

Reflections on Violence: When Kids Kill Other Kids/Fierce Reason in Reason and Compassion

The Root of the Problem
by Caleb Cornell (1999)

For the past three years, I have attended a small private school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The school has a very liberal attitude as far as dress, school conduct, and curriculum are concerned. The other students tend to be, as I am, misfits in the world of public school. It was a welcome environment. It was a necessary environment as well. If I had not left my former public school, I might have caused one of the first of a recent rash of high school shootings.

When I first heard about the massacre in Littleton Colorado, on 20 April, I was neither surprised nor shocked. Over the past two years, these tragedies have become commonplace. As the day of the shootings went on, more information about the Trenchcoat Mafia came to light. They were kids who were outsiders at Columbine High School. Not just outsiders, but misfits who were teased by the more “acceptable” majority of the students the football players, the future military recruits, the religious children who had a perfectly normal life at which they were not only accepted, but embraced. The more I hear about how Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris listened to “goth” music and how they often cited lyrics from the industrial band, KMFDM, the more disgusted I became at how our country reacts to this sort of thing. It was not the music that caused this or the lack of metal detectors at the school. And even though the Nazism that these kids were reportedly involved in more than likely played a part, the real problem lies deeper.

I think that the root of Eric and Dylan’s rage lay in how their peers reacted to them—the mocking and the teasing that they endured. Thirteen deaths weren’t caused because someone made fun of them once, but because they were psychologically tortured by other students every day. When you are forced to live in a society that rejects you in all forms, all the time, and never lets you forget that you are different, in your mind the only solution to these problems is to rid these people of their lives. You have an immeasurable amount of rage inside of you that, no matter what you do, cannot be suppressed.

Dylan and Eric were friends only with others who were in the same situation. I, on the other hand, in my former school, eventually had no friends at all. I was the only one there who held my views. I had books and other objects thrown at me while walking down the hall and was constantly insulted because of my appearance and outspoken views, not only by students but also by some faculty. “Satanist! Faggot! FREAK!!” I went through this every day for two-and-a-half years. There was no one in the school to go to for help or guidance. During my freshman year, I begged my father daily not to make me go to school, but to no avail. I began experiencing violent stomach pains, often going home from school early. I used this to my advantage, faking sickness at least twice a week in order to go home.

I began having violent fantasies about walking through the halls with a duffel bag full of guns, shooting whomever I saw, as well as throwing grenades into classrooms. I have never been a violent person and doubt that I ever will be. I have been involved in only one fight, in which one punch was thrown, by the other person, of course. He was a kid much bigger than myself, who had been taunting me for months, walking straight up to me in the hall and yelling things at me. I got sick of it and one day told him that he was nothing but a stupid redneck, and that if what he wanted to hit me, just do it. That resulted in two scars on my face. He was suspended, but when

he returned to school, the taunting got worse. I could find no solace. I felt that the entire world was against me, that I was the iconoclast to everything. When my feeling that violence was the only way out became the all I thought about, I got scared.

The final straw of my last few days in public school was when I saw a much bigger kid brutally punch a much smaller kid for no reason other than to make his presence known. I was the only one willing to tell the principal and police who had done it. I was assured that no one would find out I'd ratted. Wrong. The next day people I'd never met before came up to me asking why I'd ratted him out. I was hit in the head with a book in the hall. I complained to my guidance counselor who told me to continue with my day. I then found a note in my locker with "Die fag" written on it. This was it. I told my counselor that if he didn't excuse me to leave, I would leave anyway. I didn't return to school for weeks, and when I did, it was only for three days before transferring. I am sorry to say that by that point the only thing that prevented me from going on a shooting spree through the school was the lack of resources. I simply couldn't get any guns. Otherwise, I can guarantee I would have carried it out.

