

LET'S THINK TOGETHER 2007

NO 1

LIVING GENTLY IN A VIOLENT WORLD

Suggested reading: Philippians 4: 4-9

Throughout last year we were witnesses to so much violence both in our country and all over the world. The year ended with the gruesome pictures of the hanging of the former Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, flashing across our TV screens again and again. This was violence at its worst. At some point, we could turn it off and heave a sigh of relief that such violence does not touch us.

Violence! Violence is insidious. How we fear it! How we hope that it will not touch us or those we love. All of us are hurt by some form of violence in our daily lives. The violence we face may not be brutal or physical; it may not be on our streets; or with bombs or guns; but nevertheless it is there. We find it lurking in our everyday relationships, attitudes to each other, words, thoughts, looks and feelings.

Then there is the violence we encounter through Nature, who red in tooth and claw, batters us frequently. The violence of disease and sickness pursues us just as stealthily and silently as an assailant with a knife. The violence caused by poverty and today's corporate global economy affects more people than before. We still live in a patriarchal society in which the violence of inequality, and chauvinistic domination over family life are inflicted daily on so many women in many ways. And if all of this is not enough, the violence of ancient caste-based divisions continues to scar and destroy the fabric of life of a new generation.

Fifty years ago, the way we lived was different and some forms of violence were less. Today, our way of life in general is more violent than before as we live in a hurried, selfish, greedy society, with little respect for others. We demand more, tolerate less, are busier, angrier, have less time for family and friends and are judgmental. To get what we want, when we want it, we are often harsh, unfeeling and violent in words or action. Just think of being elbowed, glared at, silenced, ignored, put down, over- ridden, slapped or frozen with a look.

Many of us live and work in atmospheres of insensitivity, harshness and unkindness. In such an atmosphere, we long for gentleness in our lives. Our souls cry out for attention, care, affection, softness, compassion, sensitivity, warmth.....all facets of gentleness. Most people equate gentleness with weakness. When we think of gentleness we think of baby lambs, doe-eyed deer and old-fashioned grandmothers.....popular images of weakness. But those who have experienced gentleness would readily admit that this is not so.

Monty Roberts grew up in a horse ranch where wild horses were broken and trained. As a child he observed the roughness and violence in the traditional way of breaking them and was sure that there had to be another way. One day, while out in the mountains, he saw a group of wild horses and slowly walked towards them. Using soft, loving words and a quiet, gentle tone, he gained the confidence of one the horses. To his amazement, he was able to "talk" to a wild mustang and within 30 minutes he had a saddle on him and was riding. Monty said that the secret of breaking horses was gentleness, not brute strength. So too it is with people.

Why is it so important for us to live gently in a violent world? As we look around us, we see that a violent way of life has not brought peace or prosperity, either to those who perpetuate it, or the victims, or the bystanders. The consequences of a violent way of life is death. And nobody wants to die a violent death – whether it is being blown to pieces, tortured emotionally or cast aside because of discriminations. In this new century, we are aware that violence fails, and as individuals and communities we look for alternate ways to living with violence. We want a peaceful way of life so that we can be creative, raise our children well and live meaningfully. Thus it becomes increasingly important that we live gently.

Therefore, throughout this year, 2007, we will be meditating on different ways of living gently in a violent world.

How do you define gentleness? Whom do you need to be particularly gentle with?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER 2007

NO 2

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Suggested reading: Psalm 27

If we look at the history of weapons mankind has used against each other, we see that violence has been a hallmark of humankind's character from the beginning. Perhaps it began with the basic need to survive; then came the sweet taste of power and the desire to subjugate another, wanting what the other had and using violence to obtain it. Sticks and stones gave way to larger clubs and cudgons, to arrows and crude spears, axes, swords, daggers, knives, and later on when gun powder arrived, guns then bombs, followed by more sophisticated weapons of death and annihilation.

Once we had trodden the path of violence it was hard to turn back. It seemed that violence was the only way. Occasionally in the early history of humankind, we see instances of mercy and forgiveness, but no alternate way to violence as a way of life. The Buddha urged a way of life that rejected violence in every form. It took the young Emperor Ashoka who fought ruthlessly to conquer, to see the bloody carnage and waste of life in the battle at Kalinga, to turn away from violence completely. Emperors were used to battle, and bloodshed, and Kalinga was nothing exceptional as wars went; but something about that massacre revolted Ashoka. He could take no more violence and set about finding other ways of ruling his kingdom. Justice began to play a much larger part than violence during his rule.

Like Ashoka, many times, we too come to the point when we just can't take any more violence. Whether it is wars, murders, physical violence, or that of words, and attitudes. We turn our backs against it and look for a non violent way of life. We are lucky in this century because many of us have come to the realization that violence just does not work and are beginning to search for ways to live without violence. Living gently, might just be one of those ways.

Friends of mine who have small children who have thought about this for a while, put up a violence box on their dining table. Anyone who expresses violent words, actions or even shows it in their body language, has to put a five rupee coin into the box. The second time offender puts in ten rupees and thereafter the rates increase. The idea was not just that violence is penalized, but that the offender had to find a gentler solution to the violence. At first it was a game to see who put in the most, but as the days went on, and the children grew older, being kind and gentle and fair within the home took on its own importance.

It is often within the home that most of us are violent. It is easy to slap a child in anger, to scream abuse at a wife or husband with harsh words, to coldly neglect an aging parent or exploit a servant. Whether we realise it or not, all of these are forms of violence and if we are guilty of it, we need to take steps to watch out for when we behave this way and search for ways to be gentle.

Admitting to violence or standing up to it within the home is never easy, especially for women, elderly parents and children. Violence begets violence. Hard though it

may be, it is only when we ask for help, that we can also learn to live gently with ourselves and those around us.

Which is the form of violence that you detest? Why? Is there a place for gentleness when you face this kind of violence?

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NO 3

VIOLENCE IN THE WORK PLACE

Suggested reading : Exodus 2:11-13

For many people, prejudice, , discrimination, bullying, domination, and oppression are part of their daily work experience as violence seems to have firmly anchored itself in workplaces. The heads of most organizations will quickly retort, " It doesn't happen here." But scratch beneath the surface and you will hear a different story.

Most people think of violence as a physical assault. Workplace violence has a broad spectrum. From acts in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her place of employment, to rumour mongering and slamming doors. Workplace violence includes threatening behaviour such as shaking fists, destroying property or throwing objects; verbal or written threats; harassment; behaviour that demeans, embarrasses or humiliates a person; swearing, insulting or using condescending language, and of course physical attacks.

Who are the perpetrators of violence in the work place? Ordinary people like you and me, who are frustrated, over -stressed, anxious and narrow minded. Those too who are loners, who feel that nobody listens to them or has any time for them; those with emotional problems, career frustrations and those who have more power than others.

Who are the victims? Usually it is those who have no power to stand up to authority; those on a lower cadre, those who cannot express themselves well enough and women.

Having recognized violence in our work place, what do we do about it? The most common response is to act with a similar kind violence. If someone shouts at us, we shout back; if they humiliate, we respond in the same way. Violence as we know, begets more violence and the cycle goes on.

Is there a place for gentleness at work? Most people would say " no". In the arena of ambition, personal success and desire for power and control, it may seem as if gentleness has no place. Gentleness, like violence, has a certain image. We think of a gentle person as a softie, namby pamby who can be pushed around easily. People forget that gentleness is actually strength. A fishing line looks so flimsy, as if it would snap at any moment. But though fragile looking, it is strong enough to catch the heaviest of fish. So too it is with gentleness. Gentleness is the answer to violence.

Gentleness at the work place translates into standing up for the underdog, and those who struggle in some way. It means taking a moment during your coffee break to listen to a colleague's troubles; to be able to diffuse an angry person with calmness and good advice; to be fair and just. It is also the way in which we handle

the peaks and troughs of our professional or emotional lives at the office.
Gentleness brings sanity and peace to our colleagues.

A young man told me of an instance when one of his colleagues was being yelled at unfairly for the boss' incompetence. The woman struggled to keep back her tears and when the man left, she collapsed into her handkerchief. One person in the office got her a glass of water, another gave her a chair and put a comforting arm around her, and the third asked her to go home early and finished up the remainder of her work for her. This is gentleness in the work place – letting someone know that you care. Letting them know that despite violence, there is something stronger and better that brings peace and joy. That they can face tomorrow without fear because of it.

Take an audit of how you behaved at work yesterday, or last week. Would others with whom you interacted remember you as a gentle person or as a violent one. How would you like to be remembered?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER 2007

NO 4

GENTLENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Suggested reading: 1 Peter : 3: 4

We reflect again this week on violence in the work place. Most of our workplaces tend to be quite civilized. Nobody beats each other up, or carries knives or guns to work, yet, there is an undercurrent of simmering violence - one can see it and feel it. It shows in people's tense or angry faces, in their stiff, 'don't come near me' body language, in the mean, thoughtless way they react to their colleagues .

I observed something interesting in one of the colleges where I did a work shop on Gandhian values for the students. I noticed that in one department, some of the teachers did not have eye contact with each other, neither did they smile or talk to each other in a friendly manner. In conversation, I learnt that some of them were targeted for coming up with new ideas and being creative. A few of the older lecturers and professors who had been there for two decades or more did not want change of any kind. They felt threatened by the younger teachers, so they made life a little miserable for them. This group was given extra classes during their free periods, and put on lunch time duties more frequently than the other staff. This annoyed them, as they felt it was unfair. When the teachers protested, harshly, worded memos were sent to them. As a result some in one group were not speaking to the others unless absolutely necessary, and when they did speak, it was rather sarcastically. They would pass by each other and look the other way. Some of the teachers in both groups were pleasant to each other and maintained friendly conversations despite the war that seemed to be going on. These teachers were targeted too. There was lot of hurt and deep wounds and the atmosphere was very unpleasant.

" Is there violence in their staff room?" I asked them. " No," they replied. Yet when they spoke they said, " I'm really hurt."

" She wounded me deeply."

" My feelings are injured."

"I suffer at work."

" Are these words not associated with violence? " I asked them.

Acts or words that demean a person, their dignity and sense of self esteem, are violent as they hurt and wound deeply. They seem to pop up in places and situations where personal ambition and the craving for success is threatened; where inferiority has found a comfortable place, and does not like to be awakened and where jealousy raises its ugly head.

This can easily sum up many of our work places. So when we spend at least eight hours in such atmospheres what do we do? Is the idea of combating violence with gentleness something to laugh at? How does one be gentle in situations like the above example?

In most work places, people have forgotten the value of dialoguing with respect for each other. Talking to each other about whatever is the problem, ironing out misunderstandings, making compromises, coming up with a new agenda that pleases everyone, developing a give and take attitude and forgiving mistakes, takes great strength and courage. Showing courtesy, being polite and good-mannered, not using abusive language and listening to what the other person has to say diffuses violence immediately. When you are able to do this, then you know that gentleness has taken over your work place.

Think of the different ways in which you can be violent in your work place. Which of these are used in your workplace? Can you try some of the gentle approaches instead of the violent ones this week?

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NO 5

AFFIRMATION OR AGGRESSION?

Suggested reading: Ephesians 3 :29, 32

One of the reasons for violence in the work place is conflict between the boss and his or her subordinates. We should have moved away from the era when the boss held absolute power and was the master/ mistress of whom everyone was terrified. My research shows that we have not moved very far and that this kind of boss is still alive, well and kicking.

