

Chapter 2

CUTTING PEOPLE OFF

The True Story of The Bomber

During the war of the United States and Vietnam, an American soldier was in a plane, dropping bombs on targets. All of a sudden, his plane was shot down. He bailed out into a ditch. As he climbed out, he saw a man pointing a rifle at him. The man spoke only Vietnamese. He didn't speak English, and the American didn't speak his language. But it's clear enough what someone is supposed to do when a man is pointing a gun, and so the American put up his hands and walked where the man with the gun pointed.

As they went marching through the jungle, the Vietnamese man tripped and fell. The gun was knocked out of his hands. The American picked up the gun, then picked up the man, handed him back his gun, and they went on as before.

Years later, the American was telling this story to a man named William Sloan Coffin, a minister who was against the war. At this point in the story, Coffin was startled. He asked

if it were not his duty as a soldier to use the gun to shoot the man and make his escape. "Oh, it wasn't that simple," the veteran said. "I forgot to mention that there was a parade of children following. They would have run to the village to tell them, and they would have come after me and captured me, so there was no point in doing that."

It had never even occurred to him to shoot the children.

We can all be grateful for that, and of course it's what we normally expect of people. Yet when he was up in his airplane, bombing the villages, he was killing children. From a distance, it was no problem. Close up, it was so horrifying that he didn't even think of it.



When Disconnecting Leads to Violence

One of the easiest ways for people to do violence is for them to be so far away from it that they don't see what it does. Up in an airplane, seeing the bombs exploding on the ground can look like a video game. The bomber doesn't think about what is really happening to people on the ground. There is distance between the doer and the victims. When people do this on purpose, it's called "distancing."

Of course, people often do see what happens after they've hurt people, right in front of them. In that case, they can do distancing in the mind instead.

One of the main ways to do this is to decide that the victim is bad, or deserves what is happening, or is barely even human. In fact, the idea that people are not human or not persons has been suggested about a lot of people—people of other races and religions, women, people with disabilities, babies, and anyone who is opposed to the government when that government is deciding who is and isn't a person. All these people have also been called garbage and trash, diseases and infections, parasites and animals, demons and monsters.

These are not just times where friends are kidding around with each other, or where family members insult each other but then later say they're sorry. These are long-lasting insults that can hurt the people they're hurled at even if no physical attacks come. But they also make those physical attacks more likely, because they've put up a distance in the mind of the person who may attack. Getting rid of trash or diseases or parasites, after all, seems like something that people would normally want to do.

Examples of the War of Words

	non-person	trash	disease
Native Americans	"An Indian is not a person within the meaning of the Constitution." <i>George Canfield, Am. Law Review 1881</i>	"[Indians are] the very dregs, garbage . . . of the earth." <i>Poet Christopher Brooke, 1622</i>	"The Iroquois had proved more deadly . . . than the pestilence." <i>Historian Francis Parkman, 1902</i>
African Americans	"In the eyes of the law . . . the slave is not a person." <i>Virginia Supreme Court decision, 1858</i>	"The negro race is . . . a heritage of organic and psychic debris." <i>Dr. William English, 1903</i>	"Free blacks in the country are . . . a contagion." <i>American Colonization Society, 1815-30</i>

Soviet enemies	"Unpersons who have never existed." <i>Designation for people purged by the Soviet govt.</i>	"A foul-smelling heap of human garbage." <i>Prosecutor Andrei Vyshinski, 1938</i>	"Every religious idea [is] . . . contagion of the most abominable kind." <i>Lenin, 1913</i>
European Jews	"The Reichsgericht itself refused to recognize Jews . . . as 'persons' in the legal sense." <i>1936 German Supreme Court decision.</i>	"What shall we do with this garbage?" <i>Christian Wirth, extermination expert, 1942</i>	"Some day Europe will perish of the Jewish disease." <i>Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Propaganda Minister, 1939</i>
Women	"The statutory word 'person' did not in these circumstances include women" <i>British voting rights case, 1909</i>	"Emptying refuse into a sewer [the woman's body]" <i>Author Henry Miller, 1965</i>	"The worst plague Zeus has made—women." <i>Ancient Greek poet Semonides</i>
Babies	"The word 'person' as used in the 14th Amendment does not include the unborn." <i>U.S. Supreme Court decision, 1973</i>	"An aborted baby is just garbage . . . just refuse." <i>Dr. Martti Kekkonen, 1980</i>	"Pregnancy when not wanted is a disease . . . in fact, a venereal disease." <i>Professor Joseph Fletcher, 1979</i>
Disabled	"New-born humans are neither persons nor even quasi-persons." <i>Philosopher Michael Tooley, 1983 (disabled in mind)</i>	"There's a lot of rubbish [patients] this morning." <i>ER doctor, 1979</i>	"The feeble-minded . . . contaminate posterity . . . whole nations have partaken of the infection." <i>Dr. Duncan McKim, 1901</i>

But it wasn't just that real people were treated like they weren't human. "Getting rid" of something also doesn't sound like so terrible a thing to do. If it's telling people they can't live where they've always lived, or they have to go to a prison camp, or even that they'll be killed, then using words like that is a way for the people doing it to put up a distance between themselves and the victims. This way, a war of words can start a war of injuring and killing others.

