

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  May / June 2004

Thoughts on the *Passion* – When Will the Violence End?

I must confess! I have not seen it, and do not intend to – Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of Christ*, that is. Some people’s lives have reportedly been positively changed by it. Others have found it confusing and disturbing. This range of reactions is not surprising given the fact that the crucifixion of Christ is an event ripe with a rich and complex blend of historical, social, and theological dimensions that calls forth much emotional intensity.

A good deal of the controversy surrounding the film and the varied responses to it have to do with two of the most provocative questions surrounding the crucifixion event, “Why did Jesus die?” and “Who is responsible for Jesus’ death?” Answering these questions in terms of the needs of our present day and time may require taking a look at the tragedy of the continuing violence against our fellow human beings.

As a pastoral psychotherapist, my vocational calling is directed at weaving together the teachings of psychology and Christian theology to facilitate healing and wholeness for people I see in the counseling office. A large percentage of my clients have suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of other people. Every day I listen to their stories. Some are filled with emotional and physical torture and with blood and tears. All are filled with mental confusion and emotional anguish and with disrespect and betrayal. Some are stories filled with terror and with screams for help and protection that were ignored or could never be brought to voice. All are filled with massive grief, disillusionment, humiliation, and shame. It often takes years of arduous work for clients to find the language to convey the truths their stories carry and then to find the faith and courage to verbalize them in some way.

The film and the crucifixion it portrays have caused many of these individuals a significant amount of cognitive confusion and emotional turmoil. The stories these clients share, and the ways they attempt to find meaning in the midst of their suffering, make it evident that the way we theologize and speak about pivotal events in the Christian story determines whether people can connect those events in a helpful manner with their own life stories. When they can’t, a valuable faith resource for healing and growth is lost. Some of the reactions I have heard to *The Passion of Christ* illuminate this problem.

One reaction I have heard is that the crucifixion is about “what Jesus did for us, and how much God loves us.” While this may be a commonly held perspective, what it suggests is that God is responsible for this gruesome sacrifice and that love and torture go hand in hand. Many of my clients have suffered long-term abuse at the hands of those who were supposed to love them and were told they were being abused out of love. As a result, they have struggled for years to stop blaming themselves for their mistreatment and to place responsibility where it belongs. An interpretation of the crucifixion that associates love with bodily harm by asserting that Jesus was brutalized because of God’s love for us merely reinforces the belief that they (and other victims like them) are responsible for the abuse done to them.

It is much more helpful to see the crucifixion as a tragic result of the confluence of cruel and unjust persons and systems of power, of persons who gave over their critical thinking to the emotional intensity of mob action, and of bystanders who lacked the courage and resolve to speak up for what is right and just.

The agony of Christ portrayed in the film has also

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prompted some survivors of abuse to minimize their own pain and loss. As brutal and savage as the torture of Christ was, it lasted but a few hours. As young children, many of our clients suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of their caretakers on a daily basis over many years. They had no opportunity for escape, and institutions responsible for their care failed to protect them. Much of the enduring power of the beating, humiliation, and cruel execution of Jesus over the centuries has been that it captures the daily life experience of millions of people around the world. It would be a tragic mistake to suggest that the pain and suffering endured by Christ was in any way greater than that laid upon these victims.

Lastly, the extreme violence in the film has caused many viewers to turn away or close their eyes. Dissociating ourselves from that which is overwhelming is a natural defense mechanism designed to protect us. But it can also keep us oblivious to the terrible deeds we humans sometimes do. Averting our gaze from the damage our actions and inactions do to other people makes it easier to avoid responsibility for them and to deny their real impact. The many victims of current day abuse and violence also reach out to us and show us their pain in the hopes that someday we will get the message - our continued victimizing of one another needs to end.

The more I do the long and difficult work of reparative psychotherapy, the more I am convinced that the major contributors to the increasing mental health crisis in our country are the violence we perpetrate on one another and the limited time and resources we set aside for the care and nurture of one another. Our lack of acknowledgment and respect for the pain we cause one another also contributes significantly to the rabid nature of the pattern of violence begetting more violence played out on the international scene on a daily basis. Cloe Madanes, a respected “grandmother” of the marriage and family therapy movement, expressed similar thoughts when she said, “. . .all psychopathology ultimately stems from the social evils of persecution, discrimination, and violence.”¹

The root meaning of the word “psychotherapy” is “tending to the soul.” I like that definition; it describes well what I do when I am working at my best. There are many ways of thinking about “soul.” The one most

helpful to me is that soul is that unique and special aspect of God that is given life on Earth through each one of us at the time of our birth. As such, the more we come to know our true selves and the souls of those around us, the more we come to know God.

The truly revolutionary aspect of the crucifixion event is that it was God in Christ who was the victim. It is a graphic story of a God who suffered at the hands of human cruelty and injustice. Because of that, it is a story of a God who can have empathy for, and who is in solidarity with, those who suffer the same. Being followed as it was with the resurrection event, it is most importantly a story about the use of divine power to creatively find new life in the midst of all the injustice, ugliness and cruelty we humans are capable of perpetrating, rather than seek revenge. For many of the clients we see at the Center, this is also their story.