Mr Shah owned a small school. He was both the owner and the manager. I found that his teachers and the young headmistress who worked for him were in a constant state of terror. They whispered their answers, stammered and sweated in fear. He would scold them in very abusive language in front of everyone. He would threaten them....." If you don't do as I say, don't come back tomorrow."

" If you yourself have no brains to understand what I am saying, how will the poor children understand you?" If he was angry with anyone, he would not pay them on time. The worst of all was that he would withhold their certificates if they decided to leave. This kind of violence between the boss and his subordinates makes the workers feel absolutely helpless.

In another large corporate organization, the boss wielded a different kind of power and the violence was a little more sophisticated. A very anxious, young man presenting his first report was fiddling with his laptop, desperately trying to find his report. The boss made fun of him in front of everyone saying that he was a village boy and should have stayed in his village with the cows and goats. Although, the presentation was well accepted and applauded by the reviewers, there were a few problems with the machine. The boss told him, " You are not fit to do a presentation, so next time, you can see to the tea arrangements." Some of you may not think that this is violence. Anything that dehumanizes, takes away your dignity and makes you feel powerless is violence.

There are many bosses, whether in a school, hospital, corporate office or factory, who believe that they can expect better efficiency, respect and competence from their staff only by shouting at them or threatening them in some way. Some also believe that correction can only be done through violent, abusive, dehumanizing means, quite forgetting that the whole point of correcting someone is to prevent them from making the same mistake again. A violent way - shouting at someone in front of others or calling them names, may seem dramatic, but in fact it is very negative. The boss may get a kick out of being seen as someone who is powerful, strict, or a real disciplinarian, but in fact his self respect will plummet down.

Can both these issues - expecting efficiency and correcting a mistake be done in a gentle, non - violent way? A subordinate who is hesitant or inefficient must have a reason for being so. Is it lack of knowledge? A low self esteem? Lack of practice? Fear? Lack of motivation? A gentle way would be to find out what the problem is

and affirm him or her. In my very first job, I had to handle tilling machines. In that first hour, I made so many mistakes, irritated several people by my inefficiency and felt extremely stupid. My boss Gerda, a big Swedish lady, took me aside, gave me a spare till and asked me to practice on it till I felt comfortable enough to come back to the main one. " You aren't the only one, almost everyone has the same problem at first, but keep practicing and you'll be back in an hour" she said, affirming me.

Being gentle and non violent requires creativity, time, energy and generosity of heart. It is taking the long hard way to solve a problem, but in the end, it is the only way that works.

If you are a boss, think of the different ways in which you would tackle these issues. If you are the subordinate think of how you would like your boss to react to you over these two issues.

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER 2007

NO 6

Suggested reading: 22: 47-50

SOPHISTICATED VIOLENCE

There is a code of accepted behaviour in most work places. You cannot slipper someone, throw a broom at them or tell them that you will "get them" when they step outside. This is crude, boorish behaviour reserved for the market place. In refined, air-conditioned offices, with people in smart uniforms, it isn't that there is no violence in the work place, but just that the violence is very sophisticated.

A young man complained, " We had some disagreements in the department and now some of my colleagues will not greet me or shake my hand when I offer it to them."

Sophisticated violence ignores, excludes and divides. It makes the victim feel inferior and non existent. It does not use the fist and the boot, but body language. Muscles clench, face darkens, breathing becomes faster, eyebrows arch, smiles become pasted on and the little muscles around the mouth twitch.

A man was invited by the CEO of an institute to a party. He arrived in an impeccable white kurta and pyjamas and noticed that the others wore suits and ties. It did not bother him as this is what he always wore. Not many people knew who he was or why he was there. Several pairs of eyes looked him up and down coldly, measuring his status and social worth. Nobody came up and spoke to him, or offered him a drink – they just turned away from him and ignored him. The man said that he felt completely alienated by the silent violence of this small group whose body language clearly showed him that he did not belong there.

A young, woman doctor spoke of this kind of violence when she first went to work in a small hospital. No one would speak to her or answer her questions. She always had to go through someone else. She felt so inferior and angry all the time. One day, a senior doctor who had been through the same treatment told her that part of the violence was to make her break down in anger or frustration and cry, and she should guard herself against that. The victim remained on her guard, held on to her dignity and was polite and courteous even when under extreme stress. Eventually became the head of that hospital and was much respected.

Why do people feel the need to break those who are different, powerless and insignificant in society?

A young student had done his best for a project and was hoping to get a word of praise from his teacher. The teacher looked at him coldly, gave him a supercilious smile and said, " So you think you are good do you? "

Under such situations where power and violence matters so much to some people to feel strong and big, is there any place for gentleness? What do gentle people do when faced with silence, face offs, and deliberate neglect?

One person I asked said, " At every point the onus is on me to do the right thing. Yes, one of my colleagues does not greet me, and sometimes I don't greet him either, but at the end of the day I wish I had. I wish I had done the right thing. Facing this kind of violence for me is not easy as I am a sociable person, and the discrimination hurts. Thus a gentle way of responding for me would be not to ignore them, but to put some positive input into the relationship, to greet, to smile, to invite them to all the meetings I hold, and make them feel wanted, not excluded – to **not** do to them what they do to me and hope that my actions will make a difference some day. Mostly it is important for me not to retaliate with a similar kind of violence."

We all are guilty of sophisticated violence both at home and the work place. We punish our spouses, children and colleagues by the violence of silence. It is in fact more vicious than a slap, because silence eats away insidiously and we can't see what it is eating. Being gentle and doing good under such circumstances becomes a huge challenge and often we think that it cannot be done. But it can.

Are you more comfortable with sophisticated violence than physical ones in your work place? Is there a difference between the two?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER 2007

NO 7

THE VIOLENCE OF LOVE

Suggested reading: John 18: 1-11

Much of the violence we experience in our daily life is said to be because of love. Love, that deep emotion which activates the goodness buttons inside us, also unleashes streaks of violence. When we allow the violence within us to run riot, we ourselves are surprised at this dangerous power.

At what point does love become violent? When those whom we love become objects to possess; when love does not give space for growth but imprisons the loved one in a vice like grip; when love becomes impatient; manipulative; controlling; and selfish. Love also becomes violent when there is fearfear for ourselves and the ones we love; when we fight for survival; when we fight to protect. Love becomes violent when there is betrayal and rejection.

When love turns violent, - whether that violence is verbal, physical or emotional - is there any room for gentleness and goodness? Is the biblical ideal to turn the other cheek the best way to deal with violence? How long should love be patient and forgiving in the midst of violence? Can love that has turned violent become gentle love again? These are some of the questions we grapple with when we face the violence of love.

Whenever I think of violent love, and gentleness, I think of the night when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. The night was dark. Guards in their armour, holding torches, swords and ropes, stood beside Jesus, ready to take him away by force. Peter, the disciple who loved Jesus and who had been sleeping until all this noise woke him up, rushed up to Jesus and seeing him in this helpless situation, pulled out his own sword and in a fit of anger, cut off the ear of one of the soldiers. Blood, pain, screams, confusion, then the deep sound of authority ordering calmness echoes through the night. Jesus does not take advantage of the commotion or the violence. Instead, he tells Peter, " Put your sword back into your sheath. " Then he heals the ear of the wounded soldier and allows himself to be bound and dragged away. Is this act which is so amazing, only Divine?

Ngui, a doctor, was a Vietnamese friend of mine, whose whole family was wiped out by the Khymer Rouge. He managed to practice simple country medicine using crushed herbs for healing, large leaves for bandages and twig stretchers and beds for his patients in the jungle when medical supplies ran out. One day, he came across several wounded soldiers. His instinct was to run away, and leave them to die, but he willed himself to stay and treat the soldiers. He brought them back to the leafy tent that was his hospital, nursed them back to health and then let them go making no demands on them, not even that of safety.

Another friend of mine, from Kenya, was infected with the HIV virus by her husband. So too were two of her five children. Her mother - in - law blamed her for the loss of her son and made life even more difficult. When the mother- in- law fell ill, it was Dora and not her own children who nursed her gently and lovingly, not

because she had no other choice, but because of love, as she recognized the pain in her mother - in - law's violence towards her.

There are always people who question such love and goodness and prefer to get an eye for an eye and limb for a limb. They truly believe that violence is the answer for violence – sharper, more hurting words for one harsh word; a harder fist for a fist; more powerful guns for sticks and stones. Such people get caught in a cycle that is never ending and difficult to stop. When we too walk on that road, we nurture a culture of violence, not gentleness within us.

We will do well to listen to Gandhiji's words, " An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."

What are your experiences of violent love? What are your answers? Have you ever known a violence to work?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER 2007

NO 8

Suggested reading: Genesis 21: 8-15

LOVE, WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

Most of us experience some kind of violence at home in our families. Our homes are supposed to be safe places; places of refuge from the ugliness of the world outside. But for many women, children and some men, their homes are places of hell. What makes domestic violence so awful is that it is carried out by those who profess to love and protect the victims. When love and violence are combined together, the result is devastating, as one is let down by the person one trusts and is dependent on the most. Violence at home could be anything from a hard slap to the face, to having hair pulled or being pushed around, to rape ; being completely ignored, economical deprivation ; sexual abuse; verbal intimidation and threats.

Often these acts of violence are done by a husband who professes to love his wife. I was fourteen years old. My neighbour, Cora, a lovely Canadian woman stood in front of me shivering. There was a large, red imprint of a hand on her face and several bruises on her neck and arms. My mother understood where the bruises came from and gave her some tea and asked her to stay as long as she wanted to. I was shocked when I learnt that it was her husband who gave her those bruises. Shocked because they always walked hand in hand and were so lovey dovey when we met them on walks or out shopping. Peter loved Cora, so how could he possibly do this to her? I just could not understand how a sensible, amiable man with such a high powered job and a high social status could hit his wife.

What makes men violent towards the women they love? What makes them abuse those who lovingly cook for them, take care of their personal needs and care for them? What kind of ugly force makes them take a broom, a slipper , a stick or their hand and hit the woman they love? What makes them verbally abuse their wives in horrible ways and then sit down to a hot dinner prepared by them?

All kinds of social theories abound and are given weightage from various religious traditions..... the unequal patriarchal society, woman as the sinner, woman as the one to be hidden from other eyes. For centuries we abided by the patriarchal form of family life. Men held the power and wives were submissive and looked after the men's demands. Even today, some husbands want an obedient wife; a silent one who will accept all their demands without questioning; one who will not question their power; who will have no social life except that ordered by her husband. When any of these are questioned or thwarted, the man feels threatened and thinks that the only way to restore the balance of power is through violence. Much of the violence is justified by double standards still prevalent in our societies.

Today, as we journey through a new century, many of us want to build a world without violence – especially violence in our homes. We want to leave behind our past histories of violence and inequality and build our lives on new values of love,

equality and power sharing. What lessons do we teach our sons and daughters about peace, love and power sharing in our homes? Does gentleness have a place in our homes anymore? How do we cultivate gentleness knowing that it is as powerful a force as violence?

These are questions every family has to ask itself as we move forward into an enlightened age. What do men really want of their wives? Does obedience have a place in marital life? How can power within a family be happily shared?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 9

Suggested reading: 1 John 4: 9-11

LOVE SHOULDN'T HURT

All of us love our children dearly. We want the best for them and we expect the best from them.....in everything from behaviour, to marks and grades at school. Parental love and expectations, and the disappointments and disillusionments that can sometimes come from this, often lead to violence.

