For the past twenty-five years, I have sought to understand the meaning of violence in the lives of children, youths, and families. This has taken me to many of the world’s war zones—to Mozambique, to Nicaragua, to Cambodia, to Kuwait, to Croatia, to Iraq, and to the streets of American’s inner cities (cf. Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow 1991; Garbarino et al. 1921). Out of these experiences have come the beginnings of an understanding of what it means to live in a violent world, what it means for a child’s development and for the life course to come.

For me, commentary on war zones at home and abroad begins and ends with personal reflection. A few years ago, while watching the news in Chicago, a local news story made a personal connection with me. The report concerned a teenager who had been shot because he had angered a group of his male peers. This act of violence caused me to recapture a memory from my own adolescence because of an instructive parallel in my own life with this boy who had been shot. When I was a teenager some thirty-five years ago in the New York metropolitan area, I wrote a regular column for my high school newspaper. One week, I wrote a column in which I made fun of the fraternities in my high school. As a result, I elicited the anger of some of the most aggressive teenagers in my high school. A couple of nights later, a car pulled up in front of my house, and the angry teenagers in the car dumped garbage on the lawn of my house as an act of revenge and intimidation.

In today’s language, you could say I was a victim of a “drive-by-littering.” What I had seen on the television news in Chicago a few years ago was a boy who had done much the same thing that I did thirty years earlier (i.e., make his peers angry with him),
but who had experienced something far more serious than I almost three decades earlier. When his peers responded in anger, the result was not a drive-by littering, but a drive-by shooting. For me, this juxtaposition captured something very disturbing about changes in American society.

Over the thirty plus years that intervened between the drive-by littering and the drive-by shooting, the social environment had changed such that the consequences of peer conflict had changed, as part of a broader change in the “terms of engagement” for adolescents in general. And the direction of that change was negative, now, you could get killed for behavior that a generation ago might only expose you to frightening experiences with limited long-term risks (I lived to recall the story of the drive-by littering at my thirtieth high school reunion). Out of that insight came the concept of “social toxicity,” the idea that just as the quality of the physical environment can become so negative that it is justifiably called “toxic,” the same thing can happen in the social environment.

The concept of social toxicity refers to the idea that there can be cultural and social poisons abroad in a society that shorten life and that bring about a deterioration of well-being, and that these poisons include and interact with violence (Garbarino 1995). With physical toxicity, we know that there are individual and group differences in vulnerability. For example, if there is an air pollution problem in a city, we would worry first and most about old people with emphysema or children with asthma. I believe that this is an analogy to what we see among children and youths in the social environment: there is a kind of psychological asthma that some children and youths have that makes them particularly vulnerable to whatever social toxins are in their environment.

I thought of this when I went to visit a day-treatment program for emotionally disturbed children in Chicago, a program that had been in operation for over twenty-five years. By all accounts this program once worked, but it now no longer does because these children, these highly vulnerable children, these psychologically asthmatic children, now bring with them into the school a level of aggression and nastiness and violence that overwhelms the program. We need to understand that these psychologically asthmatic kids exist in every society. They exist particularly when home has become empty or hostile. These children whose homes are empty and hostile are likely to become socially and psychologically asthmatic and show us the worst that is going in society.

We know, for example, from research in the United States, that all children are affected by watching violent television but children who are otherwise at risk because of psychological or emotional vulnerability are the ones who are most affected (National Research Council 1993). We ourselves have done research in the Middle East that demonstrates that Palestinian children involved in the Intifada are most affected by political violence when their homes are abusive or neglectful (Garbarino and Kostelny 1996).

I think that there is a natural merging of the interests of those among us who have a primary focus on family with those of us who are concerned principally with community because those who fall victim to violence and social toxicity within the community are particularly those who have been hurt or neglected at home. And, more than even that, we have come to understand in child development research that the presence or absence of
any single risk factor tells us very little about the outcome for a child. Rather, it is the accumulation of risk factors (Sameroff et al. 1987). This emerges over and over again in research when it is designed to reveal it. It may be accurate to say that runaways and drug addicts and sexually abused children come from all strata of society, but it is not to the point because the point is that victimization, when coupled with other risk factors, is what really does the damage.

One of the things I have learned from time spent talking with children and adults in war zones at home and abroad is that there are three dark secrets that children learn, three dark secrets that children learn from exposure to violent trauma. The first of these I call “Snowden’s secret,” and it refers to a book by Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1961). During the course of war-time combat on an American airplane, a character comes to understand what happens to human bodies when they are exposed to human violence. He witnesses the effect of shrapnel on the human body, in the form of another crew member, Snowden. Snowden’s secret is that the human body, which appears strong and tough, is really just a fragile bag filled with gooey stuff and lumps. This knowledge is itself traumatic; it changes you forever, as anyone who has worked in an emergency room or visited with victims of war comes to understand. This is one of the dark secrets that children have to contend with. How do you rebuild your understanding of human life once you have learned Snowden’s secret up close and personal?

