

# Unmasking our pain

## Therapeutic politics: A way to confront collective violence

by Ched Myers

*"Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that has silenced him; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes withered; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they were not strong enough."*

Mark 9:16

**W**hat if they held a war and everybody came? This, it seems, is what we have just witnessed. Those who tried to raise their voices against Desert Storm were officially *silenced*, and the rest were officially *silent*, successfully manipulated yet again by opportunistic politicians. Silent in the face of the most horrific unleashing of aerial bombing in history. Silent still.

We have seen in Desert Storm the genius of the system in bold relief. Minority dissent is tolerated, marginalized or squashed, depending on the necessities of the political moment. But the system is *predicated* upon a "silent majority."

In our efforts to stop the Gulf War, we learned, like the disciples in Mark, that we are not strong enough. The discipline is to learn why.

"How long has he been this way?" asks Jesus. The demon-possessed boy's father replies: "Since childhood" (9:21). Ancient wisdom indeed! It is rearticulated in the modern psycho-therapeutic axiom that the seeds of adult pathologies are sown in early childhood trauma. And it may hold a key to our efforts to get at why

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we have been unable to cast out our national demons that again rampaged across the earth in Desert Storm.

Alice Miller, a Swiss psychotherapist and philosopher, sees the roots of human violence in what she calls the "silent drama" of the child. Children, she argues, are utterly dependent

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on adult love and acceptance, and therefore unable to consciously process anger resulting from experiences of hurt or domination. Their sole means of survival is to internalize their sense of betrayal while rationalizing or idealizing the adult's "good intentions." The child must eventually repress the trauma, even to the point of forgetting altogether (that is, banishing it to the realm of the unconscious). It is only later, as an adult, that the true emotions associated with the trauma are discharged, but then indirectly, because of the "unconscious imperative" to "split off the disquieting parts of the inner self and project them onto an available object."

While this drama is most clearly played out in the family, Miller reminds us that its impact is socio-political as well. When the unconscious store of pain and anger is *introjected* its cost is intrapsychic, manifested through *depression* and various forms

of despair. When it is *projected*, the cost is social, taking the form of *oppression*, the reproduction of the trauma in the public theater. If the target in the former case is the self, in the latter it is inevitably other vulnerable persons or groups. In the family this means the next generation of children. In the context of society, it usually means projection of anger/vengeance upon those already oppressed or disenfranchised. What else can explain our uncanny, vicious national habit of "blaming the victims" for social violence, regardless of whether it is rape, poverty or insurrection?

But let us take Miller's model of the "vicious circle of contempt" one step further. If the roots of the *individual's* complicity in the cycle lie in childhood trauma, could it not follow that the seeds of our destructive national/cultural character lie deep in the shadow side of our *collective* story? *Imagine* for a moment the psychic health of a people who pass on, from generation to generation, a mystified heritage such as the one communicated in our American history books! Here the incalculable traumas of conquest and dispossession, enslavement and genocide, economic exploitation and objectification, militarism and ecocide, *are all repressed*, masked instead by grandiose founding myths and idealized portraits of our "fathers."

Historical honesty, if we in the dominant culture had the courage to practice it, would compel us to admit that our "prosperity" and privilege are predicated upon a legacy characterized as much by racism and greed as by liberty and democracy. But of course we do *not* face the shadow side of our own story, because we are shame-bound. So we unconsciously harbor its suppressed traumas, and pass on its myths (thinking them essentially benign). So we consolidate and extend our national pathologies,

finding new victims to blame and new enemies toward whom we may split off our insecure rage.

*This collective psychic substructure* functions to create and maintain the mutually reinforcing family and social patterns of domination intergenerationally. It is, I believe, as much responsible for keeping the dominant culture silenced and domesticated as is any superstructure of law, state or military. It helps explain why North Americans *essentially police themselves*, why social contradictions are so ignored, and why the process of social change is so difficult here.

"It is part of the tragic nature of the repetition-compulsion that someone who hopes eventually to find a better world than the one he or she experienced as a child in fact keeps creating instead the same undesired state of affairs," writes Miller. This simply restates Freud's dictum that "What is unconscious is bound to be reproduced." We are facing in this country much more than bad politics. The pathology is deep, structural, and we must face it squarely.