At a young people's writing workshop, one of the students wrote about an occasion that changed his life. He was ten years old and raced home happily with his report card as he had done well in his exams. His father loved him deeply and had promised him a treat if he did well. His father looked at the card and tore it in two. The boy was puzzled and did not expect what happened next. His father picked him up and flung him against the wall. He had not got the grades in mathematics that his father had coached him and had hoped for. The boy pointed to a long narrow scar on his forehead and showed me the stitches. What kind of love turns so violent?

The old, Jewish King Solomon wrote, "He who does not beat his son does not love him", and for thousands of years, children have been beaten because their parents were convinced that this was the right way for them to become responsible adults. {It is interesting to note that that King Solomon's son, Rehoboam, became an oppressive dictator who narrowly escaped being stoned to death for his cruelty.}

Parents who love their children also humiliate, verbally abuse, neglect, reject, disrespect, demean, ridicule and injure the integrity and dignity of their children. Children who live with violence are often told by their parents that the violence meted out to them "was out of love."

"My mother loves me very much," said a little child, and then went on to show me where she had been burned with a hot iron. Children are often threatened with cruelty....." If you touch it again I'll hit you/ leave you behind in the shop/ lock you in the store room." Children are vulnerable. They are physically weaker than adults and it is easier for an adult to hurt a child than someone his/her own size. Young children are dependent and cannot run away from a violent home easily. They often cannot find help or are easily frightened into silence about violence. It is also easy to bribe or threaten children, as they are inexperienced and easy to deceive. Can love and violence co- exist?

Many parents are unaware that there is a way to raise children without violence. The alternative to violence is a creative and gentle way, that builds rather than destroys. I once watched a father and his son build a sand castle. Just at the point when it was beginning to look really great the toddler son came and kicked it down with great glee. I thought the father would give the child a smack, but he just picked him up and deposited him with his other toys. This happened twice and I wondered what the father would do the next time the little one did this. Well, to my surprise, he stopped building the castle, picked him up and cuddled him and swung him around a

few times and gave him a little bucket and asked him to bring some sand from where his mother sat some distance away. The little one toddled obligingly. This time the castle got built and by the time the little one arrived he too became part of the building project. There is an alternative to violence, but it takes time and creativity, and in today's world time is what most of us don't have.

Children are by no means angelic all the time. Parents need to make sure they eat their meals, do their home work, help out at home, be civil and kind to their siblings, neighbours and pets. Parents also need to discipline and sometimes punish children. Parents today are harassed in many ways and are tired, anxious, disturbed and angry themselves when they get home. Violence may seem the easy answer. But we need to remember that love and gentleness nourishes self-esteem, and builds the child's capacity to love and be gentle in return. Violence only begets violence.

Did you ever experience any kind of violence while growing up? How did you react to it?

Do you follow the same pattern with your own children? If not, why?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 10

Suggested reading: Luke 4: 42 Matthew 14: 13

THE VIOLATION OF PERSONAL SPACE

For most of us, our own personal space is sacred. Whether that space is a luxuriously quiet room, or just a table in the corner of the room, a chair in the garden, a moment of snatched solitude with a cup of coffee, or even just the idea of having some space for ourselves. Our personal space is sacred as it is to that place that we can go to when we are harassed. It is very necessary as it provides us with a sense of calmness, and gives us a few moments to recuperate, replenish and nurture our souls in a world crowded with events, demands and chores.

Is this idea of personal space a twenty-first century phenomena? In the Bible, we read that often Jesus rose early and went away into the hills to be by himself. He needed that time alone without other people to strengthen himself spiritually for the day ahead. When in grief over the death of his cousin John, he needed that space too – to be able to weep and mourn in his own way. When he was exhausted with his ministry of teaching and healing he headed for the hills, or took the boat into the Sea of Galilee.

Today, we live and work in crowded, busy environments. We constantly interact with people who demand much from us and exhaust us. The personal space that we crave needs quietness and solitude. But, much of our space is violated by noise. ringing telephones which pierce our ears; blaring, deafening horns, loud, earsplitting music, screeching of tyres, booming voices and so much more that assaults us.

Lack of space, congested roads, narrow corridors, flats built so close to each other, all violate our sense of space and need for solitude. So too do thoughtless interruptions, intrusions into our privacy, rummaging through someone's drawers or papers, reading their mail, listening at doors to conversations. These are also violations of space and privacy. When our space is disrupted, we become angry and this often leads to verbal or emotional violence.

How can we be gentle with someone's personal space? By learning to identify and respect our spouse's, parents', colleague's personal spaces. For each person their idea of space is different, and when we live and work together we need to respect the other person's need for space as much as we do ours.

For me, the time while I have my first cup of coffee is the most sacred time of my day. Over the years my family have learnt to respect that and not violate it. In return I too have identified their spaces and respect it enough not to violate it.

A friend of mine needs to be alone in the front porch with his cigarette, coffee and newspaper. Nobody would dare disturb him first thing in the morning during his time of solitude. His wife's space is last thing at night watching her favourite TV serial. There have been many squabbles over this as he often interrupts her asking for a drink, or expecting her to search for something he has mislaid during that time. This

insensitiveness and lack of respect is a form of violence and most of the time we are not even aware that we are violating someone else's space. Being gentle means being sensitive to the needs of those we live and work with.

We often expect space for ourselves; we rarely offer it to others. Why?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 11

Suggested reading: Luke 4

VIOLATING WORK SPACE

All men's miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone.

{Blaise Pascal}

Last week we looked at the lack of personal space in our lives. Today we concentrate on the lack of this space particularly in the corporate world, whether they be business houses, educational fields or hospitals. In many corporate establishments, in an attempt to be transparent and communication friendly, the old fashioned wooden doors and desks were replaced by glass and lightwood desks. What may have originally been a good idea has backfired and today it violates many people's privacy.

Open plan offices leave us with no privacy, increased noise and a feeling of being constantly monitored - so it comes as no surprise to find that new research suggests they are very stressful for our health.

Today many people sit at their desks surrounded by distraction and diversion. They are constantly frustrated and annoyed by the ceaseless chatter around them and the incessant whirr of printers and photocopiers. In comparison, a library, is still a hushed place, where productive work is done, where knowledge is being gathered in the old fashioned way. There is always a nearby coffee shop to discuss and communicate the ideas learnt or discovered.

Says Roopa, who works in a corporate atmosphere, " The sound of the printers and copiers, are just three feet away from my desk, so there is a loud constant background whirr. Then there is the guy in the next cubicle who insists on checking his voice mail through the speakerphone. Everyday, I grind my teeth and shake my head in disbelief while listening to the dull roar of the combined efforts of the printers, fax machines, photocopiers, telephones, speakerphones, inconsiderate co-workers, slamming doors, hallway conversations immediately beside my desk and wonder how I can be expected to work effectively amidst such a crazy furor. There are people walking through the corridor beside my cubicle every few minutes. And perhaps the ten mobile phone calls that my surrounding cubies seem to get every day, each one heralded by a distinctive and piercing ring-tone from some Top 10 dance hit. And don't forget the neighbour in front of me who pops her head upside down to see what I'm doing.

Working in such an environment has made me very intolerant. Basically, I just can't stand people any more. At the end of the day I have no power left to smile, or wish anyone good night. I just leave. My nerves are on shred and my back and my head aches. Sometimes as I sit in my car I wonder," Am I really a human being? "

An assistant to a CEO remarked, "A lot of my work is confidential, so working in an open plan office makes me very paranoid. I don't leave documents on my desk, and I'm always aware that other people can hear me on the phone."

Open plan offices that leave us with no privacy, increased noise and a feeling of being constantly monitored violate our need for privacy. And in case you didn't know it, privacy is a fundamental human right recognized in the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

Many of us face this kind of harassment and we don't even think of it as violence. But violence it is. So how can we deal with this kind of violence? If this is the way your business, office, hospital is run, you cannot change it, but there are still ways in which you can be gentle with yourself and others even in a corporate environment.

Being gentle means being extremely sensitive to another's needs. It means being aware that your neighbour, colleague, children or spouse also have needs for privacy. Speaking softly, turning your phone off when speaking to someone, listening to what they are saying despite all the noises around is being gentle. So too is giving them some time to be alone to gather their thoughts. Today most couples work outside the home and so it is extremely important that each be given his / her share of privacy.

Why is privacy so important to you? What does lack of privacy do to you?
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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 12

BIG BROTHER KIND OF VIOLENCE

Suggested reading: Psalm 139 : 1-12

Most of us like to keep our thoughts and feelings to ourselves. We also like to keep some parts of our lives private – where we shop, what we buy, the dates of our birthdays and anniversaries and other personal information. For some reason, today's commercial world seems to require all kinds of personal details about us - what we buy, our preferences for clothes, jewellery, shoes, bags books and other things. This need for personal information by those who don't matter to us is something that irritates us endlessly.

The boy in the florist where I buy flowers insisted on my filling in a form along with the bill which asked for unnecessary details. When I objected, he pathetically said, "Madam if I you don't fill this I will get into trouble as we are supposed to get our customer's details." So to oblige him I filled it in. A few months later, a voice I did not recognize cheerfully said, 'Happy birthday ma'am. This is the flower shop. You are a valued customer. We love you. Please come and buy your flowers from us again.' I was annoyed that someone who did not know me, knew that it was my birthday, and had actually said, 'I love you.' Not because they cared about me, but as a commercial advertisement. Along with the flower shop's wishes, there were also ones from a dozen other places and how they got the information is a mystery. Being reduced to just a commercial entity is a kind of violence, as it doesn't recognize one as human, but only as a consumerist, one with economic potential.

In this technological age someone is always watching us; someone knows something personal about us and this too is a kind of violence. We live now in the era of closed circuit television. It is a very spooky feeling when one enters a shop and can see oneself on large cameras at every corner. It automatically makes one tense, to know that someone is watching you while you buy personal items. Larger hotels, restaurants, airports, railway stations, libraries, also have closed circuit television cameras, and so too do some schools. While we see the need for it in some places for security reasons, to have someone continuously observe us, our reactions and relationships is an intrusion into our privacy.

Anyone who has a cell phone or a computer knows well enough the number of annoying spam mails, calls from unknown persons, sources and various advertising companies that bother us everyday. Hospitals, schools, hotels and anyone who requires us to fill in a form want personal details of our lives.

Apart from the intrusion of high technology into our lives, there is also the moral police, like in Mumbai who ferret out young couples holding hands on the beach, or sitting in parks and shady corners. These intrusions into privacy invoke a primitive violence in us. We cut off calls rudely; yell harshly to whoever is at the other end; threaten; and hold the anger and rage within us. All of these reactions are stressful and bring out the violence within us. Often we turn this violence on to someone else and wreck other relationships.

Everyday, our rights to privacy get less and less and there is little we can do about it. Perhaps in the years to come, as we move into a more globalized, computerized age, more of our privacy will be taken away from us. In fact privacy is something that arouses more interest in its absence or when it is threatened, than in its presence. It is worth thinking about what privacy is, when it is worth protecting, and if it is, how it can be done without violence.

When our privacy is intruded on, how do we remain gentle, calm people? How do we not resort to violence? Quite a challenge isn't it?
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LET'S THINK TOGETHER

No 13

RoAD RAGE

Suggested reading: Psalm 25: 4-10

Twenty five years ago, the road to our home in Karigiri, was off the main Chennai – Bangalore highway. It was a pleasant drive amidst paddy and sugar cane fields and pastoral country side. As it was a main road, there were frequent buses, lorries and cars, but mostly the traffic was a line of slow moving bullock carts. Today, the countryside has changed. There is a large university, two prestigious schools, restaurants and companies along the same road and during the morning and evening rush hour, horns blare, motor bikes bleep, and traffic comes to a halt. No one will give way to the other; every driver tries to wedge himself into any available space. Tempers flare, as everyone is tired, frustrated and angry and wants to get home quickly. The atmosphere is hostile. Often it ends in violence.