A second dark secret that children learn I call “Dantrell’s secret.” The reference here is to a little boy in Chicago, seven-year old Dantrell Davis, who was walked to school by his mother one day in a dangerous neighborhood. When they got to school, there were policemen on either corner, and there were teachers standing on the front steps of the school. But when his mother let go of his hand and he walked the last seventy-five feet from her hand to the teacher’s hand, he was shot in the back of the head and killed. What do other children learn from his death? What other children learned from his death is that adults cannot protect you. And this is one of the darkest secrets of all that violent trauma can teach, that you as a child are alone. And if children understand that they are alone, they naturally turn to each other and to themselves to replace the adults gone missing in action. So a nine-year old boy living in a dangerous area, when I asked him what it would take to make him feel safer, told me “if I had a gun of my own.” A boy in Michigan said to me, “If I join a gang I am 50 percent safe; if I don’t join a gang I am zero percent safe.”

Adults don’t enter into the equation. As we think about violence, we also have to think about the messages of strength and competence that we adults send children and youths. The issue is our capacity and willingness to protect them. This is why a program like Mad Dads (begun in Omaha, Nebraska) makes sense. Mad Dads is a program in which adult men go out on the streets of their community with green jackets on to send a physical message that says to children, “We the adults of your community are in charge, not fifteen-year-olds with guns.” This brave foolish act is essential to address the damage done by Dantrell’s secret.

A third dark secret that children learn I call “Milgram’s secret” from research conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram many years ago on what he called the Eichmann Effect. In Milgram’s study, normal people were put in a situation in which they were encouraged to behave barbarously, violently—to inflict horrible pain on a
defenseless victim. They did it. When it comes to violence, “anything is possible.” That is the secret unlocked by Milgram’s research, the secret that victims and perpetrators share. None of us is immune from finding the wrong situation. Any of us can commit acts of atrocity. Children in Mozambique learned the secret when they saw their parents beheaded and then cooked in a pot. Children in Guatemala learned the secret when they saw their villages burned and their neighbors executed.

We made a film some years ago at Cornell called *I Still Can’t Say It* about a child abuse prevention program. In the course of the film, one of the teachers discloses that she herself was a victim of abuse as a child. And she illustrates Milgram’s secret. She says, “When I was a little girl my mama used to beat me. One day the police were called and they came to my house and they interviewed me and they said is your mama beating you. And I said no and they went away.” Now thirty years later she looks into the camera and she says, “Later that day my mama came home and she said to me, ‘Why didn’t you tell the police that I beat you?’ And I looked her in the eye and I said, ‘cause you could kill me.”’ Because you could kill me. As a child, she understood Milgram’s secret, that when it comes to violence, anything is possible.

As I mediate upon these secrets how to understand them, I am constantly drawn to the fact that there are at least three voices that we can use to make sense of violence in human experiences, three voices to help us understand and to develop efforts to prevent and to treat and to intervene. The first voice is the voice of social science. It is the voice of statistics, of empirical research, of epidemiology. It focuses on the social toxicity of images of viciousness in the life of children and asks us to understand posttraumatic stress disorder as Robert Pynoos (Pynoos and Nader 1988) has led us to understand it. It asks us to understand what Bruce Perry and his colleagues (1995) has been finding in his research on the impact of violence, trauma and deprivation on brain development and the eventual impact of that damage on the very ability to think and reason morally. It is really about the psychological wounds of violent trauma, and we have come to understand it pretty well. We have come to understand that experiencing the psychological wounds of violent trauma creates risk for future development, and, by the same token, we have come to understand that this knowledge can lead to programs. For example, Kellam and his colleagues (1994) developed a program called “The Good Behavior Game: that demonstrates its ability to reduce aggressive behavior in children starting at age six and continuing to a later age. In our own work, we have developed a book for children called *Let’s Talk About Living in a World With Violence* (Garbarino 1993), and recently our research has shown that it too can reduce aggressive behavior in young children (Bolger et al. 1997). This emphasis on young children is important, because one of the conclusions of various longitudinal studies (e.g., National Research Council 1993) is that by age eight, patterns of aggression and violence become so well established, crystallized, and stabilized that without intervention they begin to predict onto adulthood. So we have to act early in this social science voice to understand the early origins of violence and to intervene to prevent it from continuing.

