

Hiroshima

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It's amazing how persistent family patterns are. I can remember being almost afraid to have fun because I always ended up getting hurt. When we were little, my sisters and I loved to roughhouse with my father. He'd lie on his back with bent legs and we'd take turns sitting on his feet and holding his knees. He'd straighten his legs and we'd flip upside down and over his head to land on our feet again. There'd be laughter and fun, and we'd go faster and faster and faster until someone – usually me – fell on my head. It always seemed to end with me seeing stars, gasping with pain.

This pattern played out when we kids were just playing among ourselves. Innocent fun would grow more and more frantic and energetic – laughs would escalate to shrieks, and then something would happen that went too far, someone would get hurt, and the fun would turn to guilt and sadness.

We had seven children in our family, so when I was a teenager I had the opportunity to recognize the same pattern in my younger sisters' play. There would be laughter, shrieks, a moment of stunned silence, and then crying that tapered off to sniffles and faded to quiet. Sometimes you could hear this pattern repeated over and over. It's a kind of primal play song. I've heard it enacted many times over the years in parks, picnics, playgrounds and campgrounds – wherever children gather and play.

The innocent character of this pattern depends on one thing: not understanding the consequences of one's behavior. As we grow up a bit, we begin to be able to anticipate these painful outcomes and avoid most of them. But it usually takes more than a few bumps and bruises on the way.

Take a child's toy garden hoe, for example. They seem to be made entirely of plastic nowadays, and I can understand why. When I was little, we had a set of little garden tools. I can remember holding the wooden handle of a garden hoe that was attached to a metal blade on the end. It was less than two feet long. I

think I was about three years old. I'd been playing and then arguing with my older sister, Kathy, who was five. I don't recall how it escalated, but then I was chasing her around the house, the hoe in my hand. The hoe felt like an extension of my own hand and I was reaching out to her with it, up and down. Everything changed the moment the hoe struck the back of her head. She screamed as a horizontal line appeared across her hair, and blood started oozing out. I was stunned. I felt awful. I'd never done anything like that before. I think I ended up getting spanked, but the horror of what I'd done was far more convincing than any punishment that came my way.

When we hurt people, we usually aren't thinking of them as people. We fall out of relationship with them and they become more like objects we are trying to manipulate. Sometimes we're struck so forcefully with the reality of having caused another person's pain that we suddenly see them as a human being again, and we're ashamed of what we've done. We can't imagine what came over us.

Sometimes something comes over us in the middle of an argument, we cross that line and say something hurtful. Our exasperation with our friend for failing to see the wisdom of our opinions can cause an escalation from "It is!" "It isn't!" "It is!" "It isn't!" into something like, "You idiot! I thought you had more sense than that." All of a sudden, we realize we've gone too far. We wish we could take it back, but the damage is done.

What does it take to cross that line, to realize that those we are hurting are people like ourselves? Sometimes it takes a lot. I heard the story of a US soldier who'd been doing guard duty in Iraq. This was a very tense roadblock situation, where it was hard to tell friend from foe, where they were told to fire on cars that seemed suspicious. This soldier told how he'd been worried about a car with two young Iraqi men as it approached. He told the car to stop, but it only slowed down. The passenger suddenly reached for something out of view and the soldier opened fire, killing the man. The driver stopped the car with a cry. As he opened his door and the soldier took aim at him, he cried out with anguish, "My brother! You killed my brother! Why did you kill my brother? He was only getting his passport!" The American soldier said that this was his moment of going too far. He could no longer look at Iraqis as simply "the enemy." He said he couldn't

stomach the indiscriminate violence of the US occupation any longer. He was jailed for refusing guard duty, and later sent home with a dishonorable discharge. What does it take to go too far, to see forever we are hurting real people?

This is where the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima comes in. It provides a milestone, a monument to what it means to have gone too far. A single moment of unimaginable terror resulted in the horrible deaths of between 100,000-200,000 people. The lucky ones died instantly, many more survived for hours or days or even more with burns, radiation sickness, and disease and dehydration.

Caught up in the fearful frenzy of war, most Americans saw the Japanese as inhuman monsters that had to be stopped by any means, and rejoiced at the bombings. It was only years after the war ended when the truth came out about Hiroshima, the terrible agony inflicted on a civilian population, that the world realized that this was, indeed, a moment where we had gone too far – real people had died horribly.

Given human psychology, there are two basic ways to react to this knowledge: the first is to forget or deny it. Downplay it. Blame the victim. This is the way of hatred, of perpetuating the cycle of violence. The other is to remember it clearly, hold it as a powerful lesson to keep us from ever going too far again. This is the way of love, of learning to face the sometimes terrible consequences of our actions. It's painful to keep our hearts open to Hiroshima, but that's what we are called to do.

What does it take to open our hearts to the horrors of war? Hiroshima, Dresden, Rwanda, Bosnia, Sudan? Low-tech violence can kill as horribly as high-tech. What does it take to make these deaths personal? What about 9/11? Like the little children at play, it takes experience to learn about hurting, about consequences, about responsibility.

There is no city in the world more dedicated to the cause of peace than Hiroshima. Its entire civic structure is organized around the Hiroshima Peace Museum, its annual rituals of remembrance, the tireless efforts toward world peace and nuclear disarmament. Is this because Hiroshima has become a permanent victim dedicated to the cause of self-pity? Hardly. Hiroshima is one of

the places where the effects of dehumanizing violence can never be overlooked, where the ultimate value of human life cannot be lost in the frenzy of fear, the place where people can never forget consequences of the human tendency to go too far.

Chapter 31 of the *Tao te Ching* talks about war. Stephen Mitchell's translation uses male and female pronouns in alternate chapters. I've retained his use of the male pronoun in this reading:

Weapons are the tools of violence;
all decent men detest them.

Weapons are the tools of fear;
a decent man will avoid them
except in the direst necessity
and, if compelled, will use them
only with the utmost restraint.
Peace is his highest value.
If the peace has been shattered,
how can he be content?
His enemies are not demons,
but human beings like himself.
He doesn't wish them personal harm.
Nor does he rejoice in victory.
How could he rejoice in victory
and delight in the slaughter of men?

He enters a battle gravely,
with sorrow and with great compassion,
as if he were attending a funeral.

When I look back at Hiroshima, I feel a temptation to shout out, "Never again!" to be overwhelmed with pain – with sorrow, remorse, and guilt. But I realize this is

the way that leads to denial and forgetting – sooner or later I grow weary of carrying all that pain and guilt around on my shoulders. I shrug it off, walk away from it, relegate it to the past. But Hiroshima doesn't need my guilt. The world doesn't need our remorse. What we need and the world needs is for us to keep our hearts open to the ultimacy of human life, of the precious miracle at the heart of each and every individual – the miracle we can destroy in an instant through fearful, uncaring violence. We need to remember, as we face the morally ambiguous challenges of life, that even though we must do what we have to do, we must never put another person out of our hearts. We can't repair the past, but we can learn from it to create a more compassionate future.

I think Mary Oliver summed it up well in this poem, which I read in closing:

You want to cry aloud for your
mistakes. But to tell the truth the world
doesn't need any more of that sound.

So if you're going to do it and can't
stop yourself, if your pretty mouth can't
hold it in, at least go by yourself across

the forty fields and the forty dark inclines
of rocks and water to the place where
the falls are flinging out their white sheets

like crazy, and there is a cave behind all that
jubilation and water fun and you can
stand there, under it, and roar all you

want and nothing will be disturbed; you
can drip with despair all afternoon and still,
on a green branch, its wings just lightly touched

by the passing foil of water, the thrush
puffing out its spotted breast, will sing
of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything.