on which he is expected to make intelligent decisions. At the same time, however, general education has been slowly moved to "the rear of the bus" in higher education where it has been given a sort of second-class citizenship subordinate to liberal arts and professional programs. Constantly under attack, general educationalists either fight with tenacity to hold their positions in the colleges and universities of this country or they wilt from the pressures of constant defeat and the overall atmosphere of condescension. Specialization is important; over-specialization to the exclusion of general knowledge is not. Too much concentration within an academic discipline on the undergraduate level produces students with a narrow foundation from which to cope with and understand, even rudimentarily, the complex issues he is expected to help decide in a more democraticized society. The need for breadth of view and wider comprehension of social inter-relationships must be at least presented to a student or he will be quite apt to make conformist decisions on a uniform basis, and be frustrated in his ability to cope with a complex modern society.

Thus, the need for more general education in undergraduate programs of learning is now greater than ever although, as it seems, now also grossly undervalued. Understanding the complexities of social issues and appreciating the interdisciplinary nature of the solution of those issues necessitates an approach that general education is well suited to fulfill. Specifically, the need for multi-disciplinary under-

standing in order to cope with one's self as well as with one's perspective toward social issues and problems is seen concretely in man's psychological need for viable alternatives to violence. Unfulfilled and frustrated in terms of understanding, an individual has the propensity, as does the group, to readily accept the notion that violence is the only way to deal with a perceived or real need or problem.

In higher education, students seem to be more perceptive of this educational need for academic breadth than are faculty. Taking too many "in depth" courses where the material is piled higher and deeper, students all too frequently fail to satisfy their true need—a general overview of relationships, of the multi-disciplinary inner-workings of social and human phenomena: the kind of general education that is logically called for but is seldom forthcoming. All too frequently the curriculum is not aimed at helping a student learn to cope intellecually with his complex life. Instead, each little department system within the university kingdom calls for more and more burrowing in its specialties. The problem cuts two ways. On the one hand, some faculty advisors shudder to think of their students' getting too much "exposure" outside their discipline. Within each discipline, the equation is simple—"if some is good, more is better." Thus, courses taken outside the chosen professional discipline of a particular student are suspiciously viewed as being marginal in value at best.[8] On the other hand, there are students who ramble all over the "countryside" hardly concentrating their work sufficiently to establish a major competence and ending up, after four years, with the feeling that they have indulged themselves at a smorgasbord of courses but have never really acquired a substantial insight into one mode of human inquiry.

Doubtless, therefore, some well-conceived disciplinary structure is desirable and essential. However, in the common academic environment, this structure is generally uninspired and ultimately superficial, even detrimental, in its effects. A student is simply encouraged to take courses wherever he choses but is housed in a department where he "concentrates." For example, a typical sociology major may take two courses in education and, hence, is judged qualified to teach. Or, the student may take a couple of courses in human services and then, after graduation, seek entrance into the Social Work profession. Or consider the student who selects a few courses in Police Science and, then, is assumed to be an educated cop. In truth, the student is frequently unprepared to teach, to do Social Work or to serve as a competent law enforcement officer.

Strenuous specialization within an academic discipline is more appropriate to graduate than to undergraduate education. There is a vital need for a balanced curriculum at the undergraduate level; a certain professional competency can be achieved, but the main goal to be attained at this level of education is the ability for problem-solving and breadth of exposure. Unfortunately, however, the inade-

quacies of the present system are self-perpetuating. Graduate schools that prepare undergraduate college teachers, for instance, emphasize a high degree of concentration on subject matter to the point of credentializing the matter. In essence, they produce individuals who know minute aspects of their disciplines but fail miserably to extend themselves beyond the comfortable parameters of their own academic field to the interrelationships among, and the interdisciplinary nature of, human phenomena. Such professors then offer courses in areas of study where they have specialized. In history this may consist of sixteen weeks of the Sepoy Mutiny chronologically presented; in economics, it could conceivably be a semester's work memorizing the econometric formulas related to the oligopolist's kinked demand curve. Understandably, students fail to see the relevancy of this type of undergraduate experience while professors find it difficult to understand the undergraduate students' reluctance to be enamored with such minutiae. Administrators add their weight to the already unbalanced scale by pursuing prestige, by hiring, promoting and retaining faculty on the basis of a publish-or-perish platform, seen as the golden rule. Once again undergraduate specialists win out.

