

Ya'ir Ronen and David Bargal. 2014. *Hope amidst Destructiveness: A Dialogue*. 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Conference. Center for International Conflict Resolution. Columbia University, New York, December 4-5.

Ya'ir: Hello David. I realized that you vacillated considerably before making up your mind to take part in this year's workshop. Why?

David: Let me share with you (and for your ears only) my personal feelings. I feel disappointed, frustrated, defeated and even hopeless. I devoted many years of my professional life to research and intervention regarding intergroup behavior, prejudice reduction and conflict management in Israel and in the U.S. And what is the outcome? Jews and Arabs go on with their intolerant behavior toward one another, whites continue to discriminate against blacks. Many more instances of injustice, humiliation and man-made atrocities flourish everywhere on the globe.

Shall I yield to the biblical notion that man's nature is wicked by birth? And hence the endless efforts which we among many devoted people in this room are working in vain to change the world into a better place?

Ya'ir: I believe there is potentially positive value in your hesitation. Inspired by Michael White (2011), I believe there is great power underneath the pain of despair, can we unravel it? Can we tap into that energy and transform it to power dedicated to bringing about change? I suggest that vacillation may enrich – that those who hope though aware of prevalent evil and cruelty may be more resilient than those not aware of it, overcoming naiveté strengthens the optimist.

David, You offer one reading of the biblical text, I offer another, an alternative Jewish reading emphasizing free will and the moral challenge to be good, isn't Cain punishment for the act of murder though it was not prohibited indicative of God's faith in man's ability and responsibility to choose good? (see e.g. Katz 2010).

Are you willing to consider Gorbachov's choice for freedom, democracy and disarmament as indicative of innate human goodness? And what of the growing respect for the Dalai Lama's call for compassion in world politics despite his political powerlessness? And what of the ability of the Jewish people, after millennia of suffering, cruelty and oppression, to literally arise from the ashes, from attempts to exterminate it, to create a democracy and struggle for it?

Though man has a genius for both good and evil (Fromm 2010) and though he is innately fallible (Gandhi 1996), we can rationally choose to believe that his inner core is

good and innately trustworthy (Howard and Henderson 1989, Rogers 1989, Kook 2012, Kook 1992)

The ability that some leaders, teachers and therapists have to draw the noblest in man – though not fully explicable – reinforces my faith in human nature.

A strong will goes along with a great capacity for both good and evil (Peck 1998, Kook 2012, Johnson 1987) so it's up to us and the efforts we make to heal ourselves and others.

David: I'm not convinced.

Freud writes that humans like animals generally resolve conflicts of interest through recourse to violence, unlike animals they are also prone to conflicts of opinion. Yet the most casual glance at world history will show an unending series of conflicts between communities. People can be characterized as tradition directed, other directed and the inner directed (Riesman 2001). Most people belong to the first two groups. They have strong libidinal identifications with their religious, ideological and political leaders. The tradition directed are conditioned by their religious or clan's instructions for how to think and behave. The other directed look up to their peers, to popular culture heroes to take after in adopting values and modes of behavior. For the inner directed type ("Ya'ir's type of people"), the source of direction is inner in the sense that it is implanted early in life and is aimed towards creating an autonomous individual who should act as a free reflective and compassionate human being (Riesman 2001).

The essence of the Freudian explanation of human behavior consists of two main instincts – life and death instincts – which operate concurrently. The life instinct strives to affiliate, to be attached and be part of a human collective which demands one to conform to its code of behavior or to its dogma (the state, party, religion, etc.). Hand in hand with the love-life instinct every human interaction carries also destructive, hate, and aggressive motives expressive of the death instinct.

Leaders wisely understand human nature and, in order to preserve the collective loving unity, recognizing the destructive motive, direct it towards an external enemy. The autonomous, moralistic compassionate inner directed people have little chance of winning the battle against the "vox populi" – the tradition and other directed masses who gladly vent their hostility and rage towards the enemy...

Is it not an accurate description of our current global situation? Please Ya'ir, give me an ounce of hope that our personal as well as collective input by this devoted group of people will lead to a better world. Kindly provide me with a vision about human nature which speaks for his or her lofty, kind disposition. Otherwise, I am at risk of losing my faith in people's humanity.

Ya'ir: Indeed we are always tempted to objectify and use the other, we all have animalistic urges but we also have spiritual needs that – once disclosed – can be satisfied through dedicating ourselves to the other (Levinas 1997, Levinas 2004, Twerski 2000).

Destructiveness is the result of choices often made by those exposed to familial abuse coupled by social neglect (Katz 2010, Rogers 1989). Thus healing social neglect may prevent destructiveness.

A preoccupation with egotistical, self-centered motivation deeply embedded in western culture (see Kahane 2010) may explain skepticism as to the good in human nature.

Man's ability to transcend self-centeredness deserves further attention by both academics and helping professionals – I believe that finding the paths to encourage transcendence is a key to greater expression for good in the real world.

David, at certain moments, when I face cruelty and evil, I experience doubt and pain which, I believe, may resonate with your experience.

I try to remind myself that life challenges us to hope despite the destructiveness all around us.

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