

ALEX MOLNAR

Children and Violence

Selling Our Souls

To counteract our national preoccupation with violence, we can call the heroic figures of nonviolence out of the shadows and into our classrooms.

Violence is as American as cherry pie.
—H. Rap Brown

In the 1960s when H. Rap Brown made this statement, he was talking about the use of violence to promote social change. Understandably, Brown's remark brought down the wrath of our civic leaders upon his head. But were they offended, a cynic might wonder, because he defended violence per se? Or was it because he was promoting violence to attack rather than to guard the status quo, and therefore no one could figure out a way to turn a profit on it?

Violence is, after all, big money in the United States. During the 15,000 hours American students spend in high school preparing for the future, their parents will spend about \$506,250,000,000 preparing for war.

In the free market shark tank of the 1980s, it is not only military violence that is big business. Since the Reagan FCC refuses to enforce guidelines for children's programming, the number of hours of war toy cartoons beamed out at an intended audience of 3- to 11-year-olds increased from 1.5 hours a week in 1982 to 42 hours a week in 1986 (Kidder 1985). Kidder estimates that the average child will spend the equivalent of 22 school days a year watching war toy commercials and war cartoons.

That's not all. By the time our children march proudly down the aisle to receive their high school diplomas, it is estimated they will have seen approximately 18,000 murders on TV



In the heat of the moment, violence to defend the status quo may seem acceptable; but, viewed from the distance of years, the violent response to civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham (Alabama) seems unwarranted and shameful.

(Gore 1987). There are no estimates on how many scenes they will see in commercially prepared video cassettes such as *Terror on Tape* reported by Gore:

Several men hold an attractive woman on a pool table. She is screaming, struggling. Her terror increases when one of the men appears with an ax. He swings—and cleanly severs her arm at the shoulder—as other persons clap and shout. The men take the woman's arm—leaving her in shock on the table—and proceed to barbecue it on an outdoor grill (p. 30).

Considering these data, our cynic might suggest that children in our culture are taught the logic of violence far more thoroughly than the three Rs, the logic of militarism more than the celebration of life, and the dehumanization of the targets of violence more than the shared humanity of all people.

I have only scratched the surface. I have left out the figures on child and spouse abuse, violent crime among children, and the homicide rates of



Violence encompasses so much of history; we can do our part as educators by teaching about historic figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., who made an art out of nonviolence.

American cities, which have more violent deaths per capita than entire European countries. Our culture glorifies violence in its commercial affairs, its sports, its social relationships, and its politics. It is seriously suggested, for example, that Americans shouldn't have any use for "wimpy" garbage bags or "wimpy" presidents.

Does all this violence take a toll? Consider these quotes from newspaper articles.

How many coaches tell a defensive back, "Do not put an elbow in the face of a receiver"? They say, "Punish him! Make sure that the next time he comes out on the field he's afraid of you" (Bruce C. Ogilvie, clinical psychologist, [Resler 1986]).

My husband and I went to visit my parents for the holiday; also visiting were my grandmother, and my two nephews, ages five and ten. While we were sitting in the living room talking, the five-year-old came running in with a toy gun shouting, "I'll blow you away, Grandma." My shocked husband said, "That's not a very

nice thing to say." The five-year-old, in turn, said, "Then I'll blow you away—I'll blow you to bits like Rambo with a grenade" (Naab 1986).

We've been using [corporal punishment] here since schools began, and to be honest with you, I don't know what we'd do without it (Johnie Sikes, school superintendent [Schmidt 1987]).

Superintendent Sikes' comment helps illuminate the responsibility that we, as educators, have in the face of America's love affair with violence. There is much to be done. As citizens we can work to help create the political and social pressure necessary to remove violence as a staple of our popular culture. In our own schools and school districts we can review and change policies and procedures that support and encourage hostile competition (academic, social, and athletic) and violence.

Corporal punishment is a good place to begin. Forty-one states still

allow corporal punishment; and if the *New York Times* (Schmidt 1987) is to be believed, this practice has wide support among parents and teachers. Educators mete out corporal punishment three million times a year, with about one in twenty of those instances severe enough to produce bleeding, severe bruises, or other kinds of trauma, according to Irwin A. Human, director of the National Center for the Study of Corporal Punishment at Temple University (Schmidt 1987). Under these circumstances, our profession is not a credible proponent of peaceful conflict resolution. Clearly we must get our own house in order.

Besides opposing violence, educators can propose substantive curricular changes. For example, we teach children little about advocates of peace and nonviolence such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., Leo Tolstoy, Albert Schweitzer, or even, for that matter, Jesus. We can teach more about those historic figures who transcended the strategies of violence. We can put into practice the policies, procedures, and programs that help us and our students imagine and build a world without war either in our hearts, on our playgrounds, or among nations. □

References

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