

*I am really enthused that we are beginning to unpack violence and get to its sources. Though I might be wrong, I believe few in Indianapolis or Marion County are having this level of discussion about understanding or, may I be so bold to say, “appreciating” violence. Please don’t misunderstand. Take time to read my essay and quotations and consider the importance of our natural need for recognition and validation that when unmet becomes a wayward cry for significance that can have tragic consequences.*

“At the heart of violence lies the wish to show ourselves men with a will. But the complexity of society makes the man lose heart. Nothing he does any longer seems a skill to be proud of in a world where others get the headlines. This is a plausible picture, in despair of which men cheerfully join any private army offering the ambivalent identity of a uniform: **the right to salute and be saluted.**”

~ Jacob Bronowski, *The Face of Violence*

“To strike the disease at its core requires that we deal with the impotence. Ideally, we must find ways of sharing and distributing power so that every person, in whatever realm of your credit society, can feel they need to count, they need to make a difference to his fellows and is not cast out on the dunghill of indifference as a nonperson.”

~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

## **An essay**

### ***Let’s bid farewell to innocence***

“It is always and forever in the struggle: two received somehow our own complicity with evil is a horror not to be borne. [It is] much more reassuring to see the world in terms of totally innocent victims and totally evil instigators of the monstrous violence we see all about. At all costs, never disturb our innocence. But what is of most and some place in any country? Is it not the insane asylum? . . . The perfection of innocence, indeed, is madness.

~ Arthur Miller from “With Respect for Her Agony”

- This essay is composed because I sense an innocence in the intended “Message” of the video we want youth and adults to view/critique as stated in 2018-19 Video Project, Draft. This is an innocence regarding the reality of the normalized matrix of violence faced daily by those we wish to affect. We cannot be innocent to the possibility that negative aggression and violence have existed as a natural potential in the human condition from the beginning.

“The love of violence is the ancient symbolic gesture of man against the constraints of society. Vicious men can exploit the impulse, but it’s a disaster to treat the impulse as vicious. No society is strong that does not acknowledge the protesting man; and no man is human who does not draw strength from the natural animal. Violence is the sphinx by the fireside, and she has a human face.”

~ Jacob Bronowski

- Our message, “You can choose to live as a good, nonviolent person” implies that people who are violent are bad and only good people are nonviolent. The situation is more complicated than that.

“When we revolt it’s not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.”

~ Frantz Fanon

“In the Utopian aim of removing all power and aggression from human behavior, we run the risk of removing self-assertion, self-affirmation, and even the power to be. If it were successful, it would breed a race of docile, passive eunuchs and would lay the groundwork for an explosion in violence that would dwarf all those that have occurred so far. We can’t deny the essence of ourselves: the self-affirmation and self-assertion making us persons and without which we have no reason for living. What we have failed to see is that aggression has been, on the positive side, in the service of those values of life that would if discarded, leave us bereft indeed.”

~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A search for the sources of violence*

- The intent of the Draft's "Message" avoids the reality of the existential situations certain persons experience. It avoids the reality of what I refer to as the "aggressive impulse." To me this is an innate behavior and a means of survival that must be respected. Being an impulse, this action bypasses the "reasoning" part of the brain (indeed that part with which we are trying to reason) and the person strikes out at another when threatened--perceived or real.

"Violence is a uniting of the self in action. J. P. Sartre writes that violence is creating the self. It is an organizing of one's powers to prove one's power, to establish the worth of the self. It is a risky all, a committing all, and asserting all. But it unites the different elements in the self, omitting rationality. This is why I have said above that uniting of the self is done on a level that bypasses reason."

~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

- Our project's predicament is: How can we reason with those whose violent behavior by nature bypasses reason? Consequently, in many situations, they may not understand themselves what happened and why!
- For some, violence is a viable survival strategy, "...and those coming in to my neighborhood talking about non-violence are trying to get me killed!" We take the unnecessary chance that we'll be seen as well-meaning but naïve "do-gooders" who really don't understand the "fact of violence" in certain urban areas, and are just reacting to peer pressure from other do-gooders.

"I'm from the streets  
 where the hood could swallow a man,  
 bullets 'll follow a man.  
 There's so much coke  
 that you could run the slalom,  
 And cops comb the shit top to bottom  
 They say that we are prone to violence,  
 but it's home sweet home  
 Where personalities clash  
 and chrome meets chrome."

~ Jay Z, "U Don't Know"

- We can't forget why Jay Z's rhyme makes sense to us:

"Violence is as American as cherry pie."

~ H. "Rap" Brown, July 1967

"The US has approximately 5% of the world's population and 42% of civilian gun ownership."

~ Democratic N.C. Rep. Pricey Harrison on February 15, 2018

- We also can't forget we are speaking to those who themselves are not likely to be as innocent as I am suggesting we are. They have acted violently or seen others do violent acts and so know that violence is latent in all of us.

"It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of non-violence to cover impotence."

~ Mahatma Gandhi

"Violence isn't always evil. What's evil is the infatuation with violence."

~ Singer Jim Morrison of the rock band "The Doors"

- We have to make sure our innocence does not actually enable a normalization of the cycle of violence in which people can get caught up--a naiveté that will be easily recognized by those who know violence intimately and thus will discredit our video product because we don't really know what we're talking about...not like they do.

"We use violence to show our love."

~ A remark by a South African youth when asked, "Why is there so much violence in your Township?"

