

ADDICTION TO DEATH

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Fascination with death

I shall use my allotted time, which is very brief, to consider the experience of people who play with death in self-destructive or destructive ways. I shall hope to stimulate some new thoughts about what it means to have come to the edge of existence in this way. I shall not speak about those people who are terminally ill and for whom death has become the only way forward, but many of my remarks would apply to those people who are involved in the violence of ethnic cleansing, be it as victim or perpetrator. As someone who is involved in a marginal way with the organization of psychotherapeutic help in the Macedonian and Albanian refugee camps I have received daily UN bulletins on the violence that is happening in the Balkans and it has reinforced my previously largely clinically based views on what makes people sometimes become addicted to death.

I shall focus however on those people who are suicidal, self-harming, or violent enough to take or threaten other people's lives. You have heard the figures and know quite a few of the facts. But how much of all this do we actually understand? Do we really know what the attraction of such violent pursuits is? How come there is so much violence all around us? How can we begin to comprehend that which is so taboo that we cannot let ourselves think about it without feeling horror, revulsion, fear or condemnation? How can our own experience help us to connect to what motivates those people who cross the boundaries of death in a violent manner? We know that while it is tempting to dismiss violence as an expression of evil, such labelling does not actually help. Nor does it help to label these phenomena as psychopathy or Munchausen by proxy, or narcissistic personality disorder or dissociation or anything. All this does is to attach psychopathological judgements to a range of human experiences that we find hard to understand or explain let alone overcome. In order to begin to make sense of these phenomena we have to stop making them so distant and strange. We have to reclaim our own capacity for such experience and dare to recognize our own fascination with and ambivalence about death?

Perhaps the right place to start is to notice our own interest in violence in fiction or in films, like we did last night. It is relatively easy to admit one's pleasure in identifying with those who are portrayed as killing in revenge or in defence, classic westerns are a

ourselves and the dangers that they represent. We disown them. We put them away from us, not just physically, but mentally, in a category apart.

Something similar happens in relation to people who have attempted to kill themselves. They too become slightly dangerous to know and we keep them at bay by thinking of them as weak of will. Even though suicide is no longer seen as a crime, stigma is still attached to it and many families hide the cause of death when one of theirs expires in this way.

Violence

Much research on the perpetrators of violent crimes pictures them as either evil or sick and suffering individuals. This may not be the most useful and productive way to look at these matters. It may be more helpful to consider that expressions of violence, be it towards others or towards self are the signal that there is a level of distress in the person that cannot be dealt with in a constructive manner. Although this can obviously be named as evil, if we are interested in a moral point of view and it can be named as illness if we are interested in a medical point of view, if we want to understand the process at work we must look again at the phenomenon and wonder what kind of experience can lead a person in this direction.

In violence, be it towards others or towards self, the person acting has lost track of a sense of self-reflective selfhood. A state of quasi detachment, or dissociation takes over. Violent people respond as if they are no longer responsible, as if they had mislaid their selves. If our response to their behaviour is similarly detached, we give up any hope of making contact. When we do make contact we often find that the person who is apparently so out of touch with their self is actually desperately trying to find a way to feel again, to become real again. It seems strangely easy for people to lose this sense of reality. Given the wrong circumstances it could happen to most of us.

Kierkegaard once remarked that:

The greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss - an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. - is sure to be noticed. (p.32 *Sickness unto Death*)

This loss of self seems to occur rather more frequently in people today and can manifest in many different ways. It may have something to do with the state of mass production and mass consumption, the lack of personal support systems, the lack of attention and care for each other that we all suffer from. The safety of the individual has been undermined by the unravelling of family, community, religion and careers. As the value of the individual goes down the risk of violent interactions goes up. To get into a state of mind where it is possible to do violence to oneself or to others is to have lost track of the value of human life. As Thomas Hobbes said in his *Leviathan*:

The value, or worth of a man, is as of all things, his price; that is to say, as much so would be given for the use of his power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another. (*Leviathan*, English works, 3, p76)