As activists we have exhausted ourselves trying to *conscientize* and *organize* people politically. Why do we have so little success in this country? I suspect it is in part because our standard means of educating and exhorting have no power to transform silenced, shamed people. *Paternalism* (doing it for the masses, as in *vanguard*) prevents people from becoming their own cultural, social, political and economic subjects, and only reinforces the silence and powerlessness. *Prophecy* (*Just do it!*, the politics of moral imperative) by itself will not suffice since as Miller warns, "what is unconscious cannot be abolished by proclamation or prohibition".

Nor will *political education* alone: "Since one's use and abuse of power over others usually have the function

of holding one's own feelings of helplessness in check -- which means the exercise of power is often unconsciously motivated -- rational arguments can do nothing to impede this process."

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What is needed is a way of political organizing that enables people to identify and struggle through the social lattice of dysfunction (family/group/institution/class/race/gender/nation). Do we have the compassion, as feminist therapy puts it, to "listen the silenced into speech"? Can we redefine solidarity as *radical empathy*? Do we have the courage or the discipline to engage ourselves and each other in that long process of *dis-illusionment* that is at once personal and political?

If the Church wished to stand in true empathy/solidarity with its people but preserve its own discourse, it seems to me, we should have more firmly and publicly invited the American people to prayer. But by prayer, as I have contended above, I mean that long and difficult task of *dis-illusionment*, the only process whereby the silenced can find their true voice.

*Repentance* is at the heart of Jesus' Gospel, but sadly its potency has been lost in the labyrinth of American pietism and shame culture, where it has come to mean *feeling bad*. Perhaps however we may find a modern paraphrase in the popular wisdom of Twelve Step practice. Here the first step toward recovery, as essential as it is uncomfortable, is to acknowledge

both that I am part of the problem, and in my *illusioned* state impotent to resolve it. Beginning with my own pain ensures that I am the *subject* of the struggle for liberation -- an essential component of transformative politics. At the same time, the therapeutic notion of recovery recognizes better than privatized religion did that the problem is the complicity of persons in a *system* of addiction, and that only with the support of a community of *resistance* (in this case, the Twelve-Step group) can behavior begin to change and remain changed.

But for *therapeutic politics* repentance and resistance mean something more: the dysfunctional social system cannot be reformed, and must be confronted at its roots. In this sense it is apocalyptic, in that it recognizes fundamental contradictions in the dominant order and settles only for the revolutionary transformation. To make sense of this we can use the example of an alcoholic breaking with a dysfunctional family system in order to draw political analogies.

When the alcoholic *repents* s/he calls the whole family system into question, especially its myths, secrets, and other addictions. Those who hold power or prestige in the family are invariably the ones who, while perhaps glad that the alcoholic is on the wagon, refuse to acknowledge their complicity, or fundamental structural problems in the family system. This *conservatism* is often legitimized by the myth that *we are a good family*. The flip side of this is of course the fear of public acknowledgement of family problems; grandiosity and depression conspire fiercely against liberation and the shame system. The process of recovery is thus a long and often frustrating process of standing one's own ground and refusing to cooperate with old family patterns (*resistance*) while at the same time inviting other family

members to *dis-illusionment*, so that the system may be changed through cooperative recovery.

Similarly, in the North American context we must face the truth of our "society of origin." This is difficult because ours is such a highly mystified culture. For example, those in power (the true *conservatives*, regardless of political party) trade heavily in mythological stock concerning our collective nobility. These myths fuse the essential goodness (and innocence!) of our civilization with the divine imperative of *progress*, from the Puritan's *city on a hill* to *Manifest Destiny*, from the *Monroe Doctrine* to Reagan's *America is back and walking tall*. Movements of social reform are sooner or later embraced and coopted in the name of *progress* and *working within the system* to *make the system work*. But any dissenting movement that goes further, advocating that we *dis-illusion* ourselves of these myths, much less suggesting that there are fundamental problems with the system, is immediately and necessarily marginalized.

This is, however, *exactly* what we must do. Our process will involve helping each other look deeply and critically at our roots as a dominant civilization. We must *unsilence* the past, and understand that the ideology of *progress* has been a mask for the deadly ambitions of European expansionism for two centuries. And we must mourn *the sins of our fathers*, not because we can change their behavior, but because we cannot change our own if we continue to carry the suppressed trauma in our bones. We must give each other permission to acknowledge that we have become deeply dysfunctional as a society, that we are at a spiritual and historical dead-end. And then we must help each other *turn away* (the meaning of *metanoia*, the Greek word for *repentance*) toward a new social vision.

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