

Building Peace
March 29,2009

Although most of us may well agree with Carl Scovel's assumptions on forgiveness, that it's really about our own liberation from harboring anger and rage and grudges thereby freeing us to be the wonderful folks we really are. But Scovel wrote that piece before AIG tested our mettle, and the populist rage against bonuses and executive salaries caused most Americans to foam at the mouth as rabid wolves looking for blood revenge.

I think AIG qualifies as a new emotional experience heretofore uncharted by any psychotherapist, theologian, or anthropologist. But fifty million dollars have already been returned by repentant executives which proves Carl Scovel, right: Some offenders choose to be penitent and others do not. Same old story: Some get it some don't, but what about us? We can either stoke the anger or free ourselves from the hurt. Let me give you some examples of how Americans dealt with their anger aimed at AIG and their fantasies that followed. These are all true:

Edward Liddy chief executive of AIG read letters to Congress a week ago last Wednesday in which company employees were threatened by death with piano wire. Senator Charles Grassley, Republican of Iowa, suggested bonus recipients commit suicide. Letters to the editor in the New York Times recommended the guillotine for these high-flying shameless executives. There's something a little scary about all this rage.

The fitness manager of a health club in Manhattan said there had been a rush of new attendees at boxing classes. Punching a human-shaped rubber dummy is especially popular.

But on the plus side of the ledger, anger and stress management classes have increased in huge proportions. More spirituality is being called for, and yoga classes are up 30%. Even I am part of that new statistic...and it feels good. When I unravel my body from its unaccustomed pretzel-shape contortion, all I think about is ibuprophane and I could care less about my retirement fund or Bernie Maydoff or the executives at AIG.

Rabbi Levi Brackman, co-author of *Jewish Wisdom for Business Success*, points out that we need to realize that self worth is separate from net worth, and that the more important things in life are connection with family, friends, and the spirit.

Of course deep down we know that to be true, once we finish with our guillotine fantasies. Incidentally, historians on the French Revolution claim that even public execution of the greedy and mindless and arrogant upper class only brought "temporary" relief to the justifiably angry mob and their public outrage. There really is no "remedy" when justice is violated. And you might think that chopping off a

head may provide a solution, but it's only a quick fix with no lasting resolution. (We should keep that in mind).

I want to try this morning to get a better sense of how human beings just "lose it," and violence becomes the preferred modus operandi to say – a calm and rational discussion when differences set us apart from our neighbor. What gets violated before we begin to contemplate inflicting others with pain, whether we fantasize about it or actually follow through?

Any beginner's book on ethics will spell out immediately that rightness or wrongness has no meaning in the abstract. They apply only in human activity. And these activities vary greatly. For example, there's a right way and wrong way to swing a golf club, bake a cake or fly an airplane. And the rightness or wrongness is determined by what is the purpose and goals of these activities. If you want to be effective, you do things right, and by doing things wrong, you are not very effective.

Assuming you want to be an effective golfer and actually hit the golf ball so it will travel for a good distance, or end up with an edible cake, or a plane that can land safely, there are certain prescribed rules of right and wrong ways of going about the task.

In the field of ethics, we come to understand that there are also right and wrong ways of treating people. Like swinging a golf club where there are specific do's and don'ts, there are right and wrong ways of treating people. Most of this has to do with mitigating suffering and injustice.

The debate in the field of morality...the differences that are argued among various positions deal quite simply with the age-old, biblical question of how much am I obligated to mitigate the pain of others, what is my responsibility, am I my brother's keeper, and who's to say what "wrong" really means when it entails dealing with people effectively?

I think many of us in America have come to learn most recently in this economic debacle that effective and ineffective ways of human behavior can be traced to putting self-interest ahead of any obligation to others. AIG frames the question perfectly: Are there moral demands, especially in these economic hard times, that require us to resist pursuing personal self interests because it's as wrong as putting with a 9-iron? Or, if there are right and wrong ways to treat people, then doesn't the "right way" resemble selflessness so that others may be treated more justly.

We all felt rage against AIG (from Obama to Geitner to congress to the Little Old Lady from Pasadena) because in the rule book of do's and don'ts in human relations, they hit every "don't" ever conceived. But we need to remember that rage is not unique to AIG. Rage is a pretty common human emotion. And the impulse towards violence has been part of the human make-up for quite sometime. We just need to recall one of the very first stories in the Hebrew texts dealing with Cain and Abel.

Cain was a farmer and his brother Abel was a shepherd. We might say that Cain followed the agri-technology of his time. Not too sophisticated, but it was believed that by placing some crops on the altar and sacrificing them to God you would end up with a pretty good yield. But Cain's seeds did not produce well.

On the other hand Abel, the shepherd, had a lot of baby lambs just by doing what came naturally. So the ultimate question was undoubtedly raised for the first time with Cain asking: "Is this fair?" God was treating his brother "rightly" but not him. An innate sense of justice was being tested. Cain is getting pretty upset and God notices that as he's walking in the garden and says to Cain, "Careful, you're getting pretty angry. Let's not do anything foolish like taking out the piano wire or sharpening the blade of the guillotine.

