ONE

On Cruelty and Social Change

My Context, Briefly

Why, I wondered as a child, are people so cruel to each other? On the playground, in the classroom, in families, in the media (the Second World War was under way) and elsewhere, the question asserted itself almost daily.

Although never an activist, my mother often exclaimed as she read an account of brutality in the newspaper, "Why do people *act* that way!" or "That's *terrible*!" or "It isn't *right* that people do things like that!" Those outcries seared themselves into how I viewed the world and felt about it.

Neither Mother nor Dad presented their values didactically to my older brother Gerry and me; we simply witnessed them in their behavior and talk. The decency of both my parents, my mother's exasperation with cruelty, and my father's steadfastness and sense of humor have been among the strongest influences of my life.

By the time I entered Antioch College, I had vague desires to change society. I thought I should run for office but decided that a lower-middle-class Jew from Omaha would not get very far in politics. To raise money, I'd have to compromise myself too much. Maybe, I thought, it would be possible to learn through sociological inquiry how society works and how to take part in transforming it. Prof. Everett K. Wilson helped me learn that society can be studied systematically. When my adviser, Prof. Nolan Miller, suggested I might make a good college teacher, I was flabbergasted and flattered. Five

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minutes later I made up my mind: I would get a Ph.D. in sociology, teach, write, and be an activist. By searching for underlying principles and dynamics, I would try to understand how power and suffering are organized, how they proceed, and how they might be changed.

I went to graduate school at Harvard University, where I was introduced to the work of Karl Marx by Prof. Barrington Moore Jr. and that of Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson by Prof. Erikson himself. I discovered rather early that these would be the thinkers who would preoccupy me for a very long time, but I did not know then exactly what I was looking for.

It took two more decades after graduate school to reformulate my boyhood question about cruelty into more elaborate ones: Why do people dominate each other? What are sources of unnecessary human suffering and how can it be reduced? How can satisfaction—human happiness—be increased?

In the courses I teach, I have spent years trying to explore what I see Marx and Freud as having in common—the project of identifying sources of unnecessary human suffering and figuring out how to reduce it. I have spent years trying to understand why social class, gender, race, religion, and other divisions and antagonisms persist in societies, and how complex early experiences in families shape people's senses of who they are, what they can try, what to fear, what to love, how to fulfill or not fulfill themselves in human relationships, nature, work, art, society. I have kept teaching about these matters, probing, and exploring, but only about a decade ago did I begin to figure out the insight I sought, and what to do with it.

My Insight, Briefly

In the 1980s, I turned to the nuclear threat as a primary area of concern in teaching, activism, and writing,[1] and I involved myself in Middle East political work, about which I also wrote and taught. In the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, I saw something similar to the U.S.-Soviet confrontation: each nation appeared fearful of the other and determined to defend itself.

As I pondered these two conflicts for years, and countless others like them, I found an idea gradually taking form: people not only have issues with each other; they *find* ways to oppose each other in virtually all contexts. In 1987–88, a sabbatical year in Israel brought me face-to-face with the first year of the *intifada*, the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The drama of daily confrontations and Israeli reactions to them, from strong opposition to Palestinian nationalism to a proliferation of movements against the occupation, sharpened the issues for me and provoked a more systematic formulation of my insight. I came to articulate what

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I see as tension between tendencies to oppose, or adversarialism, and tendencies to connect, or mutuality.

I decided to call these two forms of behavior *paradigms*. A paradigm is a model, an explanation of complex phenomena that allows people to grasp hold of them in a full way. There are, for example, two competing paradigms in U.S. society about origins of human beings. The biblical one assumes a God who created Adam and Eve on the sixth day after setting the universe in motion. Although biblical explanations can be taken as extraordinary literature and exquisite metaphors, those who hold to the paradigm of creationism believe the bible narrative is literally true. In the alternative paradigm, scientific techniques are used to calculate the age of the universe and deduce the ways in which species, including humans, evolved from simpler forms of life. In Western medicine, the leading paradigm focuses on diseased parts of the body or psyche as objects to be treated by way of medicines, operations, and other objective procedures. It contrasts with an alternative paradigm of holism, where attention is on the full human, whose mind, soul, and body interact in complex ways.

In this book I suggest that the assumption that human life is based on conflicts of interest, wars, and the opposition of people to each other and to nature exists as a model, a framework, a paradigm that supplies meaning and orientation to the world. An alternative paradigm sees cooperation, caring, nurturing, and loving as equally viable ways of organizing relationships of humans to each other and to nature.

This is not to pose mutuality as good and adversarialism as bad. Both must be honored as expressing real parts of the self and configured differently in different historical moments. So far in history, adversarialism appears unavoidable in many situations and is often experienced as positive in contexts where it appears not especially harmful. The case for appropriate adversarialism can perhaps be made, although with conscious effort it is possible to reduce its deleterious effects. Correspondingly, mutuality can be fulfilling and liberating; it can also be inauthentic and thus lose its capability for bringing about desirable consequences.

The idea of mutuality can be raised now as attractive and attainable because mutuality is becoming more familiar, more routine, in the world. Human rights, one of its political manifestations, has in the last two decades become a world issue. Considerateness and empathy in child rearing have been forcefully promoted by many people concerned with raising healthy, unafraid, forthright children. If humans are to survive the environmental devastation common in our current stage of industrialization, nature will have to—and it already is in some quarters—be reconceived from nuisance or enemy to an integral part of us with which to live in the greatest harmony possible. The lethality of war and the waste of resources spent on waging and preparing for it, as well as lives taken and environment despoiled, all express

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adversarialism at its most devastating and call to mind an alternative vision that fits into what I am calling mutuality.

