

Witnessing Cruelty



The renowned inventor, thinker and architect, R. Buckminster Fuller, once said in his seminal text, *Explorations in the Geometry of Thinking*, that “a triangle is a triangle regardless of size.” In a previous section of this course, we became aware of the fact that a kindness, no matter the size, is valuable for both the receiver and giver.

When we are confronted with cruelty, it is the cruelty that is brutal or merciless that truly catches our attention. Yet, sometimes cruelty resulting from malice, spite, unkindness, meanness, nastiness, or vindictiveness seems to be somehow less cruel, as if this form of cruelty is simply a part of human nature.

Genuine kindness is an action that benefits both the receiver and the giver. However, with cruelty there is no benefit for either the receiver or the giver. Although one may find temporary pleasure or delight in making an unkind remark, all cruelty, regardless of its magnitude, lowers the self-esteem and self-respect of the giver and the receiver.

We witness cruelty every day when we watch TV, listen to or view the news, or read a newspaper. This vicarious experience of cruelty tends to deaden the senses to the simpler forms of cruelty that exist in our daily lives, cruelty that comes with the nasty comment, a sneer, a look or other form, of behavior that is meant to cause discomfort or physical and psychological pain.

We can be thoroughly shocked when we witness a barbaric act or cruelty firsthand. Yet oddly enough, we can witness murders, rape, torture and other horrible acts on television, in films or in video games and feel that they are not real and as such have little effect on our being.

However, it has been recognized that the subconscious mind does not easily distinguish between imagined and real experiences. In September 1999, the US Senate Committee on the Judiciary reported that by the age of 18, an American child will have seen 16,000 simulated acts of murder and 200,000 acts of violence.

The Academy of Pediatrics says, “More than one thousand scientific studies and reviews conclude that significant exposure to media violence increases the risk of aggressive behavior in certain children, desensitizes them to violence and makes them believe that the world is a ‘meaner and scarier’ place than it is.”

Dr. Joanne Cantor notes in her paper, “The Psychological Effects of Media Violence on Children and Adolescents” that “two independently conducted studies of adults’ retrospective reports of having been frightened by a television show or movie demonstrate that the presence of vivid, detailed memories of enduring media-induced fear is nearly universal.”

In the same way that kindness can be viewed as a spectrum based on degrees of awareness in a kind act, Cruelty can also be understood as a spectrum, ranging from unintentional to intentional cruelty.

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Here is a Spectrum of Cruelty based on degrees of awareness in a cruel act.

- Cruelty resulting from ignorance
- Cruelty resulting from pain
- Cruelty resulting from illness
- Cruelty based in knowledge
- Intentional cruelty
- Premeditated cruelty
- Satiating Cruelty
- Encouraging cruelty

At one end of the spectrum there is cruelty resulting from ignorance. In this case the individual who commits the cruel act is unaware that the act is cruel. Every year tragically, many dogs suffer from heat prostration and death due to being left in hot cars during the summer months. The owners are unaware that a dog does not perspire and can only cool himself down through panting.

The next level of the spectrum is cruelty resulting from pain. Sometimes when a person is experiencing physical or mental pain, she or he cannot help from acting out in a cruel way. The act is a reaction to pain. For example, it is not uncommon to hear about loving couples, who in the middle of a heated argument have said most unkind and even cruel things to each other. If they were in their "right" minds, they would never be so hurtful.

Moving along the spectrum, there is cruelty resulting from illness. Sometimes, if one is not physically, emotionally, or spiritually well, he or she can be cruel not stemming from intention but rather as a response to the illness.

Intentional cruelty is the next level of the spectrum. This is where a person knows that such and such an act is cruel but nevertheless carries out the act.

Moving on from intentional cruelty is pre-meditated cruelty where an individual plans and orchestrates a particular cruel act.

At next level in the spectrum of cruelty is what can be called satiating cruelty. This is where someone delights in the suffering of others, and the infliction of pain. Within satiating cruelty is the concept of Schadenfreude, which is a German term, meaning pleasure taken from someone else's misfortune, or shameful joy.

At the end of the cruelty spectrum is where an individual encourages and baits another to be cruel or to delight in a cruel act being carried out.