I am sure that Dylan and Eric went through almost the same thing as I did. This has not been brought to the attention of the media in an adequate fashion. I don't hear the television reporters and magazines saying, "They shouldn't have been teased" or "We should have cared for their needs." This doesn't happen in public schools. The purpose of public schools is to teach you what they think you need to know and get you out. If you don't comply, they see this as a threat instead of a cry for help. Too often the misfits in high schools are ignored or passed off as meaningless problems. The faculty doesn't care about the welfare of a teen who wears all black and isn't one of the popular, cooperative kids. That is where the problem lies: in the ignorance of the schools themselves. Schools shouldn't wait until there is a violent act, whether extreme or not, to see warning signs. I have read short biographies of the students who were killed in Littleton and was amazed to see that they were exactly the kind of kids who put me through hell. Football players. Adamant Christians. Patriots. The normal kids. The ones who belong. All we ever read in a newspaper or magazine or watch on the news is how horrible it is that "these wonderful kids have been taken from us." It is horrible, but never once will you ever read, "Why were Klebold and Harris treated like that? Why did everyone make fun of them? Why couldn't people accept them for who they were?"

This is why these shootings happen and will continue to happen. The one thing the media, the schools, and the government continue to overlook time after time: ignorance of the severe cruelty that such "good kids" are capable of. Too many children today are prone to violence or cruelty, and not enough people are aware of it. For such things to stop occurring, the parents, teachers and children of this country must realize that if you constantly barrage and torment someone who is different from you, you must be prepared to suffer the consequences of your actions.

Although resentment still lies within me (and probably always will), I know that violence will cause nothing but more blame put on those of us who are antisocial. People aren't antisocial because they want to be. People are antisocial because of how society made them be. No one should be shocked when these shootings happen. We should expect it. I don't like the fact that this is true, but there is no other reality now. Never should someone say, "Why did this happen? How could this have happened?" You can take the most peaceful, fun-loving kid, put him or her in a setting of being hated and tormented, and see how he or she turns out. It isn't the security systems of schools that need to change, but the environment. Acceptance of one another is the only way to avoid another Columbine.

A Father's Perspective

Caleb is 16, our youngest son. As I was writing my column for last *The Script*, the war in what is left of Yugoslavia was escalating. Caleb and I discussed the war, and in his school he was an outspoken, minority voice opposing military intervention in Kosovo. It was a Tuesday afternoon when Caleb tried to reach me by phone, so upset by the teasing and opposition he was getting from other students that he was afraid he would lose control and hurt someone. He wanted to talk to me to calm himself down. When he couldn't reach me, he left school rather than risk losing control. It was the Tuesday of the Columbine High School killings.

I asked Caleb to cowrite this article with me for *The Script* knowing that he identified strongly with the boys who carried out these killings as well as student shootings at other schools. Nothing that Caleb has written here surprised me, but I was not prepared for the impact of his written words. I was both stunned to read his fury and anguish and touched to see the courage of his honesty and his capacity for self-reflection.

I could not read Caleb's essay without thinking of all three of our sons. Stephanie and I raised our kids to be independent and outspoken thinkers—providing them as best we were able with a broad range of life experiences, quite different from most of the other kids growing up in the rural and underdeveloped area where we live. We were active, progressive parents, but Stephanie and I, each in our own way, are rather shy. Our sons have mirrored our difficulties in peer relationships.

Caleb tends to meet the world like a full-force gale. He is frequently angry, outspoken, and disarmingly articulate. Caleb is also a tender and deeply compassionate young man of rather exceptional maturity. Peer relationships, however, have always been a struggle for him. He has tended to pair with older kids who graduate, leaving Caleb to start all over again. Now Caleb is lead singer and lyricist for a punk band and has established a more stable peer group, but he has suffered tremendously at the hands of kids his own age.

