Receiving Cruelty

When someone is cruel towards us personally, the hurt can be devastating, particularly when we have done nothing to deserve the unkindness or cruelty. We may even ask, why are people cruel?

There is a considerable body of research that shows how ordinary people can be easily recruited to engage in harmful, sadistic behaviors against another. Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram demonstrated that the majority of ordinary American citizens who participated in a study blindly obeyed an authority figure in administering what they believed to be painful, even lethal shocks to a stranger.

Albert Bandura, also at Yale University, revealed that intelligent research participants were willing to give increasingly higher levels of shock to other college students when their victims had been labeled by a research assistant as "seeming like animals."

In another study, by Philip G. Zimbardo, it was shown that situational forces can distort individual values. Average college students recruited to role-play prison guards became their roles in a matter of days, behaving with increasing or escalating violence toward their prisoners who were simply other college students.

However, cruelty towards another essentially involves the cruel person lacking awareness or acceptance of the other's uniqueness of being, and the right to be free from cruelty. In a sense, the cruel act involves the cruel person deriving a personal gain such as increased prestige in his or her mind or attempting to have personal control over the other.

Those who have been bullied, abused, treated inhumanely or with malicious intent know all too well how any cruelty towards another human being can crush his or her spirit. Thevery vital essence of our humanness is somehow robbed when we are subjected to cruelty. But the same loss is also experienced in the person who commits a cruel act. This loss can be expressed in terms of a decline in empathy, that is the ability to identify with and understand another's situation, feelings and motives.

The abused person often suffers from a lack of self-esteem, and the ability to empathize with himself and the experienced cruelty. He blames himself for what has happened. But with good fortune, therapy and maturation he can come to see how he was the victim in the cruelty he experienced.

Sadly, and all too frequently, the abused person turns to alcohol, drugs or some other form of addiction or self-destructive behavior that helps him or her to bury the pain of the experience and to try to reclaim the humanness lost when he or she was treated cruelly.

As I have said previously, cruelty is cruelty regardless of its size. The little cruelties we experience also diminish the quality of our lives. While we may not be consciously aware of how a "little" cruelty has affected us, at a subconscious level the impact is being experienced.

For example, when someone treats us rudely, which can be seen as a mild form of inhumaneness or "little" cruelty, we can often slough the behavior off as simply uncivilized behavior –depending on the mood we are in and our state of mind. At other times, however, shedding the same rude experience can be difficult to do immediately and we have to work through the experience and deal with the ensuing anger, which is actually repressed fear that we are not deemed worthy of humane respect and decency.