- As you may know, from my perspective, the issue is not violence, it is indifference/apathy—the stage before violence. *I don't want to stop the violence; I want to stop the indifference—an indifference that comes from feelings of powerlessness.*

"The Church is in the world, it is part of the suffering in the world, and though Christ condemned the disciple who struck off the ear of the high priest's servant, our hearts go out in sympathy to all who are moved to violence by the suffering of others. The Church condemns violence, but it condemns indifference more harshly. Violence can be the expression of love, indifference never. One is an imperfection of charity, the other the perfection of egoism." ~ Graham Greene, *The Comedians*

"Violence and suffering are critical in a democratic society, in heightening antipathy or violations of democratic values and in heightening sympathy for the victims of such violations."

~ Silvan Tomkins from "The constructive role of violence and suffering"

- We may not appreciate the "**fact of violence**" because of our distrust of power and powerful people. I suspect why some of us can feel uncomfortable with power and its negative connotations--that power is not good, that "power corrupts," that bad people want and use power, and good people do not. This fosters the stereotype that non-violent people are passive. However, my arguments assert that nice people, persons who are non-violent can embrace power, can act powerfully, can be aggressive.

"Wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power."

~ Friedrich Nietzsche

"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

~ Frederick Douglas

"Power is the birthright of every human being. It is the source of his self-esteem and the root of his conviction that he is interpersonally significant. Whether a person is black or a woman or a convict or a patient in a mental hospital...the problem is roughly the same--to enable the individual to feel that he will be counted, that he has a viable function, that 'attention will be paid.' And in and in and 3I will speak of external opportunities for men to be individuals--the last 200 years of inventions have steadily liberated human beings. I speak rather of the inward conviction of significance, the individual's psychological and spiritual valuing by himself and by his fellows."

~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

"We cannot avoid

Using power,

Cannot escape the compulsion

To afflict the world,

So let us, cautious in diction

And mighty in contradiction,

Love powerfully."

~ Martin Buber "Love and power"

- Ecstasy and violence

"One of the reasons we have made so little progress in our mitigating of violence is that we have determinedly overlook the elements in it that are attractive, alluring, and fascinating. We deny with our minds the 'secret love of violence,' which is present in all of us in some form... By repressing the awareness of the fact of violence, we can this secretly give ourselves over to the enjoyment of it. This seems to be a necessary human defense against the deeper emotional applications, we would have faced if we were to live the reality of the 'secret love.'"

~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

"That violence is often associated with ecstatic experiences is seen in our using the same phrase for both. We say a person is 'beside himself' with rage; he is 'possessed' by power. There also occurs a self transcendence in violence, which is like the self transcendence in ecstatic experiences. The total absorption, furthermore, that is present in violence is also present in ecstasy."

~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

- We have to look into the anatomy of violence and its psycho-neurological aspects.

“Adrenaline is poured into [our] bloodstream, [our] blood pressure rises to give [our] muscles more strength, [our] heartbeat becomes more rapid--all of which prepares [us] to fight the offending person or to flee out of range. The ‘flight’ is what occurs in anxiety and fear; the ‘fight’ is aggression and violence. With these psychological changes, the experience of violence gives great energy to the person. [We feel] a kind of transcendent power that [we] did not realize [we] had; and [we] may...fight much more effectively in this mood. This fact can act like a drug, tempting [us] person to give [ourselves] over and over again to violence.” ~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

“In its typical and simple form, violence is an eruption of pent up passion. When a person (or group of people) has been denied over a period of time what he feels are legitimate rights, when he is continuously working with feelings of impotence, which corrode any remaining self-esteem, violence is the predictable in result. Violence is an explosion of the drive to destroy that which is interpreted as a barrier to one’s self-esteem, movement, and growth.” ~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

Specifically, this may help us see why a person is possessed **by** violence rather than possessing **it**.

- “Violence is the expression of impotence.” ~ Bronowski, *The Face of Violence*

“Violence is a symptom. The disease is variously powerlessness, insignificance, and justice--in short, a conviction that I am less than human, and I am homeless in the world. For a convenient shorthand, I call the disease impotence, fully recognizing that violence also requires for its triggering some promise, a despair combined with the hope that conditions cannot be better by one’s own pain or death.” ~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

- Let us contemplate these 2 quotes that will help us understand Bronowski:

“Power corrupts, but so does powerlessness.” ~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

“A sense of helplessness and hopelessness led me to consider violence as a solution.”  
~ a high school student who was bullied by his peers

- Let me conclude this essay with one more quote from Rollo May:

“We are going to have upheavals of violence for as long as experiences of significance are denied people. Everyone has a need for some sense of significance; and if we can’t make that possible, or even probable, in our society, it will be obtained in destructive ways. The challenge before us is to find ways that people can achieve significant and recognition so that destructive violence will not be necessary.”

- Let’s begin to lose our innocence by acknowledging what Elton B. McNeil explains in his essay “Violence Today”

“Murder rarely fits the stereotype of an unsuspecting, helpless, passive victims stalked by a cold, calculating killer. Most homicides are preceded by angry quarrels in which the victim place and active part in bringing about their own death.” ~ Rollo May, *Power and Innocence*

*We must continue to analyze violence by debating the fact of violence and revealing its sources. I say this because I am not really sure we are ready to understand enough so that we can produce a video that will be transformational--a transformation that I believe can only come when we are able to communicate with those we are trying to affect and show each one we realize what’s going on in their hearts and minds so that they know we appreciate their situation and they can declare: “I have found someone who understands me, and now I understand myself and I am transformed.”*

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