Caleb was 13 when things began to go seriously wrong at school. He was outspoken about racial, religious, and political issues, confronting bigotry and taking unpopular stands forcefully. Caleb became increasingly isolated. His grades had dropped from nearly all As to Cs and Ds. In spite of frequent, often confrontational, meetings with school personnel, nothing really changed. My attention was focused on the school staff. As is so clear from Caleb's account, I consistently underestimated the impact of other students' behavior.

After the violent incidents at school that Caleb describes in his essay, he'd been back two or three days when we had a conversation I'll never forget. One of the first school shootings had just occurred, and Caleb told me that he had frequent fantasies of walking into school with a gun and killing kids. I asked him why he thought those kids killed and he didn't. "We don't have any guns here. That's the only difference, Dad. Believe me, if we had guns in this house, there were days I've been so mad I would have taken one to school." I found another school for Caleb immediately, and since then I've witnessed the dramatic difference a competent and dedicated staff can make. Caleb's difficulties have not evaporated over night, but he has found a place where he expects to be helped and taken seriously.

As I read Caleb's essay, I thought back to an earlier, nearly tragic, incident in Caleb's life. When he was 11, he was at an all-night camp-out in a friend's back yard. About 1 am the kids, boys and girls, were seated around a campfire. Two local police saw the fire, decided the kids must be drinking or doing drugs (not true), and swept in on them without warning from the dark. Caleb at that time had very long hair and an earring. One of the cops picked Caleb up from

behind by his hair, clamping his wrists in handcuffs behind his back. Caleb fainted, falling face-first into the campfire. Miraculously his glasses stayed on, so his eyes were not damaged, but he was horribly burned on the face and neck. He ended up in the intensive care burn unit, where he received extraordinary medical and psychological care. After the accident, I wanted to sue the police and township government. Caleb refused, saying that it had been an accident and that a lawsuit would only create more trouble. Caleb asked instead that I meet with and confront the chief of police, show the photographs of his burned face to the assaultive police officer, and offer the police training on how to deal with adolescents. That's what we did. In contrast, to this day Caleb holds school officials accountable for what happened to him, seeing it as malicious and intentional, not accidental. He wants to sue the school district, which is not an easy thing to do, although we continue to consider it.

It has been difficult for me to write anything here but as a father. As I approached writing a companion piece to Caleb's I kept wondering, what do I have to offer to my colleagues other than Caleb's honesty?

Just as we were completing the last issue of *The Script*, Robin and I received a brief statement from George Kohlrieser about the Columbine killings. A year earlier, Caleb had read George's article on conflict resolution in *The Script* theme issue domestic violence and said, "This guy really knows what he's talking about." I was deeply touched by George's comments on the Columbine tragedy and glad to publish it right away. I also showed it to Caleb, and this consolidated our decision to write something together for this issue.

As George has so often said, "People do not kill people—people kill objects." I agree, especially on a social and political scale. Over and over again our political leaders turn other leaders and peoples into objects, things, demons, so as to justify killing them. I think at a social and political level people kill objects or demons, not people. In my clinical experience, however, I see a somewhat different picture. I think people do kill other people, sometimes very intentionally; people kill particular people with particular intent. This is my understanding of what Caleb is describing about his own feelings and fantasies and his identification with Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. I think a person becomes capable of killing another when they have come to feel like objects or things themselves. I doubt that people want to kill, but they can be driven to choose it rather than to not choose it. I think it takes extraordinary, sustained neglect, humiliation, and cruelty to bring a person—adult or child—to the point that they can kill. Caleb offers us a vivid, personal description of this kind of marginalization and dehumanization and the helplessness, despair and fury it can create within an individual. Caleb challenges us to ask the right kinds of questions, complicated and uncomfortable questions, about what happened in Littleton and other schools, about what kids need from their communities, about the centrality of peer relationships.