J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D.
Director of Professional Education

¹ Madanes, Cloe, quoted in *The Family Networker*, July/Aug 1999.

C.O.O.L. Corner

Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life

Our children need to hear:

- ▶ a message of unconditional love. “I love you just because you are, not because of what you do or say.”
- ▶ a message of continuous support. “I will be here with you always.”
- ▶ a message affirming their worth. “I see your goodness no matter how you act. You are precious to me.”
- ▶ a message declaring your commitment to them. “I want to be with you.”
- ▶ a message of tolerance and acceptance. “I hear your voice, no matter what words you use.”

Women Helping Women 2004

A record number of 230 women and 7 men attended the 6th Annual Women Helping Women Luncheon at the Hotel Fort Des Moines on Friday, March 12th. The grand ballroom was filled to capacity and totally energized by Rekha Basu's presentation on *Taking Heat and Making Peace With It*. Rekha shared story after story of people who went out on a limb for someone or something they believed in. Taking heat for taking a stand often involved disillusionment and anger on the way to empowerment.



Thanks to West Bank and the Vicky Daniel Real Estate Team for helping to underwrite some of the cost of the luncheon. Bouquets to the event volunteer committee for their hard work: Miriam Davis, Starr Hinrichs, and Kathi Slaughter. And thanks to the 69 women who have made donations to the Center's Women Helping Women Fund. To date, we have raised just over \$3,000 to help subsidize the cost of counseling for women and girls who cannot afford the comfort and healing of therapy. Please continue to help us in this meaningful work by sending in *your* contribution to the Women Helping Women Fund.

Educational Events for the Community

The Center is once again sponsoring free community education events this spring to explore various complementary therapies available in the Des Moines community. The spring series is focusing on energetic therapies. All events will take place in the Burling Room at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, 4126 Ingersoll Avenue, in Des Moines. These events are made possible through a grant from the Community Innovation Fund of the Greater Des Moines Community Foundation. The events are free, but please call or e-mail the Center to let us know you will be attending or for further information (274-4006 or info@dmpcc.org).

Tuesday, May 4, 2004, 5:30 – 6:30 p.m.

Morgan Rivers

Zero Balancing ~ The Reunion of Body and Soul

On May 4, Morgan Rivers will introduce Zero Balancing, a hands-on bodywork method for aligning body energy with body structure through touch. It incorporates principles of Eastern and Western healing philosophies to help balance energy in the densest tissues of the body, the bone and skeletal system. In Zero Balancing, the practitioner works simultaneously with both the structural and energy systems of the body to bring balance. The presentation will include a brief demonstration.

Morgan Rivers, BA, Healing Arts Practitioner, has been doing massage since 1991 and Zero Balancing since 1995. She has a private practice at the College of Massage and the Healing Arts Center, where she also teaches part-time.

Tuesday, June 1, 2004, 5:30 – 6:30 p.m.

Kathy Gates

Qigong ~ Exploring Healing Energy

Start the month of June by taking some time to focus on your SELF! Breathe, feel, move, relax, explore your body/mind's potentials to let go of stress and tension and breathe in more vitality and tranquility via this Chinese form of energy healing. Qigong is a combination of gentle movement and meditation that is highly experiential.

Kathy Gates, BS, LMT, RM, is a holistic health facilitator with over 20 years experience facilitating mind/body/spirit exploration through individual training, therapeutic healing sessions, and classes. She has a B.S. from Iowa State University. She began studying Qigong and other energy-based modalities in 1993.

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation

The Foundation Board welcomed two new members at its annual meeting, March 29, 2004: Steve Schaaf of Pioneer Hi-Bred International, and Lyle Simpson of Dreher Simpson and Jensen, P.C. Margaret Swanson, community volunteer, was re-elected to a second term on the Foundation Board. Officers were elected as follows: Betty Durden - President, Hal Higgs - Vice-President, and D.J. Newlin - Secretary. The remaining board members include: Don Cordes, Paula Duncan, Don Easter, Henry Harmon, Scott Libbey, and Jan Moulton.

The Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation was established in 1995 to develop and maintain a permanent endowment fund to help secure the future of the Center and its ability to continue to offer the healing and comfort available through counseling to anyone dealing with the challenges of life, including those unable to pay the full cost of such services.

Please consider leaving a gift in your will for the non-profit organizations, like the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, that made a difference in your life or the lives of those around you. Please contact the Center to discuss various planned giving opportunities to the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation.

Memorial / Tribute Gifts to the Center

Let us again encourage you to honor a loved one with a memorial or tribute gift to the Center. Making a gift to the Center extends care, compassion, and esteem far longer than flowers can bloom. A gift to the Center is a meaningful way to remember a loved one or to pay tribute to someone on a special occasion. Let us know if we can help you arrange such a gift.

www.dmpcc.org

Visit the Center's website for more information on the Center's counseling services and staff, special events and classes.

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is a publication of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center; an independent, interfaith, not-for-profit organization. For over 30 years, the Center has been providing counseling and educational services to adults, families, adolescents, and children for the purpose of enhancing emotional, spiritual, and relationship health. The Center has satellite offices in West Des Moines, Altoona, Ankeny, and Urbandale.
Editor: Kathleen Murrin

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Des Moines Pastoral

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