Using words to make something sound like it isn't so bad is called a "euphemism." We use these all the time in everyday life. A lot of the time, they make sense. When you say you need to go to the restroom, people don't really need to have details of what you're doing there. If you say to someone that you're sorry to hear that a grandparent passed away, everyone knows that the grandparent actually died. "Passing away" doesn't sound as bad, so it's a euphemism. But it's an honest euphemism, because everyone knows what it really means.

Euphemisms can get to be a problem in two different ways. One is if they're used to hide what is really meant. They become like a white lie. A person hasn't said something that isn't true, but the way it was said would deceive other people. For example, a spokesperson for a nuclear power plant once said the plant had "rapid oxidation followed by energetic disassembly." In other words, a fire caused an explosion. Notice that big words were used to make the euphemism, words that are hard for people to understand. This is a common way of doing it when it's intended to cover up something awful.

The other problem is when people start believing the euphemisms. They think of themselves as just getting rid of garbage when what they're really doing is hurting people. Because they describe it so it doesn't sound so bad, this makes it so they can do it at all.

People can also say that what they're doing is not their fault, but someone else's. Sometimes, the victims of the

violence are blamed for "making" other people do violence against them. This is called a "blame-the-victim strategy."

If a group of people is blamed for a lot of problems, yet anyone looking on from outside can see that it's silly to say that these problems are that group's fault, this is called "scapegoating." This comes from the practice among ancient Jews of having a male goat ritually given all the sins of the people and then let loose—escaping—into the wilderness, taking the sins of the people with him. Of course, the rotten things people had done were not the escaped goat's fault. But they had this ritual to let the scapegoat suffer the consequences for them, to send the sins away. So when one group of people blames another group of people for things which aren't their fault, and wants to make them pay for it, this is called scapegoating.

Another way for people to say their own violent actions are not their own fault is to say that they are the responsibility of an authority. That's usually their own government. In the last chapter, we talked about people being mean even when they didn't want to be, because they had an authority telling them to and they felt they were supposed to. It's also true that there are times when people do want to be that mean, but they say it's the government's idea rather than theirs.

People can also try to make their own actions look less bad by comparing them to other people's actions that are even worse. Someone says, "You may not like it that I kick my dog, but there are people who treat their pets way worse than that." This doesn't make it all right to kick the dog, but it's supposed to make it seem not so bad.

The best way of all for people to feel like it's ok to do violence is to come up with reasons why it's ok. They'll say that someone was nasty to them first, so they should be able to get them back. Or they'll say that they're defending some principle, or defending themselves, or defending other people.

Some people will argue that there are times when this

really is true, that violence is needed for those reasons. But we all know that there are times when violence is not needed for those reasons, or is really being done for selfish reasons, and people still use these kind of excuses. It's not surprising that people would want to find reasons to say they're doing the right thing. People don't like to think of themselves as the villains. You can pretty well count on people to come up with explanations for why whatever they're doing is the right thing to do.

How Do We Stop the Violence?

If cutting people off by using words to act like they're not quite human is a cause of violence, then it would make sense that using words to make them human again would help in stopping the violence. If people set up a distance from other people in their minds, then there may be ways of trying to get rid of that distance and helping them see other people for what they really are.

Some people have tried to use photographs of victims to convince others that certain kinds of violence shouldn't be done. These photos are meant to remove the distance of the mind from what happens because of the actions. By sharing what happens, people find it harder to think it's not a problem the way they did when they weren't thinking about that.

But a problem of doing this is that a lot of the people who see these pictures feel that the person showing them is trying to make them feel guilty. They resent it. They're gory pictures, and stomach-churning to look at. People hate looking at them. They often feel that they're being attacked. Sometimes, trying to stop people from cutting other people off takes more than showing them what happens when they do.

Still, there are other times when this does work. There was a famous picture from the American war in Vietnam,

where a bunch of children were running away from napalm. One girl in the middle of the picture had to tear her clothes off because napalm burns the skin, and the napalm was on her clothes. She looked really scared, and was crying. A lot of Americans saw that picture and changed their minds about whether or not that war was a good idea. They couldn't think about it just as a fight between countries any more, or a fight over what was the best way to run governments. There was a human face on it.

