

The psychology of nations - Conflict resolution and prevention of violence

By Dr. Margret Rueffler - 16 October 2008

Conflict resolution is widely recognized as an extremely effective means of dealing with open contention. It is designed to be applied while a situation is ongoing to prevent further escalation and to resolve the conflict via peaceful means.

Prevention of collective violence, however, is a broader approach and process for recognizing, assessing and transforming the underlying collective belief and behavioral patterns that eventually erupt as conflict and lead to crises within and between groups and entire nations. It is a long-term approach utilized to transform collective values and effect deep changes in unconscious attitudes toward violence and crisis. This, in turn, eventually, ushers in collective creative cooperation.

Although conflict resolution can be part of prevention, the latter is a more far-reaching and long-term solution.

The prevention of collective violence is based on an assessment of the psycho-political history of a group or nation* and the current behavior resulting therefrom. It attempts to work with the limiting and restricting collective belief systems which, being unconscious, too often lead to aggression, outbreaks of violence, and wars.

These collective beliefs are living psychodynamic patterns resident in the individual and collective psyche. With time and repetition they gain power and strength, and control individual, group, and national behavior, feeding on violence, war and destruction. As they continue to do so, they become increasingly more powerful, yet the individual remains unconscious of the process.

The prevention of collective violence aims to uncover fundamentally held collective fears such as the fear of annihilation, which is deeply ingrained in the psyche of humanity due to millennia of individual and collective experiences of prior violent traumas.

In order to work with preventing collective violence, however, the healthy, unlimited potential for growth and evolution within the individual, the nation, and the psyche of humanity itself needs to be acknowledged first. So doing allows for a positive perspective that is a radical departure from the emphasis on pathology, illness, and lack, to the recognition of the boundless, if dormant, potential in each. This potential lies hidden beneath the unconscious fear of existence, but can be activated and tapped by becoming aware of it. Wars, power struggles, and conflicts can then be recognized as symptoms, as well as direct results, of this underlying fear. Due to its power, the unconscious fear of existence distorts the life-giving constructive energies of the psyche and diverts them to achieve and fulfill its own purpose, which is violence and destruction. Given an appropriate framework, though, our healthy unlimited potential can be accessed and freed. Its flow opens a powerful possibility for channelling the urge toward conflict and aggression and routing it into co-operation and growth.

Recognition and acknowledgment of the infinite individual and collective potential leads to a shift in understanding precisely how collective violence functions. This perception allows the restrictive belief patterns that lead to countless repetitions of violence, wars, and atrocities to be laid bare and viewed as the build up of rigid psychodynamic structures that restrict and distort the underlying potential.

In Western psychology, fear of annihilation is acknowledged as a given at the base of human existence. Supposedly, all human behavior is determined by it. But is this truly so? There must have been fertile

ground prior to this where, through the infliction of major collective trauma or catastrophe, the fear began to take root and grow. Memory of humanity's limitless underlying potential has been deeply buried. It is exactly this obscuring of our infinite potential that allows the fear to control and influence individual actions and reactions and thereby continue to strengthen its own structure and dynamics. Every war and individual act of destruction and violence feeds the fear of annihilation. Over time and with innumerable repetitions these collective psychodynamic patterns, their origins long forgotten, grow in strength and are acknowledged as the norm. Now unconscious, they relentlessly drive the behavior of individuals, groups and entire nations.

The present conflict between George Bush, President of the US, and the elusive self-styled leader of terrorist groups, Osama bin Laden, that is being acted out on the world stage has generated a world wide wave of fear throughout humanity.

Ostensibly, Bush and Bin Laden are very different from each other – one is Christian and the President of an acknowledged superpower, the other a Muslim, a terrorist in hiding. Bin Laden feels called to the task of destroying this superpower nation with its Western values while Bush vows to destroy bin Laden and his terrorist organization.

One could argue that it is the direction that US politics took in the past years that allowed this hatred toward the US to grow, culminating in the events of September 11. One could also argue that bin Laden's terrorists attacked first. Indeed, one might well ask, "Who is the real aggressor here?"