People who attempt to kill themselves, or do violence to themselves in other ways, be it by cutting themselves or poisoning their system with drugs or alcohol have very little sense of their own value. They have very little sense of themselves as being able to make a meaningful contribution to the world. They are desperately disconnected from the world around them although the reasons for this can vary a great deal. They are in a void, without hope or trust in their ability to reconnect or change their situation for the better. They live in an absurd world and a violent attempt at breaking through this absurdity and impossibility is their only hope. When such violence puts them in touch with death this may become a rather attractive new focus for their meaningless lives. Camus was an expert on meaninglessness and absurdity. He said:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, p.13)

In an absurd world there is no recourse, no one who can help, no one who can understand. One is alone in confronting fate. One is isolated. One might try to get through by shouting or hitting someone. One might just still stand a small chance of getting heard.

A Case Study

Joe is the kind of man that people fear. He is big and muscular. He rides a motorbike and wears leather clothes. He has been convicted a number of times for violent offences and he finds it hard to hold down a job. He does not want to hurt the woman he lives with, but has just hit her so hard that she had to be hospitalized with a broken jaw and several bruised and broken ribs. She has not pressed charges, but has told him to leave. He is deeply depressed and wants to hang himself. His G.P. prescribes anti-depressants and sends him on to a counsellor. He does not even collect the tablets from his chemist, but, out of curiosity more than in hope attends the counselling sessions. Primary care counsellors deal with all sorts of situations these days. They run crisis clinics and whole psychiatric outpatient departments by themselves.

Joe is very reluctant to speak about his destructive actions, but gradually owns up to a whole series of violent altercations with friends or family members, including his mother. Joe does not think his friends are really his friends. The mates he drinks with in his local like to stay out of his way. He is said to be impulsive and volatile and they do not trust him. Joe himself does not think he is particularly aggressive. He figures he is just defending himself. He has to stand up for himself otherwise people would walk all over him, he claims. When he starts confiding in his counsellor he begins to speak of hitherto unarticulated sorrows and disappointments. He was bullied as a child, by his big brother and other, bigger children in the street. He learnt to defend himself, though he was not so good at making friends, because he was always a bit odd, as he puts it himself. His mother stopped defending him when he was four or five years old and he had two

younger siblings. By the time he had six younger siblings nobody paid any attention to him, except when his dad used to hit him regularly.

His mom used to make him feel that he was no good. She would call him clumsy and awkward and compare him negatively to his brothers, especially his younger brothers. He just did not like to be always criticized and began to hit people when they did. It earned him respect, he thought, but it made people fear and avoid him. He became more and more lonely. His first girlfriend was a really tough girl, who had gone out with him for a bet: to show that she was not afraid of Joe. She dealt with her fear by teasing him. He let her-for a bit, craving her affection. They moved in together a few months later and she began to complain about the way he acted and reacted. As she got more provocative he began to hit her. Just a little at first, he said. She left him when he hit her really hard one day. He was done over by her brothers for this, but he got them back. They would not dare disturb him again. His perception of the situation was that he was being wronged. He felt cut off from any possible solutions. His only response to the violence he experienced around him was more violence. When precisely the same situation developed with his new woman, he felt desperate and saw no way out.

He crashed his motorbike deliberately against a wall one day and staid in a coma for five days. From then on he was to use violent driving and crashing a number of times when he felt desperate. The prospect of death had become an attractive one. Flirting with death made him feel more confident and worthwhile. At least he wasn't hurting anyone else. He was unafraid of death. A regular cycle of violence to others leading to self harm, was established. At least that is what it looked like on the outside. On the inside, Joe was just a man caught in a trap. He was a man who was cut off from being himself in a meaningful way and in a meaningful social world. He did feel a deep sense of having been wronged by the world. It was a sense that was so strong that he could not right it himself. Life was something to be feared. Working with his counsellor he very slowly and painstakingly gained a sense of his own rights and of more constructive and cooperative ways of asserting them. Others with experiences like Joe do not fare so well and end up making the wrong move one day, landing themselves in prison. The question is: when are we going to learn enough from the mistakes these people make to understand what goes wrong and prevent it. We can only do this if we work more with perpetrators.

