

Letter From Britain

The Dance of Violence

John Hills

I started my *Context* editorial in July, which celebrated our 30th anniversary as a family therapy association, with:

In the wish expressed in The Who's 60's anthem 'My Generation' ('I hope I die before I get old'), reaching 30 was that crucial age of transition when youth gave over to the oblivion of middle-age conformity. The story of 'the Buddha' dates his 29th birthday as his age of transition. In the multiverse of meaning, what for one person represents maturity, for another is decrepitude. AFT has almost reached that bewitching age of transfiguration, so what can we expect?

Days later four Britons aged between 18 and 30, dressed in trainers, jeans and rucksacks — looking as relaxed as a day out together in London might inspire — blew themselves up, killing at least 58 and injuring hundreds. Two weeks later four other young men attempted to do the same, mercifully without success.

The effect on Britain has been as immense as the tsunami at Christmas was on the shoreline of the Bay of Bengal. The aftershocks are slow acting, immense and deep. The mood is one of profound sorrow and incomprehension at the scale of the wanton and abrupt ending of mostly young and culturally diverse life (London's population is probably the most diverse of any city in the world). Bombs do not have prejudice or discrimination.

An early mood of outrage shaded into resignation — for, as a city, London has been as used to 'terrorist' bombings over the past 35 years as any in the world, with the exception of Baghdad — then rapidly turned to an uneasy confusion. It emerged that the perpetrators had grown up and been educated in Britain; that one had been a special-needs teacher who had guided a school party from his school around the houses of parliament; two were fathers; all were described as quiet, kind, sociable and not obtrusively political. How could British culture have produced such disaffection in its citizens?

I do not intend this letter to be an in-depth analysis of the world situation and add yet more words to the endless round of 'expert' opinion-formers ready to spring from the blocks like a sprinter before the starting pistol. But I do have some personal reflections, influenced partly by systemic ideas, and largely because these events, in a world we are helping create, perturb me greatly. I cut the opening paragraph from my *Context* editorial.

There is something in youth, mostly male youth — and I can say this, being at a comfortable distance from it — that is inevitably drawn to the heroic sacrifice and more than a little in love with displaying a disdain for death. Death, as The Who song celebrates, is the lesser evil to growing old disgracefully. The sacrifice of the soldier or martyrdom of the spiritual adherent, each with a different promise of eternal recognition is a powerful narrative of attainment of sacred identity which permeates Western and Christian beliefs as strongly as anywhere.

I do not want to cause offence to the Christian faithful — and I write as a practising Quaker — but many of the meanings the church has promoted about the story of Christ's manner of dying are of a fantastic, far-fetched triumph over enemies and oppressors that nearly borders on a masochistic celebration of victimhood — depicted with beautiful irreverence in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*. Some of the symbolism of crucifixion in these accounts is the achievement of a 'one-up' position of righteousness. To be good is good; to be heroically good and totally self-sacrificing ensures the virtuous a place of unequalled public righteousness. It is a fair deal — give over your life, trade it in for a cause — and an immeasurably better one of eternal life is a reward (every psychologically minded person knows even acts of self-sacrifice have to have some secondary reward!).

Of course, as such, a belief in heroic suicide is dangerous claptrap and leads, in London, Baghdad, Bali, New York, Gaza, Israel and Madrid, to conscienceless destruction of innocent lives. Yet the young are passionate, principled and want the creation of a better world as an inheritance. They are always the first ones required by communities at war to give of their lives.

I make these points because there are those innocent — usually Christians of a fundamentalist persuasion — who point an accusing finger at Islam as if it inherently encourages 'martyrphilia'. Heroic self-sacrifice is a sociological



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phenomenon, from the Japanese kamikaze pilots in the last war, to cult figures like the leaders of the Jonestown community in Guyana who required the mass suicide of their followers — the requirement of true discipleship is in the obedience of dying for the master if required. Requiring such terrible compliance is usually a male-gendered fixation. Life can seem more expendable to men, as they are more peripherally involved in the creation of it.

Terror as a tactic is an integral part of human aggression; and is part of the dance of violence in which the choices are fight, flight or madness. As a political instrument it does exactly what it hopes for and expects: provokes a reaction. Outrageous and deadly, it anticipates a symmetrical response of outrage, as in Bateson's described pattern of schismogenesis. Boozed males looking for a fight, football fans, 'road-ragers', the abusive partner in a coupleship, likewise know the repertoire. It is the syncopation of violence.

Sadly for the world, the president of the United States and his 'advisers', after the horrendous provocation of 11 September, took it as a declaration of war, not an incident of criminal terrorism. They felt justified in the unthinking, imperial reflex of displays of power in launching retaliatory action and declaring a 'war on terror'. This was precisely the reaction Al Qaeda sought.

The solutions—problem circular paradox had escaped them. If they remembered the enforcement of prohibition in the States, it might have told them that if you want to encourage a vice, you go to war against it. Both the Pentagon's intelligence services and those of the British have since released reports making it clear that this strategy has produced more terror, not less. To go to war against a psychological entity like terror is as paradoxically nonsensical as going to war against 'war', or against 'lack of generosity'. There seems only a capacity for narrow linear thinking. Imagine if therapists should take a leaf out of the politician's

book and declare war on anorexia, or suicide, or schizophrenia, or rage?

In Britain, there is a feeling that reaching for the old imperial reflex to 'sort out' cultures we do not understand was something we gave up years ago. Yet, in circular terms, we have been instrumental in engineering this disaster by joining so uncritically with the United States' narrow repertoire of solutions. Young British–Asian friends of my children speak of the attitude of paranoia they have felt for the first time when travelling the London underground, and feel viewed with apprehension and suspicion. Often they are recipients of heavy 'jokes' that assume a link between them and the terrorists. The cancerous nature of fear is working its potential damage on social and cultural relationships; and an innocent Brazilian was shot dead by police on the tube, victim of highly charged anxiety. Otherwise, so far sane and inclusive voices are the dominant ones. Much more 'terror' and that balance could begin to shift.

There is also a shared communal awareness that there are many networks of family and friends spread out in Britain, as in Iraq, desperately grieving, befogged, numb and deprived — not least the families of the four Britons whose innocuous rucksacks were such instruments of devastation. Their families knew little about their intentions. This is a variation of family secrecy of a high and apocalyptic order.

When I was young, I too had a belief I would and should not live long. Since my last 'Letter from Britain' I have become a grandfather (a delightful girl). Two months later my father died, only four weeks before his first granddaughter's wedding. Our family is caught in the bittersweet bite of the human cycle. We are an ordinary family, part of the texture of human relationships which rise and fall; sometimes doing glorious and sometimes inexplicable things, leaving all of us at a loss to have clear answers, yet full of a quiet, painful wondering. ©

Editors and their Sheds: In the Room With Clients

“I've always been unsure of silence: waiting for the fuse wire to meet the explosives ...”

(Gabrielle Lord, *Lethal Factor*, Sydney, Hodder Headline Australia, 2003: 187.)

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