Road rage! Almost all of us have at some time or other been perpetrators or victims of road rage. As we drove slowly along the East Coast Highway, the motorist behind us, kept honking his horn impatiently. As we slowed to halt at a by road, our driver allowed the person coming from that road to pass by first. This annoyed the motorist behind us that he tailgated us for quite a while. Then he overtook us, rolled down his window and yelled abuse. He just would not give up. At the next traffic light, he came up behind us and hit us from behind. This time I was scared as his face was bloated and red with anger and the road ahead was long and empty. "Don't worry madam said my driver. We have the bigger vehicle, I will show him what I can do, I'll teach him a lesson."

At which point I said enough is enough and we slowed down to such a point that we lost him.

Road rage is scary. Why do seemingly normal people succumb to such antisocial hostile behavior? Hostile behaviour like screaming abuse, fist shaking, making obscene gestures, flashing lights, tailgating, getting out of one's vehicle to another person's vehicle and banging, knocking on the windows and yelling insults. Such hostility only invokes more terrible hostility. And violence always begets violence. Someone equated the road rage phenomenon to rats. "Well, rats are usually OK until there is one rat too many in an enclosed space and then they all turn on each other. There are far more people on the road than ever before. Crowding causes aggression." Do you think this applies to us too?

Road rage usually invokes more rage and violence. But there are those who refuse to be nettled by it. During the years when my mother used to drive, she would always let someone pass in front of her if they were in a hurry, would wave her hand and smile in gratitude if someone let her through and she always wished the car park attendants. Even when people used rude words at her she didn't blink an eye. Once an elderly man saw the colour of her skin and called her "a stupid paki woman driver." And we children were furious at the insult to our mother. My brother was

ready to get out and bash the man up. But Mother calmly said, " he seems so angry let's pray he gets home safe."

How do we remain gentle amidst this kind of hostility and violence?

By reminding ourselves that we live in a world that still needs civil and courteous behaviour. A wave, a smile, a bit of generosity and chivalry on your part, will bond good drivers together and create role models. There are of course other means too. Leaving homes twenty minutes earlier makes all the difference to your nerves when you are caught in heavy traffic. If you are being tailgated, you can change lanes and allow the person to pass. If someone wants to pass, slow down and let them do so. If someone makes obscene gestures, don't return them. Stay behind the person who is angry at all costs (they can do less damage if you are behind them) If necessary, you can always pull off the road or take an exit and let them go on by.

What do you think are the causes of road rage? Are you a victim or a perpetrator?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 14

Suggested Reading: Psalm 103

Rage and Gentleness

I was standing outside the principal's office, waiting for my turn. I could hear raised voices from within and a few minutes later a little boy came out with tears in his eyes. He seemed a sweet child, and I tried to console him. "What happened I asked?" The tears just flowed. It seemed that he had failed in Hindi. Never mind do better next year I consoled him and talked about cricket to take his mind away from it. A few minutes later a tall, angry looking man came out of the room in a rage, grabbed this child by the ear, and dragged him all the way out and into their car. I was so shocked by the way he seized this poor child's ear that I followed them to point where the car moved off. What rage the man was in and what was going to happen to the child once he got home?

A passenger at the security check at the airport was asked to go through the check twice. Unfortunately for him, the bleeps went off again and he had to do it a third time. Suddenly he went into a rage. "Do you think I am terrorist," he screamed. "Why are you not asking these people to be checked three times," he said pointing to some others who has already been cleared. No matter how politely the guards explained to him that there was a metallic object on him which needed to be verified to be safe, he just ranted and raved.

A man is late for a meeting. Before he left home he had a fight with his wife that morning. It is forty one degrees Celsius outside and sticky as pea soup. He has spotted a parking spot and at the last moment someone has cut in and parked there quickly before he could. He is later than ever before for his meeting. He storms out of his car, and his blood boils. He speaks to the person in the car.. Words fly, fist touch flesh, all of a sudden a person is thrown on the ground violently.

Rage denotes a complete loss of control and is characterized by shouting, screaming, physical expressions of anger, violence or threats of violence, sulking, manipulation, emotional blackmail, silent smoldering, and anger.

Rage is often triggered by stress, frustration, inferiority, and oppression. Being enraged may seem powerful as it makes the other person withdraw in fear.

By definition, rage is a kind of violence. Today we have many types of rages.....football fans who rage through the town when their team doesn't win; The rage of the student who has been denied justice or dignity; The rage of workers who have been denied a fair deal for a long time; the rage of the Dalits who have been oppressed for centuries.

All of us know what rage is. The hot anger that bubbles inside us ; that makes us see flaming red. We breathe faster, become hot, change colour; our muscles become tight, the mind becomes blurred and can't think straight; the mouth becomes dry; hands close into fist, sweat pours down our forehead and suddenly furious anger spills out, scalding anyone who is near.

The scary thing about rage is that we never know when it is going to explode. Like a volcano that has been quietly steaming deep within, so too does rage simmer and steam inside a person. It may be that the person has been denied promotion, or been scolded in front of others and treated badly. It may be that a person was rejected by a loved one or was betrayed, or bullied or threatened. What ever the reason, rage and violence go hand in hand together.

Is there anything that diffuses rage? Is there a way in which the man who was late for his meeting could have diffused his rage? Rage can be controlled by special rhythmic breathing and counting to ten. You may laugh at this, but most anger management techniques use this simple method. When on a rage, we breathe fast. Breathe slowly and it automatically reduces your anger. You may have been tempted to blast someone while in a rage. Speaking politely and courteously showing good manners also is a rage diffuser. The easiest to do is to walk away from that place until you have cooled down. These are gentle ways of managing rage.

Have you ever been in a rage? What caused your rage? What did you do in your rage? Can you think of other ways in which rage can be diffused.

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 15

RAGE AND MALE AGGRESSION

Suggested reading: John 8: 1-10

Last week I asked the question, " What causes your rage?" Although there were not many specific answers to this question, my mail box had many examples which talked about male rage.

- " Any little thing sets my husband in a rage....."
- " The children's noise, especially if the baby cries puts him in a rage."
- " If I answer back in a rational way, he flies into a rage....."
- " If my mother comes to stay , he just goes mad....."
- " We both are in the same profession, and if I do better than him, or receive a compliment, his rage will last a week and he will not talk to me....."

Often these rages end in physical violence..... a slap, pulling of hair, pushing, pinching and sexual abuse. Why do men who have a calm manner in the office, fly into a rage at little things at home?

A male friend of mine, is any woman's dream man. He is extremely courteous, humorous, helpful and very gentle. But my eyes were opened to the reality of his nature when I stayed with them for a week. He really was every woman's nightmare. And I wondered, how does such a nice man outside the home, turn into a monster when he walks through the door?

There are various theories that explain male aggression.....hormones, biology, social conditions, instinct, social learning, gender differences, ethnic and cultural differences, frustration, criticism, temperature, alcohol and so many more.

Personally I feel that male aggression is learnt in the home. When the only emotion dad shows is aggression, the sons too pick it up. Even though many parents may raise their sons to be compassionate and emotionally open, the world outside the family still promotes the tough, male exterior and affirms that the only acceptable emotion for a boy/ man to show is anger. Just watch the movies and you will see what I mean. The angry young boy throws his glass of milk; the teenager hits his sister who tries to reason with him; the young man lashes out at the devoted maid, or shouts at his mother.....all women, who follow him trying to diffuse his anger with sweet words or apologies or admissions of fault.

How can seeds of gentleness and non violence be sown in young male minds?

For a start, parents need to allow their sons to feel the entire spectrum of emotions, not just the ones society deems acceptable. Both parents, and particularly the father, has to teach the value and meaning of respecting the women in the family by his personal example. He has to show too how conflicts with his wife can be settled in a non violent or verbally abusive way. He has to cultivate the art of being

gentle at home more than being calm and gentle outside. Only then will our sons and grandsons value gentleness more than aggression.

As a male parent, are you more an example of aggression or gentleness? What can you do as parents { both male and female } to curb the aggression in your sons?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 16

RAGE AND FEMALE AGGRESSION

Suggested reading : I Samuel 25: 1-42

Just as I expected, several people have asked, "Don't women also rage? Aren't women also aggressive? Don't women also indulge in violence?" Of course they do. Just read the papers for instances of women torturing their daughters- in- law, inciting dowry deaths, plotting family dramas.

Unlike male aggression which is based on power and subjugating the victim, female aggression is often caused by anger which cannot be directed physically or verbally at the person it wants to target. Because of the ways in which girls and women are taught to socialize, and told to be patient, quiet, calm and good natured, women hold in the anger and resentments that everyday life brings within their hearts and don't focus it or dialogue with the person who has made them angry.

When women get violently angry, they tend to get especially livid. The ranting, raving, seething, smoking kind of anger that gets women in a rage can get very deadly and poisonous. The woman betrayed; the woman scorned; put down ; denied her rights and individuality constantly; used as a sex toy or a baby making machine; or seen as a financial stepping stone to the good life all seethe and simmer inside until they explode.

There is too the woman who screams like a fishwife because of lack of self control. This too can be traced to a childhood that is spoilt; where the child is constantly made the centre of attraction and allowed to get away with selfish, insensitive and cruel behavior especially to those who do not matter. When grown up, such women are aggressive all the time because they have learnt that being aggressive gets them what they want.

Just as we don't like living or working with aggressive, violent men, we dislike being with belligerent, vicious, angry women. Such women destroy relationships and don't give room for any kind of personal growth. Any relationship that is close and intimate requires being nurtured by kindness, gentleness and love. We live today in a harsh, insensitive world where the culture is one of violence. When we come home, we want comfort, peace and harmony and we expect both the men and women in our families to provide us with this. But increasingly, the message of gentleness, especially in women is not what the world outside affirms anymore. The media tells us that it's good to be aggressive.....aggressive women get to the top. Fashion gurus advocate " power dressing" to look tough. Make up artists paint a "mean" face. Tough girls are "cool".

Today with pressures of work, family, and coping with the changes in society, culture and way of life, many women live in a steamed up pressure cooker like atmosphere. In such an environment, it is easy to be mean and unkind; to snap at those you love; to resort to verbal violence with children, spouses, elderly parents and those who work for us. But still, whether men or women, we need to

generate gentleness to preserve our families and in the long run, ourselves. Being non- aggressive and non - violent does not mean being a door mat who invites violence into her life and home.

This story from the Old Testament in the Bible is one of my favourites and reminds me of a woman's gentle power over violence. Abigail was married to Nabal, a very wealthy man who was a rich landowner. Nabal was surly and mean and aggressive in all his dealings. In the past, King David and his men had protected Nabal from his enemies. Now David was in the desert and sent some of his young men with a greeting for Nabal asking for hospitality. Nabal scolded the men with fierce words and sent them away.

Abigail his wife, heard of this from the servants. To leave matters as they were with such hostility was asking for trouble as David would just come and slaughter them all. So she took gifts of food for David and his men before he reached her home to pacify him. David was stunned by her gentleness, gracious words and calmness in the face of his explosive anger, that he spared her husband and their household.

How do we teach our children to be gentle, yet firm? The Bible affirms the unfading beauty of a calm and gentle woman. Do you know any such woman?
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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 17

THE VIOLENCE OF DISEASE

Suggested reading: Mark 2: 1-12

To be diagnosed with any kind of a disease is one of the most fearful aspects of life for most of us. Just like violence, disease too hits us when we least expect it. It is painful, frightening and life- changing. Disease, just like violence, ravages lives - it doesn't care whether you are rich or poor when it hits you. And just like violence, it will turn your life upside down.

