

## **From where does all this violence come?**

by Herbert M. Lefcourt

During this past week several newspapers have reported on a psychiatric study in which boys' aggressiveness was found to be associated with the educational levels of their mothers. Young female school drop outs were the most likely to foster the development of chronic aggressiveness among their male children. The report of these findings followed closely upon the much highlighted coroner's inquest into the death of an infant belonging to one example of this class of young female dropouts, Renee Heikamp. This case involved a young woman who was so woefully unprepared to take care of her infant that she, willfully or not, managed to starve him to death. The community reactions to this assumed infanticide were understandably strong and censorious. The CBC proceeded to interview this young woman at length revealing a tearful and sad individual. This was followed up with stories of two other "street kid- mothers" of young babies. These young mothers appeared to be neglectful, self centered, and markedly uneducated. They professed to love their children, but their daily rituals belied what we most often mean by love. They felt possessive of their babies to be sure, but to be attentive to their psychological needs, to understand how loving parents' must attend to the developing nature of their children if opportunities for growth are to be provided would have to be beyond the ken of these young mother's so deprived of love and attention themselves.

This brings us to the issue of what it means to grow up without love, without being granted the opportunities that are made available to youngsters by loving parents. By opportunities I am not referring simply to an issue of economics. Persons from economically poor homes are not necessarily deprived of opportunities for growth. Abraham Lincoln is a perfect example of how poverty need not result in the form of deprivation that results in aggressiveness. Lincoln's mother, who died when he was 7 or 8, introduced him to the wonders of reading, a surrogate for education that received further encouragement from his step mother. It is obvious from his letters and writings that he felt loved by and, in turn, loved both women who helped him overcome the deprivations that could have resulted from his severe lack of formal education. That he eventually became one of the greatest and wisest of U.S. presidents seems miraculous. Poverty is not necessarily a prescription for aggression and violence. The deprivation of love, attentive caring and nurturing of a child's' interests, talents, and cognitive development seems to have much much worse consequences.

In schools throughout Canada and the U.S., bullying has become a major concern. Suicides and murders of classmates has been attributed to rejection and bullying by aggressive peers. One horrendous case after another surfaces and results in public hand wringing. Pundits are queried as to how such things can happen even among the relatively affluent. How can life be so terrible that youngsters take their own lives? The impact of humiliation, the "saving of face" is often said to be a characteristic of oriental cultures. But, in the notes of youthful suicides within our culture it is that very humiliation, being put upon by peers and made to feel submissive and foolish before others that results in vengeful violence, to others and/or suicide.

What is the source of this violence and humiliation? I would like to suggest that bullying characterizes the bullied, in a similar fashion as child abuse results in the perpetration of further abuse by the formerly abused. Freud spoke of "identification with the aggressor." Through this mechanism the pain of passively suffering humiliation or abuse is undone by actively committing similar painful experiences upon others. It is like mastering a previously onerous challenge. To actively harm others helps to undo the lonely victimization resulting from being harmed oneself.

What are bullies but the neglected, unloved children who have never received the warm nurturance of caring parents. In a documentary about Dr. Henry Morgentaler, the defender of women's right to abortion, his support for abortion was said to have derived from his observations of the behavior of Nazi sympathizers. He attributed the well-documented sadistic behavior of Nazi followers to their having been unwanted, unloved children. His support of abortion was an attempt to prevent the emergence of unwanted children who might just become the sadistic bullies who are ready to join with other like souls in torturing those who surround them. That these adult bullies could be so bestial could only reflect their inexperience with love and the attentive concern of their parents. To be loved, to feel the genuine attentiveness and interest from others would have to serve as an inhibitor of aggressiveness to others.

In our society, those who are in some way handicapped in their development, who can not keep up with others in physical or mental pursuits, are often subjected to rejection, taunted subtly or overtly by their bullying peers or patronized by adults. Humiliation would not be unfamiliar to the handicapped and many of their number could no doubt harbor great resentment toward those who would tease and bully them. It is probably due to such humiliations that lobby groups of handicapped persons have been so adamant in their pursuit of punishment for Robert Latimer. As one who has killed a handicapped person he has almost come to symbolize the bullies and those adults who judge the lives of the handicapped as being less worthy of life. As such, these persons reveal the very fruit of unloved lives, further hatred and aggressiveness toward others. To not be able to listen to the sufferings of others who, in the case of Robert Latimer, are more concerned about agony and deterioration in their loved ones than about disability, reveals the lack of empathy of those who have been victimized. As Mrs. Latimer expressed it to me: "If it was only a problem of disability, we would have taken care of her forever. It was the pain, the insufferable pain."

Among those who are handicapped, however, quite a few have arisen to argue that Robert Latimer acted out of love for his child. Most marked to me was a phone call during one CBC radio program concerned with the Latimer case at the time of the Supreme Court ruling. A woman who was severely handicapped cried as she spoke of the travails of the caregivers to severely handicapped persons. She understood Robert Latimer's plight. Though she herself was, in an albeit less severe state of disability than Latimer's daughter, one of those who might have felt more in common with Tracy, she stood firmly in support of Mr. Latimer. Here was evidence of a well loved person. That she could empathize with the non-handicapped care giver tells us much about the power that love can bestow upon us. Pity all those unwanted and unloved children who become homeless

wanderers, bullies, or those seeking vengeance for their being stigmatized; or in a malignant atmosphere those who will readily become perpetrators of atrocities that leave us feeling hopeless in dealing with our fellow humans.