

Hearing Vulnerability and Fear

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When a baby cries, it is the only way they have to communicate that there is something wrong in their world that needs attention.

With infants, it usually means that either the input or output needs addressing, or they are uncomfortable and need touch and holding. As children grow, their language skills grow with them, and they develop more complex ways to communicate their needs. They start using words, which is helpful for their caregivers, but they are not always able to make themselves understood, and so crying remains a fallback way of communicating.

Parents can sometimes tell what is wrong by the sound of the cry. There is a “tired cry” an “I’m hurt” cry, and a heartbroken cry that says very clearly “I have been wronged by this world and am feeling deeply betrayed.”

Now, understand that I do not have children, so I am merely relating to me what my friends who are parents have told me and what I have observed in their interactions with their kids. I am constantly in awe of parents and their ability to read through the complex tangle of children’s communications to find what is at the root of their upset.

The world of a child can be a very frustrating place. One of the first bit of language that children learn is key to their autonomy. “NO!” they say, “MYSELF!”

And yet, everything in their world is controlled by others. When they sleep and when they wake, what they get for food, where they go, what toys they get to play with, and even when they use the bathroom. For creatures hard-wired to seek independence, this can be a deeply frustrating experience.

And in that frustration, their ability to verbally communicate what it is they are feeling is insufficient to the task, and so their frustration and fury is expressed in their behavior. They stomp their feet, shout, cry, throw tantrums, sometimes becoming destructive or violent. They are MAD and trying to get their needs met. To parents and grandparents accustomed to communicating with adults, this is challenging, frustrating, and even frightening behavior. And it is normal. It is normal for kids to act out and it is normal for adults to be confused and frustrated by that behavior. All normal. Not always fun, but yes, developmentally appropriate for both children and adults.

All behavior is a statement of need.

Every behavior, all words we say, is an attempt to get some need met in our lives.

Think about that for a moment.

All behavior is a statement of need.

When a child acts out, they are trying to assert some kind of control on their environment.

When people raise their voices, they are trying to be heard.

When people riot in the streets, it is a collective scream to draw attention to a deep hurt they are feeling.

Behavior is a statement of need.

Not all needs are equal, though.

Bullies bully to cover their own fear. To avoid being exposed as vulnerable.

People who act out violently against someone who is different from them are trying to preserve their own position of power or influence. White supremacists are, at their very core, terrified that they will be exposed as imperfect, weak, or less than they claim to be. Their efforts to silence those who might expose that reality can be brutal, vicious, and deadly.

Now I say this not to defend or encourage sympathy or tolerance toward white supremacy, or its systemic methods of injustice.

I say this so that we who seek justice have a kind of understanding of the motives of those whose agendas we oppose.

People who are secure in their own value seek to lift others up, to affirm and celebrate them.

People who are insecure in their own value seek to make themselves bigger by making others small.

There is so much going on in that sort of psychological reality that it can be overwhelming to dissect.

It calls on us to recognize the injured and frightened person beneath the white Klansman's hood, and that is a really hard thing to do.

Brenne Brown has done a lot of work on vulnerability in its various forms. Vulnerability in men is significantly different than vulnerability in women, at least in the United States, in part because of the culture of toxic masculinity.

Toxic masculinity is what drives the Current Occupant to play the ultimate tough guy: to decry mask-wearing as a sign of weakness, to be incapable of acknowledging any kind of human vulnerability at all.

Can you imagine the depths of the insecurity necessary to require such thick walls of protection so that it is not exposed? Somewhere deep inside is a child who was never affirmed, never given love, never told he was good enough. His entire life's experiences have been an effort to get others to acknowledge his worth, even as he offers a false picture of that worth in the only measure he understands: material wealth and the power to hurt others.

All behavior is a statement of need.

That does not mean that all behavior is acceptable, merely that it all has an explanation.

Supporters of the Current Occupant share with him a core belief that their way of life is under eminent and severe threat. The rise of multiculturalism is new and threatening to them, and they hold a fear that they will lose their standing in their community.

Fear is the underlying motivation here, and their behavior is a statement about that fear and an effort to assuage it.

As motivators go, fear is one of the most powerful. A scared person can be convinced to do almost anything if they think it will make them safe from whatever threat they seek to avoid.

And fear strikes deep into the hippocampus, the part of the brain most related to our ancient forebears – what some call our “lizard brain.” This is where the adrenal responses happen, and where logic and reason cease to matter.