Rajendran who was in his late thirties, was a happy, young man, climbing fast up the corporate ladder. He had a stressful job that often gave him a severe head ache. But he didn't mind that. He had so many plans for himself and his young family and one by one, each of them was becoming a reality. Life was good. The head aches got worse, his eyesight deteriorated and he ended up in hospital. His doctor told him that he had a tumour in his brain. Says, Rajendran, " I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. This kind of thing happens to other people, not me." He had never experienced such violent feelings as he did then.

Although the tumour was removed, over a few years, Rajendran's health worsened and he was hospitalized with terminal cancer. He was reduced to half his weight, was confined to bed, and had to bear all the indignities a person suffers when he is terminally ill.

Just as violence degrades a person and removes him or her of their personal dignity as a human being, so too does disease. One is stripped of soft clothes and put into coarse, night- shirt- like garments which gape open at the back; needles are stuck into skin that is pale and fragile, like new leaves. One is turned over, and bathed by strange hands. There is little privacy. One no longer has the choice of what to eat, when to sleep, where to be, as choices are often made by strangers.

Once hit by violence of any kind, one is always uncertain and anxious about one's safety. "Will it happen again? What can I do to protect myself?" Fear begins to rule one's life. So too with disease. Even when it seems that we are cured, there is always a nagging thought, " Will it come back again?" Fear begins to rule our whole way of life.

How can you be gentle to someone who faces the violence of sickness and disease? Often we turn away from people who are sick, or in pain, as we don't know what to do or say to them. When their diseases are prolonged, our caring too seems to stop. Being gentle means being caring enough to see them through this painful period with our presence; encouraging them to take one day at a time or anticipating their needs and doing something about it.

The violence that disease unleashes can be seen not only in personal situations, but also in large scale health ones. Just walk into any slum in our towns or cities and you will see the havoc that disease has wrought. Starting from constant runny noses in little children, to water borne and bacteria infections, to chronic onesthere is a whole spectrum of disease. And just as those who live with constant violence know that there is no way out of it for them, so too do those who live with perpetual disease around them. They cope with it by being hard and stoical. Just as violence devastates and destroys whole communities, so too does disease. { We only have to look at whole villages and towns that are wiped out by HIV/ AIDS in Africa. }

Under such situations, what does being gentle mean to communities which face disease all the time? Is this a public health problem, left best to NGO's and ment authorities, or is it something that should concern all of us too? We know that government and other interested authorities do not affirm the value of gentleness when it comes to the poor and the sick. So how do we translate gentleness when it comes to caring for them?

What is the responsibility of a medical community to the larger community around them?
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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 18

CAN BROKENNESS BECOME A BLESSING?

Suggested reading: John 20: 10-18

I have just finished writing the biography of Sundar Egbert, a man who was crippled by polio when he was eleven years old. Almost overnight, he lost the use of his feet and one of his hands. This was in an era before there were any ideas of rehabilitation, or encouraging those whose bodies were assaulted to live a full and meaningful life.

Sundar was an exception. He had already been through two other tragedies – the loss of both his parents. He was not going to lie down and allow life to dictate what he could and could not do. Sundar was not allowed to go to school because of his deformities. But, he borrowed books and became an avid reader. He taught himself mathematics and excelled in that. He even gave tuitions to those taking board exams.

Sundar could only crawl on the floor. So he made himself a wheel chair out of a cycle seat and cycle wheels and chains and was mobile. Interactions with children who were visually challenged motivated him to learn Braille, so that he could teach them. In spite of all the violence inflicted on his life, he learnt to stand tall and make life fun for himself.

Many of us over a certain age are diagnosed with various ailments that assault our bodies too. Some are life - threatening, some are just inconvenient, embarrassing or means a change to a healthier lifestyle. How do we react to this intrusion into our lives? Do we grumble, moan, and become absolute bores to those around us? Do we resent and hold on to earlier ways of life and diets? Or do we go the other extreme and become over so anxious that we share our medical histories with anyone who will listen to us?

What does being gentle with ourselves mean when we are sick? I was sitting with someone who was sick who made all her care givers jump to her demands. Being confined to bed for a few days seemed to her an occasion to keep herself at the centre of all attraction. " I wish my mother would ease up a bit," said her weary daughter. " It isn't if she's desperately sick or in pain."

There was a lady who being newly diagnosed with hypertension accused her children of causing all her stress and made life quite unpleasant for them. The young man paralyzed by a car accident who just wanted to die. All are reactions to the violence of disease.

We have much to learn from people like Sundar Egbert, who creatively overcome their misfortunes.. "Nothing is impossible for me," Sundar would mutter to himself, over and over again, and face the challenge of just getting dressed and putting on socks. He would take his time and finally it would be done. There were other things he needed to do besides getting dressed – for instance, lights had to be switched on

and off. He couldn't keep asking his aunt to stop what she was doing and come over to help him, so he devised a long iron rod with curves, so that he could just push the switch up or down as needed.

Sundar's thoughts would go towards someone in greater pain and discomfort than himself. There was a young boy in the bed next to him, who looked after his father's goats and had never been to school. Sundar spent a lot of time with this child and taught him to read write. The excited little boy showed off his new skills to his father when he came to visit him. The father was so impressed. Overwhelmed with joy, the father said, "From now on you will go to school my son."

"But who will look after the goats, father?" asked the boy.

"The boy who was looking after them while you were in hospital can go on looking after them," he replied.

Sundar changed other people's lives from his own bed.

So when we suffer from our mild diseases, aches and pains, let's remember people like Sundar who show us how to face the real violence that disease often brings.

How do you react when you are sick or in pain?
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LET'S THINK TOGETHER

NO 19

THE VIOLENCE OF EXCLUSION

Suggested reading: Mark 5: 1-5

Recently we heard that five children who were HIV positive were forbidden from going to school because of the stigma and fear of their disease. Parents of children without the disease, made such a hue and cry and threatened to withdraw all their children, if these children were allowed to stay on at school.

None of us can imagine the violence these little children faced when they were shown such rejection. The voices they heard within them said, "go away.....you are worthless.....you don't belong here.....you are not like us.....we don't want you here.....your presence scares us " Along with the voices come the booing and shooing, the angry looks, the scorn, the contempt. We may not realize it, but this kind of rejection and exclusion is a horrible form of violence. This kind of experience of violence and rejection can lead to a number of adverse psychological consequences. Loneliness, a reduced sense of self – esteem, bouts of aggression, sadness and depression. It can also lead to feelings of insecurity and a heightened sensitivity to future rejection.

Why do we exclude people like these children in such a violent way? Why do we make them feel unwanted and unworthy of being human? They may be children or adults who are HIV positive, or afflicted by leprosy or leucoderma or other skin diseases, or challenged in some way physically or mentally. Why do we deliberately exclude them from social interaction and normal social relationships which we enjoy?

Basically, we exclude people who are sick and suffering from a disease which does not require isolation because our minds are filled with superstitions, fears and doubts. We worry unnecessarily about getting infected. Some of the fears are unscientific and completely irrational. If my child sits next to a HIV positive or leprosy afflicted child, will she/ he get infected too? Some fears are sheer superstitions and prejudices - for example that it is because of sin.

It is easier to exclude and build a wall between us and those we wish to isolate than to find the largesse of heart and gentleness to include them. Accepting them into our midst means shaking off our preconceived ideas and prejudices and a loosening and softening of our hard hearts. And that is difficult work. Most of us prefer to live in a shell that keeps the world outside, and us safe inside. We don't want to get involved in someone else's life or pain because of what it asks of us.....time, energy, money, emotions.....and most of all a change of heart. So we find violence easier than gentleness.

We have forgotten what it means to be human.that hearts ache for relationships, compassion and love and hurt deeply when cast aside.....especially when those hearts already have so much pain to bear. We base our humanity on material and external shifting criteria like status, wealth, power, beauty and things

which are here today and gone tomorrow. We have not understood that the violence of exclusion can be emotionally painful because of the social nature of human beings and our basic need to be accepted in groups.

So the next time you read about, hear or are tempted to exclude someone from your life because of disease or other challenges, think of what it would feel like if this were done to you.

Have you ever been excluded from a group? How did you feel? Have you since then, made it a point of including the " excluded" in your group? If no, why not?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 20

THE VIOLENCE OF OCCUPATIONAL EXCLUSION

Suggested reading: Mathew 9:9=11

As Indians we are very concerned about the status of our professions. Doctors, engineers, IT professionals are high at the top; after them it doesn't really matter what you do. In family and social relationships, one's occupation is very important. A niece of mine married a teacher recently. The remark at her wedding to her parents was, "Why didn't you find a good doctor or an engineer?" My cousins pointed out that this young man was an excellent teacher with wonderful skills which appealed to children. Besides, this was the man their daughter fell in love with. But it was not a good enough excuse.

I noticed at social gatherings that few people went up and spoke to him. A polite smile was all he got. When I bumped into them at another function I asked the young man if he felt at ease at such family gatherings. He shook his head quite violently. "People look through me as though I am not there and this really makes me mad," he said. "They treat me as if I don't know English, or have not had any education, or can't read newspapers. Actually because I am with children all day, and we are learning constantly I am probably more educated in all fields than they are."

I had a friend who was a doctor and married to an electrician. They had to emigrate to keep their marriage intact as the hostility towards her husband's profession was so strong. She could not take him to any of her official parties as he was excluded from conversations and the general jolliness of such affairs.

Why do we look down on other professions? Why do we feel that those who work with their hands, those in agriculture, trade or traditional crafts have nothing worth contributing towards society? Why do we turn up our noses at cleaners, attenders, drivers, cooks, and those who work in the menial professions? Could we do our high status jobs if it were not for people in these professions?

I know several institutions where Christmas parties, picnics, even sports are held for the "higher staff" on one day, and for the "lower grade staff" on another. Is it so difficult for us to mingle and interact with others who are not of our status or profession? If we do, we will find that our stories, concerns, fears and prejudices too are the same.

Whenever we exclude people from meetings, social and family events because of their professional status, we violate their sense of dignity. When we say, or make them feel, "You don't belong here," or "I cannot accept you because you are of a lower profession than me," we hurt them and crush their self confidence. People who are crushed and made to feel inferior, and treated like worms, will not allow themselves to be treated this way for long. At some point they will retaliate and usually it is with violence and a sense of vengeance.

Being gentle in response to this kind of violence is easy. Inclusion is the antidote to exclusion. Warmth and embracing is the corrective medicine for isolation.

A senior doctor went to the retirement function for his mechanic friend. He was welcomed warmly as usually such appearances by people from other professions are rare. Much to his discomfort he was given a special place to sit as he was " the doctor." Many were envious of this man's doctor friend. He spoke about his friend and reminded his friend that he became a doctor because of his influence. He told the audience that this mechanic was good at maths, and as he was not, he was the one who used to help him and get him to focus on his weak subject, every evening. If he had not passed maths, perhaps he too would have been a mechanic or an electrician and so paid a wonderful tribute to his friend. This is gentleness. It does not take much to be gentle like this.....just the sensitivity that makes one realize we are part of one humanity.

