

What Is Love? What Is Peace?

Is Domestic Chastisement Love? It Is Domestic Violence

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Many words carry diametrically opposed meanings at their core — peace, love, reconciliation, conflict resolution, coexistence — the list is long. In all cases, the same term covers definitions that can be so vastly apart that they exclude each other. Peace, many would say, is to be achieved through dialogical relationships in mutual solidarity in a context of respect for equality in dignity. Yet, there are people who contend that peace is when subordinates endure their subordination in quiet and obedient submission. Who is right? I am on the side of those who would call it violence and not peace when people are so oppressed or so manipulated that they no longer speak up. So, my question, What is love? What is peace in the home?

May I share a personal experience from my practice as a clinical psychologist? I once had a client, a woman, let me call her Eve. She came to me because she was suffering from depression. I spoke to Eve's social worker because I had noticed bruises on her arms and had heard that her neighbours had repeatedly reported scenes of shouting and crying. Eve and her children were severely and regularly beaten by her husband, let us call him Adam. The social worker was afraid that Eve or the children may at some point not survive Adam's beatings and tried to convince Eve to protect herself and her offspring by leaving her unsafe home to seek refuge in sheltered housing, at least in times of crisis. Eve, however, stubbornly undermined the social worker's efforts. She argued, 'Beating me is Adam's way of loving me! I am not a victim. I bring his anger on myself!' For his part, Adam adamantly refused to be labelled a 'perpetrator', accusing the social worker of viciously disturbing the peace of his home.

The social worker told me, 'I do not understand Eve's definition of love! Here she and her children are treated, not like human beings, but like pieces of clay that must transform themselves into the perfect crutch for her husband's notion of male honour, and she goes along with this! She does not see the harm in being erased as a human being in her own right with her own dignity but thinks that becoming a self-effaced little cogwheel in her husband's personality machinery is the essence of love! She offers wonderfully genuine and loving humility to her husband, but it is so wasted!'

Yet, as the social worker observed time and again, 'both, not just Adam but also Eve, believe that their strategy — violent punishment — if only intensified sufficiently, would lead to a happy relationship — even if their experience is that all it brings is tears and bruises'.

In short, what we observe here is a normative fault line. Adam thinks that wife beating is needed to create and maintain peace in his home. He thinks that it is his duty to use violence to preserve a hierarchy where he has control over his wife. For him, peace is when his wife submits to his oppression in quiet subservience. The social worker rejects that view. For him, the husband's strategy produces the opposite of peace. Eve is caught in between. She is

unsure and asks herself, 'Am I at fault? Do I suffer from undue arrogance? Do I fail to know my place? Or is my husband at fault?' Her question is: What is peace? What is love?

Little by little, the social worker tried to introduce a new definition of love and peace to Eve and Adam, one that was in total opposition to theirs. The social worker's definition of love is that love is a meeting of equal hearts and minds in mutual caring, a definition embedded in the human rights ideal of equal dignity for all. This view is the opposite of what Eve and her husband are accustomed to — they connect love and peace with female subservience reinforcing male prowess and honour.

The social worker repeatedly reminded Eve and Adam of the first sentence of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted on 10th December 1948 and that says, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'. This sentence does not say, 'All men are born equal in dignity and rights, and all women unequal'. The social worker explained to Eve that 'domestic chastisement' is no longer legitimate and justified, that it is now being called 'domestic violence', and that Adam is a humiliator who cruelly degrades the dignity of Eve and her children, and she has a right to feel unduly humiliated by Adam and rise up from subordination.

The social worker also talked to Adam and explained to him that he ought to learn that he is no longer justified in arrogating superiority over his wife and children and demand subservient humbleness from them. On the contrary, his task is to step down and learn dignified humility, learn to appreciate his wife and children as fellow human beings, equal in dignity.

Family life is not the only arena where human rights ideals turn old definitions into their opposite. South Africa is an example. In Afrikaans, apartheid means simply segregation, literally 'aparthood', and when it was devised after the trauma of the Boer Wars, it was seen as thoroughly legitimate solution void of any taste of violation, as painful as it was for those at the bottom. It was the global rise of the promise of equality in dignity that gave this pain legitimacy, and it did so to the point that it could drive *conscientisation* — as Paulo Freire would formulate it — namely, the motivation to strive for social change. The anti-apartheid campaign led by African and Asian nations is often hailed as the earliest sustained international human rights struggle alongside decolonisation, 'Human rights were embraced as a fundamental goal of the struggle for racial justice'.