I see the shifting of relative emphasis from adversarialism to mutuality as essential to the survival of our species, of other species, of nature itself. I am not predicting that in the face of possible human-engineered extinction, we will opt for life; I am only suggesting that with the proper analysis and appropriate behaviors that follow from it, we can find our way to renouncing the predominance of adversarial ways and creating a fully elaborated mutuality as an essential piece of a survival strategy.

Individuals cannot help but reflect currents in their society. Once I named adversarialism and mutuality in my understanding of the world and myself, I began working on this book and also on my own struggles with both these modes of relating. As I worked on this idea of two contrasting paradigms, I realized that at one level I was examining society and history and at another, I was working on some troublesome issues in myself. With much trepidation and backsliding, I looked into my personal inclinations toward adversarialism and mutuality as well as what they are historically and sociologically.

My Methods

Films

I illustrate many of my points, particularly on the nature of rituals by which people maintain adversary distance or connect with others, by way of movie metaphors. In our culture, film is more than entertainment; it is also shared ritual and collective dreaming. It is a form of mythologizing appropriate to a dispersed, heterogeneous, officially secular, high-tech society. Film metaphors arise in conversation. Their ritual implications are dramatically illustrated, for example, by the highly stylized ways in which many young filmgoers have made a cult of the film and their behavior in repeated viewings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.*

Films show paradigmatic heroes, villains, role models, and alter egos. Just as Shakespeare and the Bible advance powerful images of Hamlet and indecision, Lady Macbeth and ambition, Solomonic decisions, prophetic wrath, and messianic hopes, so do movies like *High Noon*, *Rambo*, and *Thelma and Louise* present compelling metaphors for deep tensions, conflicts, and confusions. Like religion and art, and partaking perhaps of both, cinema offers cultural materials that illuminate and clarify our condition.

Rituals

Brief discussions of *adversary rituals* are woven throughout my book. I use this term to refer to practices like blaming, hurting, and avenging—mundane,

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familiar behaviors by which people oppose each other. I had thought of calling these actions routines but decided on rituals to underscore what I see as the stereotyped, unreflective, familiar, comfortable ways in which adversarialism is reinforced in everyday life. My listing could also include stereotyping, ridiculing, using sarcasm, judging, interrupting, ordering, threatening, preaching, interpreting, advising, and many, many more. There are probably countless ways by which tendencies to oppose become repeated in highly stylized patterns.

Scholarship, Observation, the Classroom, and Myself

I have proceeded in this study by way of introspection and scholarly investigation as well as observation, some of it as participant, some of it not. I see my social observations as metaphors for certain inner observations, and vice versa. Many of my concerns and insights grow from years of social activism and also years of struggle to come to terms with personal conflicts and their ramifications. I have worked in social movements for change of parts of society that have puzzled and troubled me, and I have worked with dreams and other parts of myself that have troubled and puzzled me. The latter method is unorthodox for sociology, as it has involved systematic conversations with people whose profession is to help guide and understand the fruits of introspection.

As part of my ongoing grappling with my own compulsive adversary tendencies, and in my effort to free up more of those parts I call mutualistic, I have asked a few colleagues, friends, and students to read drafts of this book critically. With many of these people I have over the years explored inner issues, outer ones, and the relationship between the two.

Some of my deepest illuminations come from what is for me a major area of praxis, the classroom. I have found the joys of teaching to include the chance to try out insights and ideas with enthusiastic people new to examining them. As with those of other readers, my students' hesitations, qualms, and recommendations have been as important as their interest and support of the project. Partly through and with them, I have more and more felt the writing process taking on mutuality characteristics, as I thrilled to finding people excited about my ideas contributing their insights and understanding for extending, rethinking, and rewriting.

This book grows out of continuing struggles to rein in and move beyond my adversary tendencies when they are destructive of others and myself and to be freer in enjoying mutuality. The book is itself a major piece of the struggle. And it goes on.

Naming the Paradigms

It was difficult to find adequate names for the two modes of behavior that I describe throughout the book. For one, I initially played with the term

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"opposition paradigm" until my friend and colleague Richard Onorato suggested "adversary paradigm," which I think is a more felicitous and accurate choice.

I thought I would call the complement to the adversary paradigm the "cooperation paradigm," but that lacks a sense of interaction and relationship I was seeking. After two years, I realized I already knew the term I needed: *mutuality*, central in the work of Erik Erikson.

Struggling with the Paradigms

I had trouble getting to the ideas in this book, and I struggled for years with trying to make them clear, accepting the possibility of their accuracy, and understanding their complex places in my life. I can imagine other people engaging in similar struggles. If readers find some of the ideas threatening, if they feel uncomfortable questioning some of their assumptions about the world and their place in it, I sympathize with their discomfort. I continue to grapple with my own version of this.

People can respond to new ideas the way they often react to new buildings: with some combination of apprehension, alarm, and scorn for disturbance of the familiar landscape. I have rarely met a building new to me in places I know, that was not unwelcome at first. I hope that readers will be in touch with their misgivings about what I claim in these pages and will approach the ideas playfully. I hope they will try the ideas on, roll them around in their minds and mouths, touch them and taste them for a while and see what they feel like if they let them become increasingly familiar. I hope they will grant that these ideas may have something useful in them and that they will think of Coleridge's advice about poetry: approach it with a "willing suspension of disbelief."

It might be illuminating to imagine these ideas not as opponents to be overcome but as partners in figuring out the great challenges of the coming turn of the century and millennium. I hope that readers will consider these ideas and reconsider them, amend them, supplement them, criticize them constructively while keeping in mind the question, How can we do more than we have done to reduce human suffering and enhance human fulfillment?

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