

the other...

Who is The Other?

Bernhard Kempler, Ph.D.

"In traditional New Guinea society, if a New Guinean happened to encounter an unfamiliar New Guinean while both were away from their respective villages, the two engaged in a long discussion of their relatives, in an attempt to establish some relationship and hence some reason why the two should not attempt to kill each other."

— Jared Diamond,
"Guns, Germs, and Steel"

Each man in this scenario wants to know whether the creature before him is "one of us" or "the other". "One of us" means blood kin, while outside the familial or tribal bond is "the other". And this other is not merely treated with contempt and not invited for dinner, or relegated to a lower social status. He is to be killed, eliminated. It is no wonder that murder is the number one cause of death among males in the New Guinean rain forests.

Perhaps we think that this is to be expected in a "primitive" society. We, on the other hand, live in a "civilized" society that has evolved a broader, more inclusive view of who is granted full status as a fellow human. However, honest reflection will show us that we are far from immune to this tendency to turn other human beings into "the other". In fact, "the other" as the alien, the different, the inferior, the dangerous, the carrier of vices and corruption, is alive and well all over the world, including our own.

I know from personal experience what it is like to be "the other". As a Jewish child born in Poland three years before the beginning of WWII, I started life as an "untermensch", a lower, inferior human, doomed by his "race" to "live a life not worth living". Massive efforts were expended by very serious and determined people to prevent me from living at all. One of the most "advanced" Western countries generated the ideas, the rationale, and the machinery to cleanse the earth of these "others", such as myself.

Perhaps because of this experience I have become interested in the question of how our psyche turns other human beings

into "the other" with such apparent ease. The recent Balkan wars (1992-1996) provide a striking example. I have made four trips to Bosnia as a member of the humanitarian organization, The ArtReach Foundation, based in Atlanta. While our primary purpose is to help heal traumatized children through art and drama therapeutic processes, my personal goal was also to learn how this genie of violence and atrocity had been let out of the bottle.

Asking Bosnians for an explanation has not proved helpful. Most seem to have awakened from a nightmare that they cannot explain. Looking from afar we are tempted to offer such off-the-shelf explanations as "these ethnic groups have hated and fought each others for centuries". But this is not accurate. The three warring groups, the Bosnian Croats, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Muslims belong to the same ethnic group, the Slavs. They speak the same language (Serbo-Croat), and the cultural differences (other than religion, which was not intensively practiced) are minimal. The level of intermarriage was high, and they had lived in peace as neighbors for 50 years under Tito. When the hostilities began many people wondered to which of the three groups they belonged. Yet here they were, neighbor turning against neighbor, murdering and raping innocent civilians, "cleansing" their communities of each other, and targeting especially children and cultural institutions.

Political and historical explanations seem inadequate to account for these enormous outrages. The ease and speed with which they happened suggest to me there must be some intrinsic psychic readiness to demonize others. Under the right circumstances this tendency can be triggered in all of us and can overwhelm our identification with all humans. (It was the massive and relentless slaughter of World War I that convinced Sigmund Freud that there was a universal "death instinct").

The most common conceptualization of how "the other" is constellated is that of projection of an unacknowledged, undeveloped, or repressed aspect of the self. Jung called this the shadow. He considered the integration of the shadow into our conscious person-

Bernhard Kempler, Ph.D., ABPP, is a Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Atlanta.

ality a major moral challenge of individuation. The American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan referred to the shadow concept as the “not-me” personification, which together with the “good-me” and “bad-me” make up the self. The not-me announces itself to our awareness through the experience of “uncanny emotions”, such as awe, horror, loathing, and dread. These emotions are difficult to tolerate and lead, on the physiological level, to an attempt to “expel” something foreign through nausea and vomiting. On the psychological level we project these noxious characteristics onto others.

I have come to believe that “the other” as an archetypal structure is deeply rooted in us. At the most basic level we are gripped by the existential imperative to protect and preserve our biological continuity and integrity. Like all living forms we are potential food and hosts for other organisms. In the course of evolution we developed instinctual mechanisms for protecting ourselves from unwanted and dangerous intruders. But the fundamental problem is that life also depends on permeable boundaries that permit the intake of air, food, water, stimulation, and contact. Thus, we are always in an ambivalent position in relation to other living beings. Friend or foe? Food or poison? Eat or be eaten? Can I make use of this one or will it make destructive use of me? Clear and obvious dangers, such as large animals or other massive natural perils, generate fear, flight, or defensive actions. But small, insidious, even invisible dangers, such as insects, spiders, fleas, viruses give rise to a “creepy, crawly” feeling, a particular kind of revulsion that is in the class of the “uncanny emotions” mentioned above. We want to avoid physical contact with them, we wash and brush ourselves off, we spit, and we shiver.

These physical and emotional reactions are similar to our reactions to “the others” among us. Every anti-Semite has at one time or another said or thought the phrase “dirty Jew”. The lowest caste in India is “the untouchables”. Nothing outraged white racists in the U.S. as much as sexual contact between whites and blacks (“would you want your daughter to marry one?”). And what about swimming pools and drinking fountains? And, of course, “they all smell bad”. A major aim of the war in Bosnia was ethnic “cleansing”. The Nazis likened the Jews to “vermin”. They used the language of disease to describe the feared effect of the Jews on the “pure” Aryan race. These metaphors were elevated to a moral level as the Jews were accused of “corrupting” the German “host” population.

While this source of “the other” archetype is in our most basic biological and evolutionary history, a second source stems from our highest and most defining human qualities. It originates in the peculiarly human condition of living largely in a world of perceptions and meanings created and actively maintained (albeit unconsciously) by ourselves. While most people maintain the fiction that we live in a world of objective realities, deeper reflection shows us that, on the contrary, our experience of the world and of ourselves and others is constructed by our own perceptual, symbolic, and narrative processes. This “constructivist” aspect of human existence was clearly recognized by 19th century writers, such as Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard as well as by the 20th century existentialist philosophers.

As we look at the great diversity of cultures we see that there is a bewildering number of very different ways of living a human life. Some of these ways are so different from our own that they challenge our most central and even “sacred” beliefs about ourselves, our place in the world, about what is good and what is bad, and about purpose and meaning.

The responsibility that accompanies self-creation is terrifying and is experienced with anxiety, dread and “nausea” (Sartre). We deeply wish that our way of life, our sense of identity, our relationship to the universe, could be based in a more absolute, even divinely revealed order. We appeal to religion or the mystique of “nature” or “race” or even patriotic nationalism for a higher authority outside ourselves. We claim superiority for our own culture, religion, race, nationality, etc. We judge others who differ from us as inferior, wrong, “unnatural”, blasphemous, and eventually dangerous and evil—in short, “the other”. (Witness the current arguments against gay marriage, that only marriage between a man and a woman is “natural”, “sacred”, “right”, ordained by God).

Perhaps the persecution of the Jews, the perennial “others” of the Western world, has this basis. Since the absolute, divine truth has been revealed through Jesus Christ, how can the Jews so shamelessly deny this “good news”? Does this not prove their utter depravity? Their very survival despite centuries of hostility and attempts to “save them” makes them a challenge and a danger. Can there be a greater wrong or evil than to stubbornly deny divine truth, the truth that guides “our way of life”? Can this challenge be ignored?

Konrad Lorenz, the great zoologist, noted how human beings attack and kill each other more than do members of any other species. He suggested that to reduce this tendency we needed to “sniff each other more”, that is, to get to know each other better on a close, living basis. This would help us be better aware of our common humanity. And we need to learn not to fear our diversity but to celebrate it as an expression of the divine gift of human freedom and creativity ■



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