An Ethics of Engagement:
Shame and the Genesis of Violence

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Violence comes in many forms, under many names. While the violence of armed conflict in the name of state interest effects untold lives, the often less salient cumulative violence of endemic global hunger, poverty, and disease decisively shapes the possibilities of both human dignity and human security. Violence destroys futures. Violence is the force that deforms life. The inspiration behind all forms of violence—whether state driven or person centered--is the irradication of difference. Violence is the endpoint action of intolerance that works to level certain desired privileges perceived to accord to specific groups or persons under conditions of scarcity or lack. On both the level of the interpersonal and the level of the collective, violence valorizes difference as danger. Violence haunts the interpersonal through a hatred of perceived privileged otherness whose immediate consequence, according to the World Health Organization, is the death of 1400 persons a day. Each death and each trauma that ensues radiates through the network of relationships and the fabric of civil society, often breeding chaos and hopelessness and revenge. Both the social body and the corporeal body suffer the depotentiating effects of escalating cycles of violence.

There is a density to violence that transforms a group into a gang, turns a spouse into an enemy, misperceives a child as a nemesis, shapes networks of terror. Interpersonal violence is never abstract. It marks indelibly the lives of all concerned—the victim and their kindred, the perpetrator and theirs, and the ethical economy of a society, indeed the world. Violence sends shock waves through each life it touches. The turbulence of violence reverberates through the networks that link all lives in an expanding implicit culture of interdependence. Violence dismantles the potential for good nascent in each relationship. Violence sacrifices an ethics of care in the name of "might is right" personal myths and cultural ideologies.

Violence feeds off of ideologies of self-interest as it exploits epistemologies of salvation, splitting the world into the saved and the corrupt, forming out of otherness enemies. Inflammatory ideologies shape pseudo-dignities out of myth when lives are subject to degradation and exploitation. A life degraded through the simultaneous forces of exclusion and control is a life that is shamed. Shame turns both personal and group vulnerabilities into a malignancy awaiting opportunities for imperious self-restoration. Shame erodes the linkages that keep a society vibrant—between mother and child, between couples, between generations, between groups, both within and between nations. Shame dismantles the acts of attention that enliven a community's collective sense of responsibility.

Shame is the silent force that frays the bonds of interconnectedness. Shame is both the outcome and instigator of damaged bonds. Relatedness is a variable balance between moments of reciprocal but not necessarily symmetrical recognition. Building recogonitions form bonds of cohesion and solidarity. They shape the self into a continuity between an embraced past and an anticipated future. Shame is what happens when solidarity and cohesion are threatened. Shame is the antithesis to dignity. It is the outcome of a withdrawal of recognition when one is vulnerable, in need, or exposed in desire. Whether based on imagined or actual rupture, shame is the emotional aura associated with the cessation of recognition, turning the familiar and the comfortable into

the strange and the alien. The shamed cast about in isolation, their sense of self deformed under escalating sets of negative self-appraisals—feelings of impotence, of lack, and of deficiency. Cumulative shame becomes intolerable exclusion, fueling, in turn, reactive rage that seeks redemption through revenge.

The shame-rage cycle can fracture families, communities, national agendas, and bilateral relations into brittle rivalries and competing saliencies, into self-aggrandizing ethnic mythologies and agendas of self-interest masked either as necessity or nobility of action. The cycle of shame that incites rage that further fuels shame is mimetic: one act begets another that begets another. Shame is the force that gives violence meaning. It is the vessel in which tyranny is formed. Shame seeds violence--against spouses, against children, against the vulnerable, against those who are different, against those who we believe shamed us.The revenge shaped by shame spreads outward, radiating across groups, forming defensive solidarities and pseudo-unities of "us" against "them," inspiring restitution through domination and greed.

Shame, the saying goes, is a loss of face. The face, said one contemporary philosopher, is a kind of infinity. Face to face is among the most intimate of encounters and among the most vulnerable. Facing the other--seeing and being seen, opening to a gaze that solicits as it receives the gift of presence—there is a mutual vulnerability that grows into empathic inter-relatedness when the face to face also occasions exchange of viewpoints through responsive listening. Listening is a subversive act. It gives pause and in the accruing moments of hesitation the shamed self—otherwise relationally deaf and emotionally blind—is heard and seen. Witness begins to heal the wounded omnipotence of shame. Perceptions of threat occlude this space of listening and in its foreclosure shame grows.

The sister said that she has been under much stress recently and has not, as a result, been to work for a week. It was because, she said, of her brother and how he was treating his fourteen-year old daughter. The daughter wanted to date this boy who the father thought was only up to no good and they—father and daughter--got into a screaming match over who was right and whose will would prevail. Father and daughter live with the grandmother who is 74 and who in turn began to yell at the father and told him to leave the girl alone. This only further inflamed the father who then pushed his mother, knocking her down and fracturing her arm, on his way toward trying to again smack his daughter, to teach her whose boss and who to respect. The sister was up all night, worrying. She feels the effects too of this violence, in her body, through her headaches and her gastric reflux and her depressive hopelessness. Subsequently, the sister found out from her mother that her brother, who doesn't work and can't hold a job, has been pressuring her niece—well, more than pressuring her, the sister finally said. The sister looked away, blushed and with difficulty spoke of how her brother had been hitting his daughter for a long time now and how the daughter one-day felt so bad and desperate that she cut her wrist and wanted to die.

