Introduction

About 10 years ago we began doing therapy with troubled and often violent adolescents. As our work developed we began to receive invitations to consult with schools and communities throughout the United States who were struggling with aggression, bullying, and violence among young people. Guided by the premise that all people have the potential to be violent, the question that most nagged at us was: Why do some resort to violence while others do not? We wanted to understand what factors underpin this problem, and we wanted to develop strategies for counteracting those influences. From the many hours we spent talking with countless teenagers and their families in therapy and with the adolescent victims and perpetrators of violence in schools and communities across the United States, gradually our model for understanding and addressing adolescent violence emerged.

Our model assumes that indeed we all have the potential to be violent, but what seems to differentiate those who actualize this potential from those who do not is the interaction of four aggravated factors: devaluation, erosion of community, dehumanized loss, and rage. In this book we discuss each of these factors, explain what they mean, and outline strategies for how parents, teachers, therapists, and other concerned adults can take specific actions to address and ultimately reduce this violence.

Fifteen years ago, this book probably would not have attracted the attention of most of America. While urban, poor communities of color were well versed in the prevalence, consequences, and need to attend to adolescent violence, prior to the mid-1990s most of America had not yet recognized the seriousness of this problem. When we first

began working with violent teens almost 10 years ago, adolescent violence was just beginning to capture the attention of the nation, and at that time a book like this probably would have garnered much interest. Presently, in the aftermath of 9/11 and with the country's anxious focus on war and terrorism, the problem of adolescent violence may seem less important or even passé to many Americans.

Much like a child with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as a society our attention shifts rapidly from one arousing and captivating set of stimuli to another. We have a hard time focusing for very long on any particular issue. In our rapidly paced, technologically advanced, super-speed society, we are all bombarded with a relentless stream of viscerally arousing, quickly moving stimuli. We live in an age when *CNN Headline News* has us "around the world in 60 minutes," and in those 60 minutes multiple focal points are broadcast simultaneously, all beckoning for our attention. From the main news features, to the headline news streaking across the bottom of the screen, to the sports report appearing in one corner and the weather report appearing in another, we are subjected to a perpetual blast of competing demands for our focus. With so much competition for our attention, each byte of information must be presented in increasingly provocative, sexy, colorful, tantalizing, and shocking ways if it is to have any chance of capturing our gaze. And even when a stimulus has caught our attention, in the final analysis, no one is capable of holding on to it for very long.

Adolescent violence has been a serious problem in this country for decades, but it wasn't until the late 1990s—when the face of the violence shifted from urban streets to suburban and rural schools, from black and Latino kids to white kids, from those who were poor to those who were middle-class or affluent, and even from boys to girls—that this problem attracted national attention. For a period of time, these shootings and the broader, deeper problem they pointed to were shocking to most Americans. But the public's attention cannot remain focused for very long on any particular issue.

In late 2001 the media found a new crisis to rally around. In the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, and in this new era of war and terrorism, our attention has been diverted from the problem of adolescent violence. But this shift in focus should not be confused with amelioration of the problem. To the contrary, far too many young people across the United States continue to suffer from the trauma that both leads to and that flows from violence. Adolescent violence is now, as it was 5

years ago, and 5 years before that, a serious problem that threatens the health and welfare of our young people.

Currently we are living in a period when the anxiety created by the perception of a terrorist threat and the growing list of Americans killed in Iraq make it hard for many of us focus on the problems of bullying, the threat of school shootings, and other forms of youth violence. Many of us are armed with a heightened sense of alertness and guardedness that is directed at noticing and being prepared to defend against an external terrorist threat. For most Americans, the perception is that the greatest threat exists somewhere "out there" rather than right here in our midst.

While the issue of adolescent violence may no longer arouse the same interest or fervor that it did before 9/11, Al Q'aeda, Iraq, and the war on terrorism, for those families and communities that have been assaulted directly by this violence, the retreat from a broad national consciousness about and commitment to addressing this problem is often painful. As one mother wrote to us following a workshop we presented on youth violence:

> "I attended your workshop as a mother who lost her 15-year-old son at the hands of another 15-year-old boy with a gun. What enrages me as much as the senseless violence that took my son's life is the indifference our society has to the violence that infects an entire generation of our young people. We spend billions of dollars waging war in another nation, billions of dollars trying to fight the terrorists who want to destroy us. But what about what's happening right here in our families, our schools, and our backyards? I don't know what the reason is for the rampant violence among our kids, but I want to understand and I want to know that as a society we all notice and care about this problem as much as we care about addressing other horrors in the world. If we don't, then by the time we wipe out terrorism (if we do), there won't be much left here anyway."