Caleb has dreadlocks, wears a nose ring, and dresses in black, his clothing covered with punk and political patches. He is also white, very bright, and straight. He also has a father who could afford to take him out of public school and finance a private school education on very short notice. What of the kids who are poor, inarticulate, African-American, Latino, gay? Orlando Peterson, a Harvard sociologist speaking to the *New York Times* on the Littleton massacre, challenged, "There is a disturbing double standard in the way we discuss the problems of different groups of people and in the way we label deviant behavior. If the terrorist act of white, middle-class teenagers creates an orgy of national soul-searching, then surely the next time a heinous crime is committed by underclass African-American or Latino kids, we should engage in the same kind of national soul-searching."

Transactional analysis is practiced and taught worldwide. As practitioners of a methodology that reaches across national and cultural boundaries, we have a unique opportunity and responsibility to try to effect social as well as individual good. As theorists and therapists we must continue to push our theory and technique into the darker reaches of human nature. Caleb's essay speaks to these darker realms, the forces of hatred and ostracization, the potential for cruelty and murder.

It seems that the darker side of Berne's writings has rarely been taken up in any systematic way by subsequent transactional analysis theorists. Transactional analysis has been developed largely within the realms of psychological daylight, too deeply shaped by American demands for support, safety, protection, and happiness, the mental attitude of the white middle class that demands comfort, gratification, and homogeneity. Berne always seemed aware and wary of the uglier, more destructive aspects of human nature. Whether we examine adolescent violence or the unending outbreaks of social and political violence justified under the banners of nationalist, ethnic, or religious identity, we are faced with the destructive capacities of human nature and group behavior. The issues that Caleb addresses take us back to our roots as a social psychiatry, a group and community therapy.

Three-fourths of adolescent deaths are caused by drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, and violence. These are social diseases. The central, visual imago of transactional analysis theory are the stacked circles of ego states and the script matrix, images derived from notions of the individual ego and the nuclear family. Transactional analysis script theory needs to be extended to deal more systematically with group behavior, peer relationships, and latency and adolescent patterns of belonging and identity. "The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health" (*Journal of the American Medical Association*, September 10, 1997), a study of 12,000 teenagers in grades 7 through 12, demonstrated that the single most important variable in the psychological health of adolescents is the experience of positive, emotional attachments to parents and teachers. A recent book, *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*, by Patricia and Peter Adler (Rutgers University Press, 1998) outlines in chilling detail the social evolution and psychological impact of peer groupings, reinforcing the relentless stratification in social groups at school and their place in preadolescent and adolescent identity formation. [?]

We need social and political as well as clinical intervention. In the United States, in most states, it is possible for a kid to purchase a gun before it is legal for him or her to buy beer or to vote. The lack of gun control in the United States is absurd and immoral. I recall the bullies of my grade school and high school years, the teasing and tormenting by the in-group of the outcasts, fist fights, a couple of suicides, our high school burned down by a guy from another town trying to kill a janitor. But fortunately, there were no handguns. Richard Reeves, writing a column in the *International Herald Tribune* (May 12, 1999), also recalled the violence of his adolescence in Jersey City: "If a fight escalated, people went for the maximum available weaponry. Fists. Bottles. Rolling pins. Baseball bats. Knives. There was blood, broken bones, cracked heads. People were patched up, generally, and life went on. If there were guns, there was killing. Life did not go on. That was the difference. . . . The difference is guns. That is why those children died in Littleton. And why others will die. This is not complicated reasoning. It is an obvious fact."

After the Littleton killings, the Colorado Coalition Against Gun Control issued statistics that US citizens own more than 250 million guns (I believe this amounts to more guns than people). The United States is far and away number one [among Western countries?] in gun-related deaths: Statistics from 1995 showed 35,563 gun-related deaths in the US; Germany was second with

1,197 shooting deaths. As I organized the papers for this volume, I heard on the news that the two young men who slaughtered students and then shot themselves in the two most recent campus shootings both ordered guns and ammunition from the same on-line source. What will it take to change the culture in the United States? The continuing domestic violence and the travesties of the Bush wars in Afghanistan and Iraq haven't done it yet. We are on the eve of an election, and I find myself yet again hopeful that commonsense, decency, and respect for differentness will once again to the fore.