In fact, both men have a lot more in common than might be immediately apparent.

Each sees the other as inherently evil and each is fighting the other as such. Each claims to be freeing the world. Yet, both use violence to do so, violence that may ultimately kill innumerable innocent people of many nationalities. Bush and bin Laden are dancing with each other, a dance macabre, the perpetual dance of victim and aggressor - every so often exchanging roles. Inevitably one must come to the conclusion, when looking beneath the apparent differences in roles, appearance, and clothing that both are simply puppets dancing on the strings of the same master puppeteer.

Looking at this as a global drama unfolding, with the Earth as the stage, and the script the story of humanity's psyche and its future, who or what, we may well wonder, is the director of this worldwide play?

Both actors are major characters since they are able to engulf the entire planet (the audience) in the collective fear of existence and fear of death. The audience itself is being skillfully manipulated by the media to move ever deeper into the fear. The play exerts its fascination. Each spectator's life seems threatened as well. This in turn creates an environment in which more violence, heretofore hidden in the collective, can surface, a never-ending cycle, well known in the history of nations and the world.

In this drama, there is no longer a good guy and a bad guy. As much as each would like to believe that he is in charge and pulling the strings, Bush and bin Laden are merely actors in a larger power play, the unwitting instruments of unconscious collective psychodynamic patterns, ever increasing the fear of existence. Both men plug deeply into the collective psychodynamic structure of fear of existence and fear of death, and unconsciously act out those beliefs. Both expend an incredible amount of energy in feeding and fueling the violence, which further feeds the strengthening of this collective pattern. And so the pattern becomes yet more powerful and controlling, gaining further influence on behavior through the individual and collective psyche. In short, the psychodynamic structure of aggression in the psyche of humanity is being activated through the actions of both players and fed and strengthened by the collective field of fear, which then activates and triggers violence in individuals and groups world wide allowing this ingrained individual and collective pattern to act out its own purpose. Surely, this is a vicious cycle.

Since the psychodynamic structure is in the unconscious, it can only be recognized by its symptoms: suffering, death, war, and destruction. Deeply rooted in the collective experience, it is rooted in the

individual experience as well; each individual, with all of his or her beliefs, is embedded in the collective unconscious.

There are many individuals, groups, and nations who do not wish to engage in conflict, violence, and war. Yet this ancient psychodynamic structure is empowered through the continuous repetition of violence and wars, and now emerges once again, obstructing the real potential for growth and co-operation. To affect any significant change we must ask ourselves: Will we allow this psychodynamic pattern to remain hidden, and ourselves to continue to be unconscious of it? And will we then unwittingly allow this deeply ingrained collective pattern of fear of existence to persist in controlling individual, national, and collective behavior?

We are truly at an important turning pointing in the history of the earth.

Prevention of collective violence means becoming aware of and working with that which is truly life-giving and acknowledging the underlying collective potential for growth and cooperation in each individual within humanity as a whole. Only from this sense of infinite individual potential can we face our deeply anchored fear of existence from which all conflict emerges.

The acknowledgment of infinite potential allows one to see that during the past millennia the lesson has been well learned and that it is time to move on, to become aware, to turn toward and accept the psychodynamic structure by embracing it and thus slowly but inexorably allowing it to dissolve. Such an approach to the prevention of violence respects and honors the past wounds and traumas of both individuals and nations.

As individual, we all have the power to influence the collective structures and we do so, in every moment through our thoughts and actions. Each of us can become aware of and consciously choose how to influence these collective psychodynamic structures. We do so by either reinforcing the old pattern that leads to destruction or by allowing the infinite potential trapped beneath the patterns to emerge and broaden our horizons. The latter choice leads to a profound change in attitude both of the individual and the collective from one of idealizing and glorifying death to reaffirming and revitalizing life.

* Nation is used here to describe a group of people of common ethnic, religious, cultural background who may be with or without a state or spread across several states.

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