The girl's name was Kim Phuc. She got to a hospital all right and she's a grown woman today. She even came to the United States and spoke about how she could forgive what happened to her.

It's not just the photograph that put a human face on the war. The more we talk with others and get their points of view, the more we'll understand how we're all part of the human family and would all be better off if we didn't find different ways of using our words and ideas to cut each other off.

People around us may use words that talk about other people as trash, or diseases, or parasites, or evil monsters. These kinds of words can also be the first step in making people feel that it's ok to hurt those other people. It's not just a little thing for people to talk like that. Remember, in the electric shock experiments from the last chapter, people started out small and then they added a step and another step until they did something way worse that they would ever have thought to do at first. These words that make people out to be less than human, or demons, or garbage, these words can serve as that first step.

There's an old saying that goes, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." This is said by people who are defending themselves from having their feelings hurt. It's easy to understand why they would want to do that. The problem is, those words can lead to the sticks and stones. People have the idea that since it's only words,

it's not big a deal. That makes it excellent for a first step to get them started down the slippery slope.

It's even happened sometimes that people who are trying hard to work for peace will use words about people who disagree with them that cuts those people off. People talk about how we're in enemy camps, or that there is a battle line drawn. Even when this is not meant literally, and there is no danger that a person will actually use violence, there is still a big danger. By treating other people as if they were enemies rather than other people, all that may end up happening is a shouting match. That's a fight of loud words. This isn't as bad as a fight with guns, but it's not good for getting anything done either.

Yet there is a big problem in trying to stop all this. If you've ever tried to tell people to stop using words that put other people down, you may have noticed they get mad at you because you're criticizing them. When the people are not your friends but adults far away, then objecting might mean letters or demonstrations, and people don't like being criticized this way either. Sometimes, you just have to put up with their being mad at you, but other times, there are ways to be more gentle about it with them. At least if you have it in mind, you may find a chance to make it make more sense to them.

In the case of a friend, you can have a friend-to-friend talk. Usually, the best time to do that is at another time, not at the exact same time as the person is making the remarks. This is to keep it from seeming like you're attacking your friend. You can make it more like a conversation about something that bothers you.

One of the most important things to do when trying to explain things to a friend is to not label the other person. If a friend says something nasty about other people because of their race or religion, and you respond by calling your friend a bigot, this will not be the most helpful. This is true even if the friend does act like a bigot. People don't like to be labeled

as something bad. Besides, putting a label on someone like that is doing what you're suggesting they not do—putting other people down in a way that embarrasses them.

Instead, it's better to talk about how the words affect you. It seems kind of odd in one way, to say that it's better to talk about yourself, because that seems like it's selfish. But if it's said well, the other person doesn't have to feel like he or she is supposed to argue about whether you're seeing the situation the right way. You're stating the fact of how it makes you feel, rather than judging them. Much of the time, the other person can then share his or her own feelings. There may well be a lot more to the story of why he or she spoke that way than you know about.

Of course, putting others down is often done by people you don't know or don't know well. If you have in mind treating those people the way you would treat a friend, though, it's quite common that they'll respond to you the same way. All people have all kinds of stories in their pasts that help account for why they act the way they do now. If someone else is interested and understanding them, that means that they are being treated like real people. It also means that a problem that they need help with is more likely to be found out, and they're more likely to get the help they need.

Many times, a different approach will work better, and that is to not ~~to~~ challenge other people on how they said things, but just to make a point of saying them differently yourself. Say things that are true and also nice about the group of people that are being put down or cut off. Make them into human beings again with your own words.

This is especially important if you need to quickly move a conversation away from being mean, rather than letting people keep on saying ugly things, yet you also don't want to just start a fight. If the people being put down are hearing the insults, then of course that way of defending them becomes even more important. When they're out of earshot,

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though, you may be able to see that it's the best way to handle a situation. As with challenging people, though, there are also times when you may want to make a point of doing this at separate times, times when you don't seem to be arguing with what someone just said but just making conversation.

It's also not expected that any one person is going to go around fixing other people. Many times groups have gotten together to organize programs. They can do things like educate others about the value of other cultures, or see that people understand different religions, or show how to treat people with disabilities well. A lot of programs could use all the help they can get, and especially from young people.

It's especially important for young people to be involved in re-connecting people when others are trying to cut them off. When someone has had an attitude against a group of people for a long time, then that attitude tends to get hardened. It becomes way more difficult to get that person to understand what the group is really like, and how getting along with people in it can be done. Having these ideas for a long time means, of course, that a person has gotten old enough to have been around for that long time. Younger people generally have not yet had the time to have their attitudes get so hard. Young people also tend to be more likely to listen to other young people. That means young people have an especially important part to play in changing ideas that large numbers of people have, ideas that keep groups from getting along with one another.