Do you have a friend who is not of your high status profession – perhaps a postman or plumber? What keeps you together as friends? What prevents you from having such a friendship?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 21

CASTE, VIOLENCE AND EXCLUSION

Suggested reading: Romans 15: 3-7

Some 160 million people in India live a precarious existence, shunned by much of society because they are Dalits—the caste at the bottom of our society. To be Dalit today means a life of segregation, exclusion, discrimination, exploitation and violence. Many of my friends do not believe that there are still tea stalls and eating places, bus stands, wells, and footpaths where Dalit people cannot eat, stand, drink water from or walk on not far from where we live. Rape, murder, burnt houses, lost cattle, and bonded lives are the reality for many Dalits. The word “parayan” in Tamil is the worst form of insult.

Violence towards Dalits presents itself in various ugly forms. Basant Singh is a Dalit who lives in Mansa village in Punjab. Born a Dalit, his is an inheritance of loss. His daughter, Baljeet Kaur, was gang-raped by upper caste men of her village in January 2002 for daring to walk along their path.

A woman mid-day noon meal maker in a south Indian Village school was proud of her job and heaved a sigh of relief when she was given this job. At last she could earn the family's needs as her husband was a hopeless drunk. Within a week there was an uprising. Parents found out that she was a Dalit woman and forbade their children to eat what she had cooked. They would rather their children had no food than eat food that was cooked by her.

In an account by Dalit writer Bama, Chinnaponnu had touched the lunch box of a high caste child and was beaten badly for it. The next day, Paripoornam went up to Class IV, where Chinnaponnu studied. The children told her that the teacher was in the office room. She walked quickly to the office. Chinnaponnu had to run to keep up with her. The headmaster and the teachers were all in the office. Paripoornam was very angry, but she controlled herself and said softly: “Sir, children give and take things among themselves. For such a small thing, the kids of your street have beaten my daughter and she no longer wants to come to school.”

The Class IV teacher glanced at Chinnaponnu and said something to the headmaster. The headmaster asked Paripoornam: “You have come all the way here for such a small matter? Anyway, your daughter is at fault. The donkey sleeps in the shelter of a wall and dreams of a mansion! If your daughter had touched their things and eaten from them, how would the children of our street eat? Go on, tell me. What, don't you know the customs of our country? Instead of teaching those to your daughter, you have come here for justice!”

A young government doctor told me that it was his dream to study medicine as he had watched his father die of sickness and had not been able to do anything about it. He wanted to make sure that other Dalits did not die this way. His voice shook, and tears rolled down his face. “Today I am a doctor with a good post graduate degree. But patients would rather wait for three to four hours and see another doctor than come to meall because word has got round that I am a Dalit.” “Look at me,”

he said, "I am well dressed, I speak well, but still the issue of caste haunts me." Then I saw his fists clench and saw the rage in his eyes. "It will not be for long," he warned me. "All this will change, just you wait and see." The warning alarmed me.

Lakshmi, the girl who picks up my daily garbage told me how she was beaten with a metal rod by an old man because she dared to ask for water on a hot day. She was humiliated and angry and she cursed that old man in a frightening way.

Apart from the violence meted out to Dalits, there is the violence that Dalits themselves harbour within them that has been the result of generations of insult, humiliation and violence. The caste wars, and retaliating battles that spring up all over India are a sign that violence, violence that we cannot imagine right now will scorch and scar us as never before, if we continue to practice the policy of exclusion and discrimination and violence where Dalits are concerned. So how does one be gentle in the face of such discrimination and violence? One way is to just listen to their stories and share their pain and accept that historically we have done them wrong. We need to read Dalit writers and poets and hear what they are saying, listen to Dalit musicians, and see Dalit art and realize how deep their pain and humiliation is. And then think of ways to alleviate that pain through education, employment, and socially uplifting measures, while respecting their distinct culture.

Have you ever thought of what it would be like to be such an easy target for violence and discrimination? How would you treat a Dalit colleague? Can you think of ways in which you can make a Dalit person feel comfortable and at ease in company.
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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 22

THE VIOLENCE OF SILENT EXCLUSION

Suggested reading: Psalm 21

As we continue to think about the violence of exclusion, let's also think about the way we sometimes "withdraw" from those who love us. "I hate it when my husband shuts me out of his life," said a newly married wife. "I know he has some problems at work, but he won't share them with me. When I asked him, he replied, 'you won't understand and just becomes silent.'" This husband, by silently shutting her out of his life and refusing to acknowledge and respond to her emotional and psychological needs, is inflicting emotional violence on her. Such violence is passive as the husband causes emotional pain to the wife day after day without feeling guilt or remorse. Perhaps he does not know that it is violence.

In another scenario, a mother tries to understand what is going on in her teenage daughter's mind. The girl, shuts the mother out saying. "You won't understand." The mother stands outside her daughter's door with tears in her eyes and the pain of being excluded from her child's life breaks her heart.

A very competent wife who manages all the family's affairs, rolls her eyes and pushes her husband away when he asks if he could help with something. "You won't know what to do," she says and leaves him feeling isolated and humiliated. "What is my role within my family?" he wonders sadly and angrily.

In all three cases, the victims experienced the deep pain, the violence of exclusion brings. They cannot protest by screaming or hitting back in some unpleasant way, so they bear it silently and stoically. If it happens again and again, as such behaviour often does, they may go into depression, lose weight or put on weight, or turn to other forms of self-destructive actions. They cause grave psychological damage not just to the wife, mother and husband, but to the entire household.

If we look around us, there is the strong presence of passive violence everywhere in our lives. Usually we ignore it, or just wish it away. What can you really do when your wife, husband, mother-in-law, child, parent, colleague curses you or blames you for everything that is wrong in their lives? You can't beat them up for it, or take them to court, so you end up just putting up with and turning a blind eye to it. Turning a blind eye, does not make the matter go away, it only makes it worse as there is a fire quietly raging within the victim which will erupt sooner or later. Passive violence includes, name calling, teasing that insults and degrades one's dignity, disrespect and general uncouth kinds of behaviour.

All of us at some time or another have been given the silent treatment. Usually this is to make us think about our behaviour, or response to something. When we give someone the silent treatment because we cannot cope with their involvement in our emotions, we push them into an area which says, "not human". And this emotional violence.

Those who inflict such violence on others have to understand what it is that makes them wreak havoc on the emotions, and lives of those they love and who love them. If you are a perpetrator ask to yourself, " Why am I being so nasty? Is it because I am insecure or jealous?" Whatever the reasons, we have to get to the bottom of it and stop being the violent persons that we have become.

Have you ever been given the silent treatment? How did you respond to it? What did you learn from it?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 24

THE VIOLENCE OF SUPPRESSION

Suggested reading: Exodus 1: 8-16.

The violence of suppression has weighed heavily on humankind since the beginning of history. Men who had muscle, land, intelligence, wealth and weapons controlled lesser important ones through conscious, forceful, violent actions to prevent them from having what they had - land, wealth, education and power. They suppressed them with fear, violence, and by keeping them as poor and as ignorant and dependent on them as possible.

If you look around us today, the scenario is as before. Nothing has changed. The instinct to suppress is alive in all of us. Men suppress women. The best of parents suppress their children's curiosity, talents, energy and creative growth. Many mothers suppress their daughters' desires to be independent, fearing that the girls will grow away from them emotionally. Bosses suppress their juniors' promotion in fear that they will become more active and more prominent than they are. Teachers suppress children's creative outbursts. Husbands suppress their wives. Those who think they have the right ideas suppress those with different or opposing ones. Wherever one person holds more power than another, or is physically stronger or richer there is the temptation to suppress. So we are all perpetrators or victims of suppression in some way or another.

In every act of suppression, there is some violence. It may not always be physical. Often it is emotional and psychological. Suppressing someone makes the perpetrator feel good. It gives him/ her a sense of power and the weapons needed to control someone else's life completely. Perpetrators become ruthless when the suppressed lift their voices, use their pens, try to run away, or gather support. These acts bring out the worst in them. One very good example is the story of Moses in the Bible. Pharaoh, ruler of the Egyptian empire suppressed the Hebrew people in his kingdom and made them slaves. When it was known that the Hebrew race was multiplying fast, he had all the male babies killed at birth. An example of ruthless, violent suppression born from fear of a minority group become stronger. When Moses their leader appeared before another Pharaoh and appealed for their freedom, he would not let them go. As a punishment he made them work harder in even more difficult situations with the use of whips and violence.

How do the suppressed feel? I asked a few people who were in suppressed circumstances to describe how they felt. These were some of the responses.

" I feel like an insect, always waiting to be crushed."

" I feel angry and violent. Sometimes the desire to hurt, rises strongly in me."

" One day I will teach him a lesson."

" The first thing I will do when I get to sit in his chair is to treat him in the same way. "

A person who is suppressed feels shame and humiliation at being put down, scolded, and treated in an inhumane way. He /she and looks for ways to take revenge. They experience deep pain and anger towards the perpetrator and at some point, will revolt, usually with twice as much violence than the one who suppressed them. Remember the ugliness of the French and American Revolutions?

The revolutions of the 20th century in Argentina, Chile, Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and places in Africa have shown us that violence is not the answer to suppression. If we look at the history of our own country, and South Africa, we are happy to note that dialogue and a non violent approach works better for everyone, even for the perpetrators.

List down different ways in which people suppress others. If you have been in the position of the suppressed, share how you have felt.

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 25

THE SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH

Suggested reading: Genesis 27: 19-41

Have you ever thought about why we suppress truth? Those who suppress truth whether in the form of information or knowledge, have power over others. Truth enables us to be strong, live with a sense of purpose, and to think without fear. Lack of the truth makes us ignorant, fearful and vulnerable. When we are vulnerable, those with power over us can get us to do what they want. The suppression of truth and violence go hand in hand, because there are always people who question the truth and come to conclusions by themselves. Such people are threats to those in power, hence the need for violence. Martin Luther, in an age when the Church held great power over the ordinary person and used this power to become richer, questioned the truth of salvation and coming to the conclusion that it was attainable only by faith in Jesus, not through the sale of indulges and by lighting candles. The suppression of this truth made the Catholic church in Europe even richer than individual empires.

The suppression of the great spiritual truth that all men and women are created equal and in the image of God, has been the cause of so much violence. Just think of the power it gave people like Hitler, George Bush, Lenin, the aristocracy during the reigns of the Kings of France, the British and Spanish settlers when they massacred the native populations in the Americas and our own selves in the way our ancestors divided themselves into castes. Today, though most of us know this truth, we still seek to keep it from those who are ignorant of it, through violence.

Even in our daily lives we suppress the truth. We realize that a new colleague is somewhat of a genius. Letting everyone know about his gifts and creativity and accepting his ideas makes us feel small and insignificant. So what do we do? Squash him at every opportunity. Veto his ideas. Don't send her for conferences. Give her the most routine things to do. Isn't this suppression and violence?

Many husbands adhere to the false truth that they are superior to their wives and will not allow them to make decisions, be independent in their thinking, or be responsible for their finances. Often the only way to reinforce this truth is through violence.

Very often, parents will not allow children to get close to their respective in-laws. The mother keeps the children away by telling them false stories about the larger family. Fear of children being close to others and selfish possessiveness makes them suppress the truth that they too are loving kind people. This too is a form of violence.

Sometimes we suppress truth for what we think is a compassionate reason. To spare someone close to us needless pain. But truth has a way of raising its head even in such circumstances. A close friend of mine was born without legs and was given away at birth. She grew up in an orphanage thinking that her parents were dead. Her father who gave her away at birth told her mother that the baby died at

birth. Both mother and child went through almost three decades of deep pain until the truth surfaced in an explosion of emotions. The person who suppressed the truth gave the others a death sentence of a lifetime.