However, the injustice is too great for Cain to bear. His own poor fortunes in the shadow of his brother's good fortunes drives Cain to make some poor decisions. And so one day when the two brothers were out in the field, Cain "rose up against his brother and slew him."

I guess a little time passes before God says to Cain, "where is your brother?" and Cain replied: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper.?" Three thousand years later I still don't think we have a satisfactory answer to that.

So there's a right way and a wrong way to swing a golf club. I think the story of Cain and Abel was to suggest to all who would listen, that there's a right way and a wrong way when it comes to human interactions. There is a sense of justice that may be violated...you may feel rage churning within you...but violence is not the "right" response. A primitive story...an eternal truth.

Although we'll never find the word "interdependence" in the Bible, I think that's the concept that drives most of biblical wisdom. We are all fundamentally interrelated and interconnected and we need each other. We may want to satisfy our own needs and impulses, but our behavior has a rippling impact on others. It's always about weighing short-term interests against long-term consequences. Satisfying my own interests always proves to be short-term. Working towards the public good proves over and over again to be the "right" and "effective" way of treating people.

The farmer and the shepherd are interdependent. Has anything really changed? In the global meltdown over the past five months we have painfully learned the full extent of our interdependency around the world, and it staggers the imagination. We are tied to each other from Mexico to Iceland to India to Saudi Arabia to China. ... We are tied to every blooming piece of junk dumped in the ocean and our rivers and our air. We are kin with every conceivable ecosystem.

The sociologist, Robert Bellah, asks most poignantly: How can we give interdependence – which is so obvious in everything we do – a moral meaning?

Interdependence without moral meaning is terrifying. We don't like the fact that we depend on a lot of other people, or that what people do in other parts of the world can have effects on our lives.

But aren't those the terms of our existence upon this planet? In a global economy, especially the ante is raised with regard to our responsibility to others.

In another biblical story, we recall how Jacob robbed his brother Esau out of his birthright and a blessing by tricking their blind father. Once again we learn early on in the Book of Genesis that there really is a right way and a wrong way in treating people. Esau, railing from the injustice of what is rightfully his, flies into a rage and Jacob, realizing the anger felt by his brother, gets out of town. After many years and many wives and children, God says to Jacob: Go see your brother Esau but soften him up first by sending him some presents. Start with some peacemaking initiatives. And Jacob did, sending his brother camels and sheep. Jacob found favor in Esau's eyes, and the brothers were reconciled.

One last story of biblical rage in Genesis: Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was by far the favorite son of 12 brothers and the boys didn't think this was "fair." So they sold Joseph into slavery, and down to Egypt he went. When the father asked: Where's your brother Joseph...hasn't that question been asked before...the boys say Joseph was mauled by an animal and is gone.

Of course Joseph rises in stature and becomes a viceroy for the pharaoh down in Egypt. When famine hits Israel, the brothers journey to Egypt to get grain. They don't recognize Joseph, but he has his fun with them because he knows precisely who they are. Finally, when Joseph realized their remorse, they all weep and become a united family again through forgiveness and reconciliation.

How do we begin to recognize that we are not all sovereign individuals? We are much more tightly interrelated than we would like to believe. Our interdependence must be placed in the context of moral meaning because there are right ways and wrong ways in treating people. And being so interconnected, we only do harm by not attending the public good.

The stories in Genesis are quick to reveal the inherent rage that comes with being human. A sense of what is right has been violated and so we just blow up. But it matters to God that the road to peace involves placing your rage in check and begin talking with our brother.

Before Cain slew Abel the two brothers met in a field. They were supposed to talk things over, according to God's wishes, but it never came to pass. Death was the result. Esau was certain that his brother was going to kill him as an act of revenge. But he heard God say to send a little gift and then go talk to your brother. And there was peace. And it was forgiveness in the story of Joseph that made peace possible.

I can't help but be reminded when during the last presidential campaign one of the big issues raised was whether or not the United States should even consider talks with its enemies, specifically Iran. John McCain said, "No." Hilary Clinton said, "No." We should not give them that dignity. Barack Obama said, "Of course."

In an interconnected world, how could it be otherwise? If we are our brother's keeper, how could it be otherwise? If we want to serve the public good, how could it be otherwise? And don't the stories from the very beginning speak of a God who says there can't be peace unless we talk to one another. And it might not be such a bad idea to send gifts in making peace initiatives.

We may think our world is a lot more complicated today than it was in antiquity, and perhaps it is. But the human emotions of rage and revenge have always been found in our tool chest. Right ways and wrong ways of treating people have always constituted a dilemma. And the need to discuss and forgive and bring peace has always been heralded as the sacred path to a better world.

In this fragile world, in these times of great woe, may we and the people of the world...may our nation and the nations of the world...move towards greater reconciliation because the answer to the million dollar biblical question is: Yes. We are our brother's keeper.