Into this picture the general educationalist should logically step to provide a vital service to all concerned. Certainly not to discourage research and publishing, but to insist on a renewed emphasis on effective teaching of the broad range of human phenomena. Moreover, a trend should be encouraged toward setting up curricula and courses that expose students to many fields of human activity—the arts, humanities, social science—not with the intent of their learning all there is to know in each of these areas, but of their gaining insight into the general motivations of man, the aesthetic qualities of the arts, the basic characteristics of good literature, the fundamentals of a modern economy and of the political process, all of which aid in broadening one's understanding of his own environment.

The position of general education in the academic milieu, dealing with the baffling array of social issues, is to attempt to explain the interlocking arrangements of a culture, to illustrate the broad relationships of humanistic experiences, and to show that social problems like violence do not have simplistic, once-and-for-all types of solutions. Education alone, in the sense of the simple transmission of knowledge is only a prerequisite to the real appreciation of ethical values. Rather, one must go beyond disciplinary training to achieve sufficient insight into the very complex social problems of our age. Violence as a contemporary issue can best be understood and countered by a much broader program of study which seeks contributions of specific knowledge from various disciplines. General Education, with its emphasis on multidisciplinary approaches to problem solving is ideally suited for such a role.[9]

The basic conclusion to be reached is that General Education not

only plays a role in higher education, but a vital one. The contribution to be made by general educationalists is to point to the relevancy of investigating such social concerns as violence and of presenting insights into such issues from myriad points of view. Through the perspectives of general education, social problems are seen more comprehensively, in contrast to the vision achieved by the narrower approach of the specific disciplines. A synthesis should be developed, utilizing both the important depth offered through disciplinary research and teaching and the breadth promoted within the general education program. Narrowness of scope hinders rather than aids the creation of solutions to complex social concerns; thus, the understanding of the phenomenon of violence, for example, is most dependent on an increased emphasis on general education.

FOOTNOTES

[1] *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society,* A Report by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office), February, 1967, p. v.

[2] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, The State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1959.

[3] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell) and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1966.

[4] Margaret Mead, "Warfare is Only an Invention—Not a Biological Necessity," in David Brook (ed.), *Search for Peace* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company), 1970, pp. 12-16.

[5] Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression,* (London: Methuen Publishing Co.) 1966. Relating this human phenomenon to animal behavior in general, Lorenz offers the example of the cichlid fish. It seems that these highly aggressive creatures require hostile territorial neighbors on whom they can vent their aggression. If a pair of cichlids is isolated by removing them from a tank containing other fish, the male will turn his aggression against his own spouse and progeny, and will actually destroy them. There is a great deal of evidence that aggressive tension can be dammed up in exactly the same way as we habitually suppose sexual tension can be. *Ibid.* p. 17.

[6] Rapoport, Anatol, *Strategy and Consciences* (New York: Harper & Row) 1964, p. 113.

[7] One could cite the Russian Revolution as illustrative of this point. For example, it is extremely difficult to see any substantive difference between the Tsar's secret police and the Bolshevik's own NKVD; between the belief in organized religion and the idolization of a new institution—the state; between the democratic facade of the Duma and the hypocrisy of democratic centralism.

[8] One author has pointed to the dangers of the disciplinary concentration which causes colleges and universities to become "factories" which produce workers and technocrats with unswerving conformity being the ultimate goal. "In the United States, we have used universities as Xerox machines to reproduce the status quo—they have been cultural cookie cutters . . . We know that human beings are not the same; they are not homogenous raw material, yet the university strives to remove these differences. In fact, I often wonder if

the primary goal of the American university is to teach students to conform instead of allowing them to develop their individual perceptions, talents, identities, and value systems, that is to develop their manhood." Gary R. Weaver and James H. Weaver, *The University and Revolution* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.) 1969, from the introduction by Gary R. Weaver, pp. 2-3.

9 For an interesting view on how education should adjust to social problems see: Barry Commoner, "General Education and the Environment," *Perspectives* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University), Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring, 1972, pp. 19-32. Commoner notes that the solutions needed to confront the ecological crisis can only be arrived at by a pooling of academic resources and not from the narrow perspective of the highly departmentalized disciplines. This argument is relevant to the solution of all social problems, including violence.

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