If we pursue the idea of living gently in a violent world, then living according to the great truths becomes a must. Respecting another as much as you would want to be respected, allowing someone else to have as much as you have, giving another the same opportunities that you want for yourself and your family, all become not just idealistic theories, but the pathway to a real way of life.

Are there any truths that have been suppressed from you? How did you react when you discovered the truth? What kind of truths do you suppress? Why?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 26

THE SUPPRESSION OF DISSENT

Suggested reading: Luke 18: 19-24

Almost throughout history, anyone who dissented from widely held main stream ideas , was burnt, tortured, imprisoned and put to death. { Look at the lives of Socrates, Jesus, St Paul, Galileo, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Steve Biko, and others.} Those who suppressed dissent belonged to the most powerful groups and often had motives for suppressing dissenters and their new ideas. Instead of choosing to dialogue with the dissenters, which required time, sensitivity, and the ability to listen and respond carefully, they preferred to stamp it out with violence.....using the stake, hangman's noose, the torturer's nails and knives, and other forms of machineries of death.

Dissenters are necessary to a democratic way of life because they question accepted ideas which may have become stale, corrupt or irrelevant. They look for alternate lifestyles, stand up for the voiceless and look for ways to include forgotten sectors of society. Even today, dissenters are perceived as a threat to the powerful, whether in government, academia , industry, religious traditions or the creative arts. Censorship, book burning, slashing, decreeing a fatwa, murder and rioting have taken the place of the earlier ways of putting a dissenter down. But nevertheless all are forms of violence.

A young friend of mine shared with me how her thesis which had some new ideas and findings had been suppressed by her tutor. She was asked to delete parts which she was excited about, and threatened with withdrawal of research funds if she didn't. This may not be burning at the stake, yet, is a form of violence.

In places of academia, one expects freedom of thought and speech; being able to acquire knowledge and allowing that knowledge to bring forth new ideas without suppression. Today with little discussion in academic circles, and hierarchy that is strictly compartmentalized , suppression of dissent comes in the form of obstructing publications, withdrawal of funds and grants and refusing to employ or give references. This too is violence.

Even in the media, in many news channels we see how dissenters are voiced down, so that they cannot be heard. Speaking loudly, taking longer than one should to express a point, a sneer or a contemptuous look leaves the dissenter voiceless and powerless. More violence.

Writers especially have always been voices of dissent. Alexander Solzhenitsyn was sent to the Gulag; Dostoevsky to Siberia, Albanian writer Tomor Bahja to London, Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Writer, and Chilean novelist Luis Sepulveda are exiled writers whose voices are suppressed in their own countries. More recently Feminist writer Taslima Nasreen has gone from place to place because of her dissenting views. What is it that makes these writers such a threat that they have to be exiled? Can you see the violence in such an act?

You may not be a politician, or writer, but in every day life, many of us are dissenters who are suppressed. In schools, teachers with new ideas and who are creative are quickly suppressed with, " This is how we've always done it." At home, wives and children who dissent are slapped, ignored or suppressed in other violent ways. At work places too, creative people, those who stand up for fairness, and those who question unethical decisions are suppressed as trouble makers. Once such a label is pinned on you, progress up the professional ladder becomes hard.

How does one counter the violence inflicted on those who dissent? Condemned to death or exile by the Athenian government for his teaching methods which aroused skepticism and impiety in his students, Socrates heroically rejected exile and accepted death from hemlock, calmly talking to his friends, blessing the guard who brought him the cup of poison. This is a very passive way. Another, is to keep on dissenting in non- violent ways. When we think of being gentle in a violent world, it becomes our duty to dissent and use our freedom of speech and thought to put right ideas that are violent, which harm others, and restrict their freedom and rights. Being gentle can also mean standing in solidarity with those who dissent to bring justice, freedom and peace, so that they are not lone voices which can easily be put down.

Have you thoughts or ideas ever been suppressed? How did you feel about this?
Have you ever suppressed someone else's freedom? How did that make you feel?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 27

Suggested reading: Matthew 5: 38-42

THE VIOLENCE OF REVENGE

Violence, injustice, revenge these powerful forces, are acted out dramatically on the stage of our lives everyday. But we rarely stop to think about the effects that violence and revenge have on us and on those close to us. The word "revenge" to me, is a harsh, violent one, bringing images of fear, murder, blood, suffering and death. To others though, revenge is a "sweet" word, and if you don't believe me, just check out the number of books written about it. Sweet, because it brings some measure of satisfaction.

Someone hurts us, lets us down or betrays us. We long to hurt them back, often in a way that humiliates them even further. Why do we thrive on feelings of revenge? Recent research shows that scientists have been studying our brains to find out what happens when we experience feelings of revenge. They have found that a part of the brain -- the dorsal striatum -- which normally sends reward signals, like the ecstatic feeling you get when you're in love, is stimulated when people desire revenge. Thus the pursuit of revenge is a turn-on. A rush of adrenaline surges through you and lifts you high. Like all turn ons, once you have tasted it, you want to do it again...and again, until it becomes a way of life.

Every family has its own stories about revenge and most of them are not sweet. Brothers and sisters, parents and children refuse to speak to each other for years; each tries to outwit or out manipulate the other and feels good when the other is brought down a peg or two. But where does all this tit for tat lead to? To peace or more violence?

A friend surprised me once by saying, "I believe in the Old Testament laws – an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." As I delved into his life when he had a problem, I found that he indeed lived by this rule. But he didn't seem happy, nor did he have any close family or friends to help him cope during his hour of need. Could it be that instead of the sweet rush of adrenaline, he experienced alienation and a sense failure? Something he had not expected?

For a while at least, the philosophy of 'an eye for an eye' seems to work, and may even be funny. A young, newly-wedded wife whose husband had scolded her, got her revenge by shredding his expensive shirts to ribbons. She felt good and imagined his face as he entered the room. He had hurt her, and she had her revenge. Now they were quits. When he came home, he was appalled - not just by his torn clothes, but by the anger and violence that lay within her. She could not understand his anger and reaction. He just could not find it in himself to live with her after that incident and packed his suitcase and went home to mother. A silly story really, but it shows how revenge affects us and those close to us.

Revenge is fundamentally self-defeating. For some people, revenge is a life long obsession. And like most obsessions, it is destructive. Anything that is self defeating

is not worth holding onto. Instead, letting go of the feelings of revenge and walking the path of forgiveness makes for a better and longer lasting life.

How many times have you said or thought, " I'll get my own back on him?" Or, "There will be payback time one day." Did you mean what you said, and get your revenge? How did this make you feel?

At what point do we turn away from revenge and walk down the path to forgiveness and peace?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 28

Suggested reading : Luke 23: 32-35

REVENGE AND FORGIVENESS

In the face of violence, there is a downward spiral of retribution and revenge which plunges us into more violence, bloodshed and grief. Our TV news is full of stories of revenge and retaliation which tear communities apart. It is what we expect, whether at a national level, – the violent invasion of the Golden Temple at Amritsar led to the murder of Indira Gandhi, followed by the killing of thousands of Sikhs – or a local one – caste or political violence in almost every town. Whenever there is violence, we expect retaliation and more violence. We bolt our doors, live in fear and expect the worst.

Is retaliation the only way to face senseless violence? Is revenge the only emotion one should feel when half our family is gunned down? Is there another way? We know that all religions have roots of mercy, forgiveness, love, non-violence, and compassion which enable us to live life on another level. Are these values of an ancient age and therefore not applicable to today's culture of violence? We live in a world gone mad with suspicion, revenge killings and sectarian violence. It seemed as if the culture of violence is firmly embedded in our societies, until we heard about the extraordinary reaction of the Amish at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania.

In October 2006, Charles Roberts entered a school and held the children as hostages. Emotions ran high during the hostage drama and the Amish community waited with fluttering hearts not knowing what was going to happen. Roberts killed five little girls and himself. The community was shocked and in grief.

Dark, cold, frightening words like retaliation and revenge are not part of the Amish's vocabulary; instead, love, compassion and forgiveness is. Despite the anguish and shock at the murder of their beloved children, they attended the funeral of Charles Roberts after the burial of their own children. The families of those who had lost children visited the Roberts family to condole with their loss. The elders of the Amish community set up two funds in the wake of this tragedy - one being the Nickel Mines Children's Fund, and the other, the Roberts Family Fund, for the children of Charles Roberts. The Roberts Family are the children of the gunman, who have been left without a father and with a horrible and confusing legacy. The Amish have seen to it that the children will not suffer for the sins of their father. The widow of Charles Robert, and her three small children, have been invited to join the Amish community to find security and peace.

One can only stand in awe of the Amish Community of Nickel Mines, for reminding us of the strength of forgiveness, love and compassion in the face of such violence and grief.

Forgiveness rather than the desire for vengeance which the Amish have shown both at the individual and community level, springs from the example and teachings of Jesus, the foundation of their faith and way of life. For others, their faith may lie

elsewhere in someone else. Wherever our faith lies, to see the need to forgive, and walk the extra mile for those whose victims we are, is a choice given to every one of us. Choosing to follow its path lifts us from the murky depths of bubbling, angry feelings to light and life. Just like the Amish, it is a choice that we too have to make when violence destroys our lives. What would we choose – revenge or forgiveness?

When the Amish walked the path of forgiveness, it seemed so easy, wholesome and beautiful. Was it so easy for them I wonder? There must have been many there for whom this must have been painful, but who believed in its power because they had seen it work at other times. It is only when we practice forgiveness in small ways, that we too will be convinced of its power. Only then can we face the brutality of violence with forgiveness, compassion, gentleness and love.

Gandhi said, " An eye for an eye, will make the whole world blind" What does this mean? How do you think the Roberts Family reacted to the generosity of the Amish
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NO 29

Suggested reading : Exodus 2: 11-

REVENGE IN THE WORK PLACE

I'm sure most people would say that they work in a very pleasant atmosphere and would deny instances of violence and revenge. But if you scratch under the surface a bit, you will find hard, angry, vengeful feelings in the best of places and people. Have you never thought, 'I'd like to kill him' or, ' just you wait, lady, I'll get my own back on you.' Have you never hid a piece of information, deliberately forgot to give a message, done something sneaky or indulged in pettiness and got a sense of satisfaction while watching your colleague squirm?

What causes these ugly thoughts and feelings? The first thing we should realise about revenge in the workplace is that it is provoked. Someone offended another person and hurt their feelings; someone was treated with disrespect; someone's dignity was demeaned; someone's self esteem was destroyed; some injustice was done. These happen in hospitals, factories, universities, schools and wherever people work. Anger begins to reside in the workplace, play havoc with relationships and has serious negative consequences for both the employer and the employees. The energy, passion and dedication put into work becomes less; production and creativity may decline; there may be acts or words of violence and sexual harassment. Certainly there will be thoughts and feelings of revenge.

Most of us can carry a large load of small injustices, but there will one day be something that tips us over the scales. An unfair comment; a cutting remark in front of others; a promotion denied; an opportunity passed on to someone else; unappreciation of hard work. This is when the thirst for revenge becomes acute and only giving into these feelings will assuage the thirst – or so it seems.

So, the war begins.....of words, petty acts, negative reactions, harassment of all kinds. When revenge takes over common sense, comradeship and good feelings at work, terrible things happen. The first to be destroyed is relationships.

