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HUMAN CARING IN TROUBLED TIMES

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Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Carl Hollander, mentor and friend

We are living through times of violence, terror and collective trauma. Trust and intimacy are threatened everywhere. Isolation creates a false promise of control and safety. Cultural trauma abides the world over and is now more apparent than ever. All this comes upon us at a time when care for ourselves and others is most vital.

This Collective (the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama) and the method of psychodrama are founded on values which can promote inclusion, connection, and creative expression of individual and cultural differences. Often eyes glaze over when psychology is mentioned, partly because psychology has isolated itself from the context in which it is embedded, that is the socius, culture, the larger group. Part of the larger group includes the "anti-group" or the violent and destructive group expression of our most primitive and split off (unconscious) humanity. We must not dismiss the trauma we ourselves perpetrate on others, when we lack awareness of the primitive within ourselves, - the unconscious, the archaic, the undeveloped and the undifferentiated - and within every human being. A vigilant awareness of this may relieve people. It seems to me there is value in recognition that (1) this phenomenon is part of our shared common humanity, and (2) conscious awareness can be brought to our nature, that we can facilitate a cognitive shift by which humans can refrain from acting out. We must work to mitigate the continuous, collective projection of our darkest aspects onto other groups of people.

Action methods access inner wisdom and work to discover the blocks to full therapeutic empowerment and authenticity. I have heard people say "the violent people we have always with us." Embracing that paradigm will lead to our utter destruction, and we must reject it, especially now. Human beings have always had choices about their behavior. Now, more than ever, it is time to grapple with difficult inner and outer realities. Our brilliance and creativity can illuminate these dark and dangerous times.

I quote the Dalai Lama on fighting back: At the end of one of his talks someone from the audience asked the Dalai Lama, "Why didn't you fight back against the Chinese?" The Dalai Lama looked down, swung his feet just a bit, then looked back up at us and said with a gentle smile, "Well, war is obsolete, you know." Then, after a few moments, his face grave, he said, "Of course the mind can rationalize fighting back... but the heart, the heart would never understand. Then you would be divided in yourself, the heart and the mind, and the war would be inside you."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men." And, "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate.... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Dr. Robert Muller, former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations (U.N.), was in San Francisco recently to be honored for his service to the world through the U.N. and through his writings and teachings for peace. Now Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Peace in Costa Rica, he witnessed the founding of the U.N. and has worked in support of, or

within it, ever since. At age eighty, Dr. Muller surprised, even stunned, many in the audience that day with his most positive assessment of where the world stands now regarding war and peace, when he proceeded to say, "Never before in the history of the world has there been a global, visible, public, viable, open dialogue and conversation about the very legitimacy of war. The whole world is now having this critical and historic dialogue -- listening to all kinds of points of view and positions about going to war or not going to war. In a huge global public conversation our world is asking: Is war legitimate? Is it illegitimate? Is there enough evidence to warrant an attack? Is there not enough evidence to warrant an attack? What will be the consequences? The costs? What will happen after a war? How will this set off other conflicts? What might be peaceful alternatives? What kind of negotiations are we not thinking of?" All of this, he noted, is taking place in the context of the U.N. Security Council, the body that was established in 1949 for exactly this purpose. (I'm in my 72nd year now, and I was a Junior in high school then.) Dr. Muller pointed out that it has taken more than fifty years to achieve the real function of the U.N., and at this moment in history-- the U.N. is center-stage. It is the place these conversations are happening, and has become, in these last months and weeks, the most powerful governing body on earth, the most powerful container for the world's effort to wage peace rather than war. Dr. Muller was almost in tears as he recognized the fulfillment of this dream. The largest peace demonstrations in the history of the world were taking place. "So this," he said, "is a miracle. This is what 'waging peace' looks like."

No matter what happens, history will record that this new era of the 21st century was initiated with a global dialogue. History will report that the whole world examined the legitimacy of our nation's actions, deeply, profoundly and responsibly, as a universal community. How can we create authentic happiness and self care in this atmosphere? Identity is formed and maintained in relation to isolation and intimacy. One expression of violence is the way we isolate ourselves and thus erode vital attachments. Vicarious traumatization of those who treat the traumatized and secondary compassion fatigue are ever present problems. Biological, psychological and social exhaustion, as well as existential themes of death, annihilation and non-being further exhaust our capacity to creatively and compassionately attend to self and others. We must protect everyone's right to be, to have needs, to separate and be ourselves, to be autonomous with support, to speak our own truth, to love wholeheartedly, and to find our own spiritual path.

That is where we are called upon to lead today, to take our country to the next step in the development of the human being. We are called upon today to be revolutionaries without force, revolutionaries of the spirit and of character. This is the revolution of deep personal example, which has always been just beyond the reach of our culture. We have work to do beyond our privileges of private ballot elections and free public assembly, beyond even the first amendment. We must behave as if we know that there is a "there" there, that we now have no other choice than to become more than we have ever been before. As if we know that we can no longer get to freedom without personal restraint. As if we know that we can no longer get to liberty without truth. As if we know that we can no longer get to peace without a willingness to abide in our suffering. We must become individual, personal islands of conscience in an ocean of indifference and sometimes chaos - islands who symbolize the original promise of the first democracy, the revolution of decency and compassion. We must become truth tellers and historians, too sophisticated psychologically to project the enemy outside and to demonize either Islam or George Bush. We must become formulas of justice and restraint. We must become poets and musicians who sing to the hearts of decent people in opposition to materialism and excess. We must become examples of the future so that we may begin to taste and love and cherish the dream ourselves, so that our work is not a sacrifice but a reward, so that our future is not only for some future generation, but also for our own. Our therapists and educators must become the juiciest people on the planet - authentic, integrated, compassionate, thoughtful and fully alive.