If you live in the United States, please do not be silent or passive about the urgent need for serious, systematic, severely enforced gun control. Give money to gun control organizations. And wherever you live in the world, lobby for the government support of community-based mental health services in all neighborhoods and schools. Do not be passive or silent. Give time. Give money. Write letters. Write articles. Raise hell about the needs of our kids and the socially outcast.

At this moment, I am mostly keenly aware of the compassion, resilience, and decency that Caleb has maintained throughout an adolescence that has been far from easy. I deeply appreciate his willingness to write for *The Script*. I hope his comments will bring a little more insight and compassion toward kids who are driven to violence.

Fierce in Reason and Compassion

Just a few days ago, Robin Fryer and I were finalizing the copy for this issue of *The Script*. Then it was Tuesday, September 11, the day of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC. Like everyone else here, I spent the day stunned, listening to the radio as I tried to listen to clients, trying to make some sense of their reactions and my own and most urgently trying to reach my sons and my friends.

Suddenly, the United States, like so many other nations in the world, was the tragic target of the hatred and violence bred by nationalistic, ethnic, and religious fanaticism. What we saw and experienced that day was a level of violence and destruction that is beyond comprehension.

I found it personally appalling that within 12 hours of the first plane crashing into the World Trade Center, US President George W. Bush was promising vengeance (thinly veiled in the language of justice) and making a declaration of war while in the next breath saying a prayer. He seemed oblivious to the way in which his fusion of vengeance and prayer was virtually identical to what we now suspect was the pretext of the terrorists. We can be pretty sure that the terrorists were praying to their own version of God, certain in their own moral goodness and superiority as they directed those planes to their targets.

In 1965 I graduated from high school in a small, upstate New York, working-class town. I was the brightest kid they had ever seen around there, the pride of the village. At that time the Vietnam war was escalating, and in the time-honored tradition of nationalistic fervor, American political and military leaders had relentlessly and successfully transformed the North Vietnamese people into monsters who were no longer truly human. This entitled us to slaughter them en masse, our ultimate God-sanctioned victory assured as we strove to save the world from Communist atheists. Upon graduation, I was immediately inducted into the service; although I refused to comply, I was inducted anyway and granted a student deferment, which I also refused. Instead, I sought conscientious objector status on political and ethical grounds, challenging the prevailing religious requirement. My lawsuit against the Selective Service went on for years; meanwhile, I went off to college. But I was no longer the pride of the village; the town turned

against my family, and my parents and siblings were subjected to such hostility that within a year they decided to leave, never to return.

Thirty-five years later my oldest son, Seth, decided to backpack on his own through Cambodia and Vietnam. Several weeks into his trip, I received a middle-of-the-night panicked call from him in Hanoi; he said he was in trouble and needed money right away, reeling off a bank number where I should send cash. Then the phone went dead, and I had no idea how to get back in touch with him. I sent the money immediately, but Seth never picked it up. I called the US Embassy, but they couldn't trace him. Finally, desperate, I called back to the bank in Hanoi where the bank manager assured me they had the money but my son had not appeared. He offered to call all of the other banks in Hanoi to see if Seth had been to any of them. After doing so he called me back to say there was no word on Seth but they would do what they could. I began to cry, "Why are you doing this for me?" I asked him through my tears. "Because I am a father, too," he replied. "But why would you help me after what my country did to your people? I can't believe you are so kind." I will never forget his answer: "We are a good people. We have always been good people. You did not make the war. We did not make the war. Our leaders made the war. We have no reason to hate you. I hope you find your boy. Our people will not hurt him; they will help him." Seth never did get the money I sent him, but he made his way virtually penniless from Hanoi to Hong Kong with the help of the people we were taught to fear and hate.