A young typist was scolded harshly and accused of carelessness in front of many people. She was most hurt and angry that no one stood up for her, especially as they all knew that it was the boss's fault and not hers. In her anger, she decided to make things difficult for her colleagues. She stopped running errands for the others, and doing the little things that made others depend on her efficiency and goodwill. Her smile became a grim twist of her lips and her voice, a snarl. Her anger changed the atmosphere of the place where she worked. Everyone became snappy and touchy; no one trusted the other, the friendliness had disappeared. Her boss made more demands on her, her efficiency and energy levels dropped. The young woman was not happy. Revenge did not seem so sweet after all. So she decided to forgive her colleagues and go back to being the kind of person she was once before. But before she did this, she wrote a note to each of them telling of her anger and hurt and asking for forgiveness for the way she took her anger out on them. There was a vase of beautiful flowers on her desk the next day and several letters. The Catholic writer, Dorothy Day said: *"We plant seeds that will flower as results in our lives, so*

best to remove the weeds of anger, avarice, envy and doubt, [so] that peace and abundance may manifest for all."

We live and work in an imperfect and unfair world where everybody looks for peace, a sense of belonging and community. Only being able to forgive and move on with gentleness can give us this security and enable us to live in hope of a perfect and just world.

Think of some of the ways people take revenge in the work place. How does this affect work and relationships in your place of work?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 30

Suggested reading : Mark 10 : 35-45

THE VIOLENCE OF BEING POSSESSIVE

A young man was in love with a beautiful girl. " I'm a very possessive woman," she warned him, but he just shrugged his shoulders not understanding what she meant. A month into their marriage he found out what being possessive meant. His new wife called him almost every hour at work.....where are you? Who are you with? What are you doing?She checked his brief case, his pockets and his shelves; eaves dropped on his conversations; resented his time with friends and his family. Slowly, to keep the peace within the home, he gave in to each of her demands, until one day he realized that he had lost his freedom to be a human being – to have thoughts, likes and dislikes of his own. Have you ever thought of such possessiveness as violence?

A father was very proud of his son. From his early years he moulded him with great care – chose his books, his extra curricular activities, and even his friends. As he grew older, he groomed him for the best engineering college and monitored his work and leisure times strictly. Nothing and no one was allowed into intrude into this relationship. Today, the son is a musician, not an engineer and doesn't have much to say to his father. Isn't this kind of possessiveness also violence? The father perhaps thought that he was doing the best for his son, but was he? In not giving the son freedom to grow and discover his own likes and dislikes wasn't the father committing a kind of violence?

Being possessive rises from feelings of deep insecurity and the fear of being unloved. A possessive person feels secure only when he or she ties another person to themselves. Very often possessiveness is mistaken for love. " That's my way of showing how much I care," said one possessive lady. Nothing kills a good relationship faster than being excessively possessive. When possessiveness takes over, the space between two individuals shrinks until it gets reduced to nothing. This taking over of personal space results in the death of a good relationship.

A feisty young woman from a small town comes to the city to earn her living. Her distant cousin shows her around and helps to ease her into city life. Soon they fall in love. What should be a wonderful love story, changes as he becomes possessive and great demands are made on her. She feels guilty knowing that she should be grateful to him for making her the smart young woman she is today, but wanting her freedom at the same time. He becomes angry as he feels pushed away and not needed as much as before. Finally after a big argument, they learn a bit about each other. She apologizes and tells him she feels badly because he has been such a great teacher and that she owes so much to him. He too has learnt his lesson and knows the reason for her resentment. " I realize now what I was doing, " he tells her. " I wanted you to grow to your full potential, only as long as I was there to help you achieve it. I wanted you to be free as long as you were in the cage I put you in. " he wisely understood that being so possessive of her put a terrible strain on their love.

There is something within us that makes us want to possess whatever is beautiful and to have it exclusively for ourselves alone – whether it is a painting, or a book or a relationship. We read in the Bible that the disciples James and John were so possessive of Jesus, that He rebuked them for it.

Let's remember what the poet Khalil Gibran says of possessiveness in relationships.
"Let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls....
Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping"

How do you feel when someone wants to suffocate you with possessiveness?
Do you think that being so possessive is a kind of violence?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 31

Suggested reading : Matthew : 9 - 13

THE VIOLENCE OF CORRUPTION

The word corruption in Latin can be broken down to this.....the heart {corr} destroyed {ruptre} - a destroyed or broken heart, a violated whole. That is what corruption does to oneself and to those we inflict it upon. Have you ever thought of corruption as a nasty piece of violence? For the rich and well to do, corruption is just an inconvenience - but for the poor, it plunges them further into poverty and debt and disgrace.

Sometime ago, while applying for a ration card, it soon became evident that unless I paid Rs 500 to the clerk, it would not get stamped. So I quietly paid it off. A few months ago, my maid also applied for the same stamp on her card. The amount had been raised. Being an attractive woman, the man in charge made her come three times to the office, once during a time when there was no one around. She finally borrowed the large amount needed to stamp her card. This type of monetary corruption is seen in almost every office and one adjusts to it. But the sexual corruption is more subtle. It cheapens, defiles and violates the woman.

In almost all banks the bank manager puts 30 % of the given loan into his pocket without a shame. If it is someone who can afford it, it can be shrugged off. But often it is the poor man or woman who is burdened with the harshness of this kind of corruption.

Almost all our educational establishments and hospitals are corrupt in management. The doctor at one of our local hospitals was caught giving sterile water as pain killer injections. Again, it was the poor who couldn't afford better health care who went to him and were cheated. A prestigious local school during inspection time, just shifted teachers from one of their schools to another to avoid paying tax. During medical exams many teachers openly ask for "gifts" so that their students can pass their exams. One Phd examiner asked her student for a costly silk sari to be given to her the day before her exams. The student of course was a poor girl who had to borrow the money to buy this. Corruption is a disgusting form of violence, as it destroys each person's soul a little.

When we think of our politicians, their corrupt ways know no end. There have always been two ways of dealing with corruption. One is to refuse to pay and suffer the consequences. The other is to pay up and seethe inside for being taken for a ride. Both these ways do not touch the corrupter in any way. So is there a third way which will appeal to the corrupter's soul?

In the 9th Chapter of Matthew, Jesus meets a tax collector. Tax collectors were known for their corrupt ways in those days. Jesus does not shun him, or wag a finger at him; instead he shows him a new way of life which will enhance his dignity as a human being. We know that Matthew gave up his corrupt ways and became a follower of Jesus.

Perhaps that is what we too need to do each time we meet a corrupt person. Show them through our own life style that life and dignity is not to be destroyed but enriched and blessed.

How do you deal with a corrupt person? Do you pay up or fight till you can win no more?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 32

Suggested reading : Psalm 42

THE MEMORY OF VIOLENCE

I'm just back from Dublin where I attended a consultation for the Healing of Memories caused by the pain and suffering borne by violence. Five case studies from Guatemala, South Africa, Cambodia, Germany and Northern Ireland were presented by compatriots with a deep understanding and a first-hand experience of the conflicts in those areas, and the reconciliation and healing processes that have been taking place there.

Faced with the terrible experiences of gross human rights violations and conflicts in these areas, there came a great need to heal memories that were fractured and tortured once these conflicts were over. Some memories brought experiences of evil that we have done, and evil we have been forced to suffer. All of us have been hurt or have hurt others in the process of our relationships.

Memories haunt and disturb us. Memories also have a restoring function. So how we remember our past is vital to how we deal with our present, particularly after experiences of violence, conflicts and gross human rights violations. These painful memories need to be dealt with before we come to build a more peaceful and reconciled community.

Pain and memories of violence and suffering destroy us physically, emotionally and spiritually. We would like to forget the painful, bad memories that were inflicted on us so that we can move on with life. We live at a time when we have been experiencing episodes of ethnic and religious cleansing in different parts of the world. Given the rather dreadful and horrific situations that many people have experienced, how do we relate to those who have been the perpetrators of pain, suffering grief and loss? How do we look at a group of people who have wiped out whole families and neighbourhoods for no reason other than that they were of a different faith, colour or ethnic origin? Can we forgive a group or community that has hurt us so badly and taken away all that we possess and hold dear — our homes, children, parents and livestock, and not wish the same on them? Can we live again in peace with those who have instilled chilling fear within us? Can we face those who have threatened our existence and the very core of our faiths and stand side by side with them, and share bread with them again in friendship and peace? Peace builders and those who work for reconciliation say that it is hard work, but that it is possible to move on.

There is another kind of memory – destructive memory – memory that fuels conflict from one generation to another – memory that is soaked with poison. Memories where

the elders teach the young to hate – they tell the stories, they remember and there is venom connected to the memory. Such memories need healing and liberation.

How do we transform destructive memory to healing memories? Perhaps the first step on the journey to healing and wholeness begins with the passage from knowledge to acknowledgment. Where the pain and suffering is not borne in silence and hidden away, but is told, listened to with compassion and acknowledged as truth. Two families had not spoken with each other for two generations until both of them died. The next generation did not know what the issue of separation was about, until they found a love letter from the sister of one to the other man. It was then known that the brother had forbidden the sister to meet this man and also ruined his business so that he would have no chance of marrying his sister. The next generation continued the distrust and by this time there was competition between the two families. In the next generation after this, two youngsters fell in love and were told that they could not get married because of the past hostility. When the letter was found, it helped to clear up the mystery and to acknowledge that one member had in fact behaved terribly towards the other, four generations ago.

As hurting individuals, communities and nations, we need to tell the truth, listen to it and act on the new truth however painful it may be, to be able to move through pain and come to a point where we can begin to live healed, meaningful, joyful lives.

What kind of memories need healing? How would you help someone heal painful ones?

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LET'S THINK TOGETHER -

NO 33

Suggested reading : Psalm 6

THE VIOLENCE OF SUDDEN DISASTERS

In the gardens of the Dominican Priory at Tallaght, { Dublin} stood an old, gnarled walnut tree. This particular tree, called the Maelruan tree, with its huge, canopy-like branches captivated me. It wasn't just a beautiful tree, it was tree that began speaking to me and I had to hear it's story.

I had just been listening to people whose lives were destroyed by sudden violence. Often, the destruction was caused by meaningless violence over which the victims had no control. A bomb going off in the middle of the street; a child stepping on a landmine; a young man disappearing suddenly because of his political beliefs. These may seem extreme to us, but we too in our daily lives face all kinds of unexpected disasters.....an illness, an accident, a failure, financial disasters, betrayal.....the list is be endless. This kind of sudden violence can leave us stricken with exhaustion and depression. How do we cope with this kind of violence? Whom do we blame for our violated state? What will help us regain our destroyed self?

As I stood beside the walnut tree, it reminded me that all of Creation gets hit by sudden violence from time to time. In 1797, this tree was sliced into several parts when lightning struck it during a fearful storm. Branches fell far apart and some parts of the tree appeared to wither and die. Then over a period of time, it seemed as if the broken tree faced Nature, which with all its fearful violence had tried to destroy it. The tree despite the pain of being severed into pieces, refused to give into the violence and just die. The different parts of the tree slowly began to take root wherever they had fallen. Little twigs began to appear; then fresh new, leaves and finally the fruit. People picked the fruit and found it sweeter than before and marveled at it.

How like the walnut tree many of our lives are. We too are suddenly struck by a spectrum of violence - whether it is disease or the death of a loved one, or through the destruction caused by thoughtless everyday verbal and emotional violence - the sheer violence takes us by surprise. For a while, we are unable to make sense of it; neither do we have the desire or energy to rebuild our lives. But like the walnut tree, we too get new life, through faith and mercy. The fruits that we bear may not be the same as before, but they will be sweeter, with a lovelier fragrance. Those who taste our fruit, which may be in the form of kindness, compassion, empathy, or a commitment to work to end violence and suffering, will truly marvel at the new life that has given birth from violence.