Baumeister showed in his recent book on Evil (Baumeister 1997), that perpetrators of violent crimes often commit their offences in the belief that they are merely defending themselves against an unfair world and they often perceive their subsequent punishment as further abuse. As they do not feel valued in any way themselves it is very hard for them to see real value in other people's lives as well. The lives they destroy are as meaningless to them as their own. Death holds greater fascination than life. In death some value might still be achieved. By killing or flirting with their own death, they cross the boundaries that hold them back and reach into new territory. It is a territory largely unexplored by those who deal with them. A foreign territory that they can therefore claim as their own.

It isn't surprising that there should be a fascination with death in some people in our culture. The prospect of death can become a rather attractive escape route towards oblivion if all other roads to comfort and satisfaction are barred. A client of mine, who made repeated suicide attempts told me that to know that she could opt for death at any point anchored her life in the quiet knowledge of her own readiness and willingness to go. It provided her with a source of courage in the face of danger to know that she could defy death. It had become an additional attraction to realize that she could try to die and kind of vanquish death by being revived again from this twilight state. She would come and see me once a week, but for a long time used the Samaritans as extra, free therapy, phoning them on an almost daily basis. She had quickly realized that she would get more phone attention if she let it be known that she was suicidal. It was an addictive process that it was hard to wean herself off.

Exploring the boundaries of life can become exhilarating in itself. It can be difficult to help someone who has become addicted to self-harming activities to abandon these. If there is no new source of meaningful engagement with life, then meaningful experimentation with death or even pain, can remain the best source of meaning or even of a simple sense of one's own existence. There are those who will show you their scars with a bitter and somewhat proud sense of their own ability to survive and thrive in dire circumstances. The scars become like the calluses of the agricultural worker or the medals of the long distance runner: proofs of maturity and capability. In this case proof of an ability to play with death or suffering and survive.

Perhaps we are missing something when we are so quick to describe these behaviours as pathological. Perhaps we have not really looked carefully enough at what is being experienced and played out under our eyes. Heidegger spoke of the anticipation of death as bringing one face to face with the possibility of Being itself. He spoke of an:

"Impassioned freedom towards death ? a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the "they" and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious." (Heidegger 1927, 266).

Death and aloneness

The ability to face death is something that is acquired alone. People who self harm or act violently towards others often feel deeply lonely. Challenging death liberates one from the rule of the other. It puts one in a different category, where they cannot get you anymore (except of course to lock you up). I think it is important in working with people who are addicted to death in one way or the other to help them acknowledge their dire circumstances and their brave efforts in trying to overcome these, no matter how much they have failed in doing so. Somewhere along the line it is possible to transform human pain and isolation and a feeling of having been wronged into positive and creative action. Some of the greatest human accomplishments and feats of culture are undoubtedly centred around the experience of death, human tragedy and suffering. Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, Mozart, Bach, Brecht, Da Vinci, van Gogh: there are endless examples of art being rooted in tragedy. What we know so little about is how to

transform such preoccupation with death and destruction into something that is of value, not just to the person suffering but to others as well.

This is one of the objectives of the Centre for the Study of Conflict and Reconciliation: to learn more about the experience of the person involved in violence, understanding their motivation and their hope for something better.

Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* said that:

"Man would sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose". (Nietzsche 1887)

If this is so then we need to find ways of helping those who have lost the ability to live in a meaningful world to find a new purpose that does not involve violence or destruction.

I believe that Nietzsche hit the nail on the head in relating people's preoccupation with death to a lack of purpose and meaning. It is when one feels deprived of access to life, of an essential right to breathe and to speak and to think and to be, that one focuses on the void and on oblivion and on the black hole of death. Perhaps there is a lot to learn from those who confront the things that are often taboo in our world. Perhaps they show us the necessary other side of the coin of our preoccupation with sex and youth and success and fun. Instead of condemning and classifying we need to reach out and understand.