Within hours of the horrors in New York, Washington, DC, and Pittsburgh, I was receiving phone calls and emails of concern and condolence from ITAA friends and colleagues around the world. I know this is true for other ITAA members in the United States as well. These calls have been a powerful and soothing reminder that the ITAA can be, needs to be, a truly international community. Robin and I decided to postpone production of this issue briefly so that we could include some of these moving and thought-provoking messages. In addition, we asked Valerie Batts to share some of her perspectives on what happened in Sydney and what happened this week, to bring to bear some of her experience and expertise on the pressures of divisiveness and power that we see in both our organization and our world.

I found the process of editing this particular *Script* both ironic and sad, focused as it was on the Sydney conference, which was organized around the theme of reconciliation. From the letters and articles we received, as well as from some of the material that was sent out over the Internet, it seems that the conference brought its participants powerful lessons not only in reconciliation, but also—unfortunately—in competitiveness and divisiveness. We cannot afford to allow conflicts, misunderstandings, and contentiousness within the ITAA and among transactional analysis organizations to destroy our international community. What we have in common as people and colleagues is far more important than the ways that we differ. Personally, I refuse to believe that these issues cannot be resolved. I do not believe we are strengthened by regional allegiances pitted against the difficulties of maintaining a cooperative international community. I believe deeply that the ITA can remain a diverse community without becoming a divisive or divided community. It is up to us to make sure, even on the small scale of our organization, that the differences among us do not become fodder for distrust, power plays, and fragmentation.

It breaks my heart to see the forces of fear, hatred, and demonization swing into full force yet again. As American political reactions to this week's terrorist attacks unfold, it does not look as if we can rely on our nation's leaders to help people grapple with fear, hatred, tragedy, loss, unyielding anguish, and vulnerability. Wrapping ourselves in American flags—or any flag—or in the banners of fanaticism or vengeance will not reduce the tragedy or the vulnerabilities that stalk the peoples of this world. We need to wrap ourselves in tears and reason, not nationalistic

diatribes. Former US Senator Bob Kerrey, one of the few current American politicians who actually fought in the Vietnam war, said yesterday of the terrorists' action, "I condemn it morally, and I do think it was cowardly. But physically, it was the opposite of cowardly, and if you don't understand that, then you don't understand the intensity of the cause. . . . There is hatred out there against the United States, and yes, we have to deal with terrorism in a zero-tolerance fashion. But there is anger, too, and they ought to have a place for a hearing on that anger, in the International Court or wherever we give them a hearing" (*New York Times*, September 15, 2001, p. A16). We must bring our skills, our reason, our compassion, and our humanness to bear upon our lives together even—and perhaps most especially—at those moments when we most fear it to be futile and inadequate.

I do not know the name of that banker in Hanoi. I do know the name of my President. I hope that George W. Bush can find within himself the determined wisdom of that Vietnamese father. During the memorial service at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, three days after the attacks, President Bush said, "This nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger." We need now a leadership and a people who are fierce in reason and compassion, not fierce in anger. I hope that Bush can realize, even in the midst of unfathomable tragedy, that people of every nation, every faith, every race, and every ethnic identity are good people. We cannot afford once more the facile "solution" and self-indulgent relief of revenge. We must find the will and the means to confront and ultimately to develop alternatives to cycles of vengeance, violence, and moral superiority. We must give the nations and peoples of the world time to come together in a fiercely reasoned way, to finally, finally not resort first to war but to find the means and resolve to isolate and punish criminals while helping people understand the depths and divisiveness of our mutual fears and demonizations.

"[World War I] broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countrysides through which it passed and the works of art which it met on its path but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for many philosophers and artists, and our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty impartiality of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits with in us which we thought had been tamed for ever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. It made our country small again and made the rest of the world far remote. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we regarded as changeless." Sigmund Freud, 1916, "On Transience," **Standard Edition**, 14: 305-307. London: The Hogarth Press.

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