If a person can stimulate the hippocampus of another to a sufficient level, that person will be unable to hear or see anything but peril and unable to think clearly with reason or logic.

Terror can do that.

Collective terror is powerful stuff.

When one is scared, and I mean *terrified*, afraid that they are about to be deeply harmed, even erased from existence, they will accept any language that speaks of solidarity with others similarly frightened. Language that says “we are all under attack” affirms their fears and gives them a tribe with which to ally themselves for mutual aid and protection.

Fear of being erased strikes deep. Fear of being powerless is similarly visceral.

We live in the United States, where we expect to be affirmed (at least if we are white) and encouraged to succeed. We are told that we can do anything we want, that we can go anywhere we choose. The world is our oyster! This individualism is so deeply ingrained in our culture that we can perceive a call to think about the needs of our communities as an attack on our individual freedoms.

Yet, individual freedoms exist only because the collective community permits it. The idea that the collective community might change and begin to demand that people be accountable for the damage our freedoms cause can feel like an assault.

All behavior is a statement of need.

The thing that the Current Occupant fears most in this world is ridicule. This hints at what his niece Mary Trump has described in recent interviews as a childhood experience of humiliation and cruelty, devoid of nurturing and affirmation and the things a child needs to develop a positive self-image.

So this brings us to an awkward and difficult place: are we capable of holding the president in compassion, aware that his behavior is likely based on wounds so deep that they began probably before he even had words to express himself?

All behavior is a statement of need.

His behavior is that of a deeply, brutally wounded person, whose psyche was twisted and fouled from his very first day.

Now.

I am not saying we excuse his behavior.

I am not saying we even send him a "Get Well" card.

Behavior is behavior and can – and should – be regulated.

Just because you're wounded does not give you license to wound others. We can hold a person accountable for their actions while still having compassion for the crippling sense of vulnerability they seek to hide.

This poor guy – he was taught that being human was to be vulnerable. And to be vulnerable was shameful.

Being vulnerable is to be fully human. As I spoke a few weeks ago when Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died – grief is the price we pay for love, for caring. Pain of loss is the price we pay for the joy of connection.

Unwilling to allow himself to ever feel that kind of pain, he has never allowed himself to love or be loved. What a bitter, hollow place that must be to live.

Can you imagine waking up each morning with that reality in your head and heart?

Do you suppose he is even aware of it? I kind of don't think it is possible that he is aware.

For if he were aware, if he were to let one teeny ray of sunlight into that cold, bitter existence, his entire persona would be revealed to be a huge shell built around a tiny, quivering bean of pain and shame and grief and sorrow. His whole personhood would be revealed for all the world to see as empty and fake, as false as his tan-in-a-bottle and the fictional numbers in his bank accounts.

His followers, I believe, are probably smaller versions of that cavernous façade. They're regular folks who can't bear to think that maybe they're not as good as they thought they were, that maybe they've been behaving badly and will resist any and all efforts to acknowledge their own human frailty.

All behavior is a statement of need.

What needs are people getting addressed by the behavior we see?

Are we able to see past the behavior to the root cause of it?

And what do we do about it?

If someone does not want to see their own stuff, there's not much anyone can do to force the issue. Try telling an alcoholic that they drink too much and see how that works. There are some truths we will run from as far and as hard as we can.

So, what to do?

Well, we can address the behavior. We can call out the behavior and name it, without being cruel to the people trying to get their needs met.

You cannot call me names

You cannot threaten me with violence

You cannot be cruel.

That stuff is not ok.

You can believe what you will, but some behavior is out of line.

Let us remember our universalist roots: we know that all people have inherent worth and dignity. All people are worthy of god's grace and love. That does not mean we must

invite our abusers into our homes, but neither are we allowed to treat them as they treat us.

We are called to live out our values, and our values say we don't get to hate. We don't get to use violence. We don't get to humiliate others.

The thing is, once we see the truth of a person's fear, we can no longer see their hateful behavior as simply evil behavior. We see it as a statement of fear. Fear of being erased. Fear of being made a fool. Fear of being humiliated, laughed at. Fear of being alone, separated from others.

In this month when we contemplate the idea of deep listening, I challenge you this week to listen deeply to our neighbors who hold differing views and see if you can hear the vulnerability hidden beneath the hate.

May we all learn to hear deeply the vulnerability of others.

amen