

Giving Cruelty



Many people believe that they have never been cruel but will gladly tell you about how cruel other people can be. We have examples of barbarians, dictators, tyrants, and others who have shown great cruelty towards others. Almost daily we read about, see on the TV, hear on the radio, or learn about through social media, how someone was brutally murdered or beaten up or sexually assaulted or raped.

In the main, most people are not murderers, savage bullies, or sadistic monsters. However, an honest self-appraisal will reveal that there have been times when we could have been more kind or less cruel.

We generally loathe thinking honestly about the dark side of human nature that exists in most, if not all, humans. Oddly enough, though, we delight in the many TV shows and novels that go into great detail about how people can be cruel towards each other. We are afraid to think that, perhaps, each one of us has a cruel streak, whether or not it is exercised. But in truth, all humans have the capacity to be cruel in the same way that all humans have the capacity to be kind and generous in spirit

Often the cruelty we carry out is verbal and takes the form of unkind words spoken, passive aggressive behavior, "teasing," mean-spiritedness and out and out hostility. If we are truthful about how we have been or can be cruel, we come to a realization that our ability to be kind can be sometimes over-powered the urge or impulse to be cruel.

When we are cruel towards another, often the cruelty stems from feelings of retaliation, revenge, or wanting to "get even." Often our cruelty is a reaction to a situation or event that forces us to act out without thought or consideration of the other person's state of mind or being at the time.

Abject cruelty always is an attempt to exercise power over another. Cruelty is not always physically violent but can be verbal as in a sarcastic remark or a put-down. The sneer or "look" can be equally cruel. Ultimately however, cruelty stems from fear, fear that a person has something that one doesn't have. This "something" can be physical or non-physical such as a personality trait, talent or ability. Cruelty is always devastating to both the receiver and giver.

I know of this family where the father never bonded with his son, and appeared to hate him. He would constantly tell his son, in one way or another, that he would not amount to much. The son ended up being a junkie, living on the streets, and was never able to finish his schooling beyond a GED, and could not hold down a job. The father missed out on a valuable relationship that he could have had, and the son never received the love that he rightfully deserved just because he was born. When the father died, the son lost all hope of ever being able to have the love of his father. The son's soul had become trapped, locked in misery.

Hatred is another source of cruel motivations and actions. According to Wikipedia.org, "hate or hatred is an emotion of intense revulsion, distaste, enmity, or antipathy for a person, thing, or phenomenon; a desire to avoid, restrict, remove, or destroy its object."

The Dalai Lama has noted that the antidote to hatred in the heart, the source of violence, is tolerance that enables one to refrain from reacting angrily to the harm inflicted by others. Yet sometimes we have to react, for if we did not react, a horrible tragedy will occur. For example, the Rwanda massacre, the genocide in the Sudan and the murder of Bosnian Muslims. In each case the world, or world leaders, were not motivated enough to put an end to these killings.

continued on Page 2

One would hope that after the Second World War, with the extermination of millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, thinkers, artists and others, the human race would do everything in its power to prevent this from happening again. But again in the few years after this war, Stalin killed millions of his countrymen and women. This list can go on and on, from WW II to the present time.

In the World today, terrorism has brought cruelty to the forefront. But in the background, there are the more subtle forms of cruelty that many humans participate in, even knowing that the acts are cruel.

For example, there are people who love animals and eat meat. They eat the meat knowing about factory farming and the horrendous conditions the animal has come from. It may even cross their minds, while they are eating, that the animal was raised inhumanely but still keep on eating while reflecting on the chemicals and animal-remains this beast was fed in order to put food on the table. Compassion, sympathy, empathy for these creatures have not been aroused. These people would never beat a dog or kill an animal, but have participated in what can be a very cruel industry. In a sense they have abetted a cruelty.

It is the accumulation of these little “abetting” acts, which on the surface seem to be harmless, that leads to the fact that a very cruel industry can exist. These people were not personally cruel, just cruel enough to participate in a cruel industry.

Another example concerns the pornographic industry, with revenues larger than the combined revenues of professional US football, baseball and basketball franchises, and exceeding the combined revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC.

This is an industry that objectifies the human body and in the process, diminishes the sanctity of human sexuality. Often the “actors” in this industry have come from a life of child abuse or severe family dysfunction and suffer from one or multiple addictions. Sadly too, there are, according to one study, 100,000 Web sites offering illegal child pornography.

People, in general, are aware of the proliferation of pornography on the Internet, and the potential harmful effect it can have on the family, leading to pornography addiction and other problems in the home. Yet of all search engine requests, or a total of 68 million pornographic site queries, are made each day.

The people who are requesting, for example, the 116,000 daily peer-to-peer Gnutella “child pornography” requests may not be personally abusing a child but are abetting a cruelty being carried out and supporting an inhumane and destructive industry.¹

The above are two extreme examples, relating to human consumption, which demonstrate the conflict that may exist between what one knows is the right action and what one does. A thorough examination of one’s relationship with the objects, animals, people and the environment in one’s life can lead to greater awareness of how one can be wittingly or unwittingly cruel.

When we are desensitized and not moved by accounts or knowledge of cruelty, through our own apathy and inability to empathize or sympathize, we are shown the limitations of our hearts and minds. These limitations are not related to feelings of anger and disgust that such and such a cruelty can or did occur. This restriction is related to, however, how we feel about ourselves individually. For if one is truly connected in the world, one would see all humans as brothers and sisters as a part of a global family, within a sphere that contains animals, flora, nature, an environment and oneself.

As long as we consider another human to be “The Other,” we automatically become “The Other” as well. When we have become “The Other,” we also fracture the wholeness of our individual selves, so that within us we create an alien, not to be trusted, aspect of our being.

Once our being is split, we lose the necessary tolerance for otherness, and our ability to deal rationally with our own cruel impulses and those of others. Ultimately, this rupture in human personality can lead to our being cruel to ourselves.



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I experienced being cruel to another.

Jot down a few notes about your experience:

What were you doing?

What were you thinking about?

What were you feeling?

What were you aware of?

