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'Hatred': When Bad People Do Bad Things

By MELVIN KONNER

WILLARD GAYLIN has long been one of our leading explainers of psychology, and his books on love, despair, the male ego and other puzzles of human nature have unfailingly made difficult questions plain. More important, they have maintained a human focus, never shifting into objectifying jargon, always recognizing that their subjects -- happy or sad, guilty or innocent, comprehensible or not -- are people, and ultimately can be understood only through an empathic if not sympathetic act of will.

Gaylin now brings these gifts to bear on the crucial issue of hatred, which differs from anger, rage, bigotry, paranoia, jealousy and envy, although it has something in common with each of them. He makes such distinctions carefully and with the accumulated wisdom of a lifetime of psychiatric practice. He is also at home with the classics of philosophy, and illuminating references to Epictetus, Montaigne, Hume and Sartre are as likely to appear as clinical cases. The two quickly converge on the book's first conclusion: hatred is not one thing.

One main type is found in people whose exceptional violent acts have made news. They are often mentally ill. Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, was psychotic; his paranoid delusions charged his disordered thought. Ted Bundy, the serial killer, was a psychopath, a seductive and confident liar who felt no remorse. Timothy McVeigh may have been just an extreme personality, or he may have deserved a diagnosis -- say, schizotypal personality disorder. Not that Gaylin views diagnoses as exculpatory; people can be mentally ill but guilty.

He gives a prominent place to individual differences, attributing them in part to genetic influences. He does not believe that everyone is capable of very violent acts, even in the heat of passion, no matter the provocation. And he assigns a prominent role to culture: "The average individual of a paranoid culture will become more paranoid than the average member of a trusting community." Despite the simplification, there is a deep truth here. Cultures have distinct child-rearing practices, ideologies, adult behavior and symbolic frames. The same person would turn out quite differently if raised in, say, the culture of Bali as opposed to that of the traditional Sioux Indians. A culture takes a roughly similar range of personalities and does two things: it shapes the mind and behavior of every individual, and it orchestrates the resulting range in a particular framework of behavior, belief and ritual. Although the genes resist complete shaping, the socialization process influences personality in at least some way.

Gaylin doesn't shrink from addressing mass violence. "Hatred" opens with a precis of Jan Gross's account of how, on a July day in 1941, the Christian half of the town of Jedwabne, Poland, brutally murdered the Jewish half, some 1,600 people. These were not

the mostly cleaner murders of the German killing squads: "They gouged out their eyes with kitchen knives, dismembered them with crude farm instruments, and drowned the women in shallow waters. Infants were pitchforked in front of their mothers and thrown onto burning coals, all accompanied by the shrieks of delight, indeed the laughter, of their neighbors." Wisely, Gaylin does not attempt diagnoses for the perpetrators of this crime - half the Christian adult males were later identified, by name, as murderers. But he also does not accept the assertion that they did it "because it was permitted. Because they could." This, for Gaylin, misattributes to a general human nature a criminal hatred that requires more specific analysis.

As indeed all human actions do. But here, I think, Gaylin misunderstands what is meant by human nature. Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, in "The Imperial Animal," posed the rhetorical question, "If we are not by nature violent creatures, why do we seem inevitably to create situations that lead to violence?" Indeed, my view of what it means to say that we are by nature violent creatures resembles Gaylin's analysis of violence caused by hatred: when a group of hateful, mentally ill leaders come to lead a population made susceptible by chronic frustration and envy, enraged by the nursing of past wrongs and prepared by bigoted ideologies, horrific acts of mass violence can and with a disturbingly high frequency do occur. What distinguishes hatred from anger, Gaylin says, is its "sustained nature." Perhaps his most original contribution is the proposal that hatred is an attachment, like love -- a lasting emotional state that brings one person into an intimate involvement with another, if only in fantasy. Love can be poisonous, but hatred frequently is.

There are passages with which one must differ. Gaylin writes: "A legitimate cause rarely generates the kind of hatred that sacrifices the innocent." Was defeating Germany and Japan in World War II a legitimate cause? Because the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki certainly sacrificed the innocent. He says that no one can "pretend to distinguish the Irish Protestant from his Catholic equivalent in physical appearance, speech patterns, Irish traits, Celtic humor or even cultural values." But in fact, as psychologists in Northern Ireland have shown, any child can tell them apart, not from physical but from numerous cultural traits beyond religion and politics.

Indeed, this is a standard dynamic in any deep division. Gaylin's phrase "pre-cultural societies" is an oxymoron, suggesting an uncharacteristic naivete. It is not true that "Al Qaeda is not motivated by the establishment of something"; it seeks the establishment of Islamic law throughout the world, and the destruction of the West and its freedoms is its members' path toward that goal. And comparing the Palestinians to Nazi Germany, even with qualifications, is neither fair nor helpful.

In general, Gaylin's attempt to mix psychoanalysis with Middle East politics is unsatisfying. He writes that "the Palestinians have become a community of hatred and the Israelis have not." The difference is one of degree: some Israelis have become a community of hatred, and not all Palestinians hate Jews. It is natural to react to extreme suffering with rage, and sometimes rage goes too far. Psalm 137, a moving lament about Israel's exile in Babylon, ends, "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones

against the rock." Such sentiments are extreme, perhaps immoral, but not unnatural or unexpected.

For Gaylin, hatred is a pathological state. Perhaps. But I feel a deep hatred for Osama bin Laden and am willing to call him evil, even knowing that he would use the same designation for me. I am not obsessed with rage, but I think about him hatefully at least once a day, and I would like to see him captured, humiliated and condemned to a long, undignified life. I imagine much worse fates for him, but I could not carry out or even order these fantasy-schemes. This at least separates me from the men of Jedwabne. Yet if one of my children had died on 9/11, I could perhaps do almost anything to bin Laden; one cannot know unless one is there. Still, I harbor real hatred and I don't see it as pathological. Indeed, contra Gaylin, hatred can be adaptive, especially in a creature with long memory; in hunter-gatherer life, it may have been essential.

But these concerns do not detract from my admiration for Gaylin's accomplishment. With enough space I might reconstruct the subtle, precise ways he distinguishes among anger, rage, prejudice, bigotry, hatred and other emotional states. But I could not reproduce his insightful account. There is nothing for it but to buy and read this wise and very disturbing book.

Melvin Konner's new book, "Unsettled: An Anthropology of the Jews," will be published in September.