But this is not the only voice for understanding and intervening. There is a second, deeper voice that Bert Cohler (1991) at the University of Chicago calls “Human Studies.” What he means is that there is an individual narrative account, a life story, a life history that each of us tells. And this act of making sense of life experience is a very important
influence in the outcome of that experience. In fact, Cohler goes so far as to say it is not the experience of bad things early in life that predicts later difficulties but the quality of the story one can tell about that life, the making sense of it. Bessel Van der Kolk (1994), a psychiatrist working in Boston, has found that if children who are exposed to violent trauma early in life cannot make sense of it, they are in for a lifetime of difficulty. He finds, for example, that among his patients who have experienced violent trauma before the age of five when he asks the question, “Have you given up all hope of finding meaning in your life?” 75 percent answer “Yes.”

This is what I would call the philosophical wound of violent trauma. The threat that it poses, the injury that it produces, is to our sense of meaningfulness. The social toxicity that perpetuates this is the shallow materialistic culture in which more and more people around the world live—what is now being called “affleunza.”

I think traumatized American children are particularly at risk in this regard because of the shallowness of the culture around them, culture that we are exporting to the world with growing rapidity. The fact that there is nothing more to life than shopping and material acquisition is linked to nihilism in a culture that has no depth. And without any depth, where can children and youths at risk draw a compelling life story? But even these human studies, these narrative accounts, are not the whole story and not the only voice that we can use to understand what living in a world of violence means to children and youths.

There is a third voice, a voice I would call “soul-searching.” This is the voice that begins from the fact that we are not best understood as animals with complicated brains but we humans are first and foremost to be understood as spiritual beings having a physical experience in the world. Once this is recognized, we see that the third wound of violent trauma is not so much an injury but a spiritual challenge. The spiritual challenge of violent trauma is that it diverts us from the path of enlightenment (Garbarino and Bedard 1997). It diverts us from the path of being fully in touch with our nature as spiritual beings.

Violent trauma tends to divert us from this path to a series of dead ends. For example, it may divert us to the quest for revenge which is fundamentally against the human spirit. Some cultures contain the proverb, “If you begin a journey of revenge start digging two graves; one for your enemy and one for yourself.” That is a very spiritual message which I think is grounded in psychological realities. For inspiration, for intervention, for a basis for soul-searching, we can look to something like Joe Marshall’s book *Street Soldier* (1996) in which he recognizes that without this spiritual depth to an intervention program with violently traumatized children, there is very little hope of their recovery because they have experienced the psychological wounds, the philosophical wounds, and the unmet spiritual challenge of trauma.

Here, too, American culture and increasingly world culture is toxic for the victims of violent trauma. Increasingly, the Western view of the world predominates. What is at the heart of that world view? Our Native American colleagues from the earliest days of their contacts with Euro-American culture were very cognizant of the puzzling facts that European Americans thought of the world as being dead, that the trees were simply standing wood, that the animals were simply walking flesh. They were puzzled and often
disturbed and depressed by this deadness in the way we looked at the world, when they saw the world as alive, with spirits everywhere.

I think particularly now we need to understand the aliveness of the entire universe, the spiritual unity of all of existence because indeed we are spiritual beings. I see this now particularly as I interview boys who are incarcerated in a maximum security institution because of murder and other acts of severe violence. It is a peculiar kind of maximum security institution, because unlike most of them, the boys are safe. This is unusual for a maximum security facility. But this one functions so well, the boys feel safe usually for the first time in their life. So, on the one hand, they are safe, but on the other hand, they are immobilized so that their energy cannot be diverted into guns or drugs or girls or cars or jewelry or gold or money. So they are immobilized. They are safe and immobilized. They need to be in a place like this that encourages reflection and discipline, without the “temptations” of the socially toxic environments from which they come (and to which most will return eventually). I think the model for such a setting is not the power oriented “boot camp,” which has garnered so much attention recently, but rather the reflection-oriented “monastery,” where the vows of “obedience, chastity, and poverty” are coupled with mediation, reflection, study, and soul nourishing work. This is what the most traumatized violent youths need, because all that is left for them is to go inward to their deepest core and upward, to make touch with the grandest spiritual realities that they can discover and as a result grow in wisdom in ways that were previously unavailable to them.

I would like to close by reminding each of us that whatever our religious allegiance or cultural traditions, we are a common spiritual ancestry and a common spiritual aspiration. Therefore, we can find common ground in dealing with violence-related trauma. Each and every day, each of us as professionals and advocates should take a moment to meditate and to reflect on how well we are prepared for the spiritual journey that it will take to transform the world, because as Mahatma Gandhi said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” Our professional training teaches us to think and act, but the foundation for that thinking and action must be a solid spiritual and metaphysical base. Breathe and reflect, then think and act.

References