This family in escalating distress exemplifies a certain pattern of development in which shame gives rise to tyrannical control—experiencing another as property or an

extension of a desperate reactive self. Extreme forms of control become a cauldron in which intensification of feeling irrupts into forms of violence—in this instance, as physical abuse and suicidality—collapsing all capacity for empathy or concern or attentive patience. In this family, violence becomes progressively self-replicating—one form gives rise to another, all of which further isolate the family and disconnect its members from larger contexts of meaning, from friendships, from community, and from work. The sister and daughter also exemplify further one of the common empirical findings when multiple forms of abuse occur—the health of individuals is also impaired and not just acutely but chronically. Evidence suggests major disease in adulthood is correlated with the experience of abuse in childhood.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child postulates that states should protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence. Even among the signatories to the convention, corporal punishment of children in the home is legally acceptable in all but 11 countries. This national sanctioning of a domestic culture of abuse—largely directed toward children and their mothers--- perpetuates across generations a legacy of shame, trauma, and historical enmity. The cumulatively punished child is often excluded from becoming an empathic adult citizen, one whose attachments and ethics of responsibility extend beyond survival and self-interest toward the care of others and of communities. Human dignity is grounded in a sustained and inwardly alive sense of attachment, in feeling loved, attended to, and cared about. Secure attachment is the outcome of consistent and engaged care. Civil society is an extension of secure bonds that radiate outward in expanding empathic loci of concern. Fundamental human rights are contingent on a level of ethical development that requires matrices of secure attachment as its possibility.

Speaking on the universal character of human dignity on November 11, 2002 at the British Museum, Sergio Vieira de Mello spoke to the limitation the concept of "civilization" contains when it fails to ground achievements in basic human rights. Too often, he said, there is debate without action on what constitutes a human right while those whose rights have been violated have no difficulty in discerning when such violation has occurred. Civilization is, de Mello added, a term that contains within its practices a habitual collective apathy for those subject to violence, inequality, and injustice, those who have had, he said, "misery upon misery heaped upon them."

No where is this more true than in those countries currently ravaged by the AIDS epidemic. AIDS is a catastrophe of unthinkable proportions. All levels of a society are disassembled under its impact. AIDS is a family disease, potentially exempting no one. AIDS is an example of what in physics is called a strange attractor—it is the nodal point around which chaos organizes. The cycles of chaos spread outward, destabilizing families, markets, educational institutions, and the military. AIDS threatens all levels of security—from the personal to the familial to the civic to the national to the international.

All too often the surround of death does not awaken so much as it numbs. Whether the transmission of the AIDS virus is primarily through heterosexual contact as

it is in Africa or through intravenous drug usage as it is currently in CIS countries (in Ukraine and Russia, for example), the future of subsequent generations is misshapen and fundamentally threatened by what Nelson Mandela has called the worst epidemic in human history. Where the impact of AIDS becomes most disastrous is among those children who are orphaned by this pandemic. In Kenya, in South Africa, in Zimbabwe and in Botswana one out of every two 15 year-old boys are destined to die from AIDS. Of the thirty-four million people living in sub-Sahara Africa with AIDS, eleven million have so far died and one quarter of these deaths have been children. Conservative projections suggest that by 2010 there will be 44 million AIDS orphans. Others suggest that if a full range of factors are included there could be as many as 100 million AIDS orphans by the year 2010.

Misery upon misery heaped upon them. Special Envoy de Mello's vision of civilization as engaged compassion also has implications for how we imagine the emergent global civil society. Perhaps we might think of the global civil order as a space of openness to the multiple identities that embrace a multitude of differences. Global civil society is, among its other meanings, an imaginative space shaping something akin to what one contemporary French thinker, building on a more ancient tradition, calls "cities of refuge," places that address the wounded vulnerability of the exile, of those, who, in families, are caught in cycles of violence and those who, in larger communities, are caught in the conflict of forces that sweep over lives, turning in a near instant a child or a mother or a father (what, in more sanitized language, we call non-combatants) into an exile, subject to the torment and ravage of ethnic and political persecutions, abandoned, too often given over to the destitutions of rage or hopelessness or neglected to disease.

Cities of refuge are places receptive to the dispossessed, places that in often little but discernable ways bring dignity to the shamed. I think here, now, of one young man I recently spoke to, a member of the Dinka tribe from the Sudan. When I think of cities of refuge I think of Daniel Kuol. I think of his ruptured and dispersed family, of his witness at age nine to many shootings and drownings, to many kindred killed (including his five dead siblings and deceased parents), and to those other lost boys Daniel recounted who died from typhoid and from malaria. I think too of his wanderings, his homelessness, his walking hundreds of miles in search of safety and some peace, of his nine years in a Kenyan refugee camp, and of his more recent saving exile to the United States. Yet I also think of the thread of witness beyond loss that allowed him to endure and not shatter under such immensity. It is this thread of witness, this superordinate recognition of self, linking the one who is otherwise lost, to the fabric of connectedness that also gathers around one a certain dignity, a presence that is, in the best sense, the preservation of what it means to partake of that which deMello demarcated as foundational to fundamental human rights.