As this mother's words reveal, the families and communities that are directly assaulted by adolescent violence realize the seriousness of this problem as 7intensely as our nation feels the threat of terrorism and the danger of war. But collectively our focus has shifted, and this problem no longer attracts the type of recognition that it needs to garner if we truly are to address and overcome it. It may well be that this

issue will not recapture public interest until there is another Columbine massacre, or worse. Certainly, we hope it does not have to come to that, and this is what we hope to accomplish with this book. It is our intention to help readers understand the scope, nature, and dangers of the phenomenon of adolescent violence. But more importantly, we hope to provide a framework to clarify why this violence exists and offer specific strategies for what each of us can do individually and collectively to address and ultimately prevent it.

The current level of anxiety about terrorist violence and the increasing losses associated with the war in Iraq only intensify the likelihood and seriousness of youth violence. Young people today are living in an environment that is strained by the fear of trauma. Like the drive-by shooter who suddenly lurches around the corner in an unexpected moment, unloading a spray of bullets that randomly assaults anyone in the vicinity, terrorist attacks create a comparable fear rooted in the element of surprise and generalized victimization. American children today live in a society where they are held hostage by the threat of an impending attack. Those who live in this chronic state of tension, uncertainty, and aggression are more vulnerable to violence, because at some point it begins to feel commonplace and inevitable. When kids of any age can view beheadings of hostages over and over on the Internet, at some point they become numb to the horror and ugliness of this brutality. Violence—or the threat of it—becomes the norm rather than the exception, and this makes young people more likely to resort to it and more conditioned to tolerate it.

Living in a chronic state of threat fosters a hardness, a callousness toward pain—both one's own and that of others. It's a defense against pervasive stress, but if it persists long enough, with the deadening of feelings comes a loss of inhibition and even of fear itself. At some point a boldness emerges whereby a person can conceive of doing just about anything because there is a sense of having very little left to lose. This is the reality that poor children of color in urban war zones have lived with for decades. It's what so many Iraqi, Chechen, Sudanese, and Palestinian children endure. After living in a state of constant threat, of constantly anticipating or actually being the target of another's aggression, when so much has been lost, at some point people become conditioned to the horror of violence, which breeds aggression. It's built into human biology that in response to a threat we either "fight or flee." For those who don't believe there is anyplace to flee to and for those who regard fleeing as a sign of weakness, or for those who have lost so much that there is a sense of having very little

left to lose, an aggressive instinct is honed. In this way, living with the ever-present threat of harm nurtures a level of aggressiveness in young people that can only increase the risk of youth violence.

Another potential consequence of living in these times is that such circumstances tend to exacerbate ethnic and religious divisions. The nascent trend in bullying is no longer so much about "the bad kids" picking on the "the good kids," or the "tough guy" who muscles "the weakling." Instead, it more reflective of "blue-blood kids" targeting kids who are believed to be Muslims or immigrants. There is so much intense hatred and suspicion that has been generated toward anyone who appears "Middle Eastern" or Islamic or simply "foreign" that this creates a climate that breeds bigotry, ignorance, and aggression. More and more we are hearing about kids who, because they don't seem "American enough" or "Christian enough," have been targeted by other kids who see them as "outsiders" and therefore as potentially unsafe and suspicious. Certainly Muslim children routinely are subjected to bullying from other kids who see them as "terrorists." But also children who simply look Middle Eastern in some way, irrespective of what their actual ethnic or religious identity is, are often targets of bullying. We have heard accounts of attacks upon Jewish kids wearing yarmulkes and Mexican American children who were mistakenly assumed to be "Arabs." In these instances the attackers are responding to a conditioned hatred against anyone who appears to be "other."

What is important to understand is that the trend in bullying, with its strong xenophobic undercurrent, is reflective of what young people today are learning from the adults around them. Kids mimic the adults in their lives, adults whom they hear making bigoted and hateful comments about those whom they perceive as "others." The promotion of "other" from the broader political sphere makes it possible for us to distance from the suffering that violence creates, which increases the likelihood of more violence. When any living being becomes "other" in our eyes, it becomes easier to inflict violence upon that individual with little hesitation or remorse. We are conditioned to not relate to the "other" as someone like ourselves, with feelings, interests, or connections to family. Our compassion is short-circuited, and at that point violence is not only possible but highly likely. This is what happened in Abu Ghraib where U.S. military prison guards piled up the naked bodies of Iraqi prisoners to beat and humiliate them for amusement. The acts were possible because in the eyes of the guards the Iraqi prisoners were "other."

Another consequence of the times we currently live in is that our strained circumstances send a powerful message to young people sanctioning violence as a solution to problems. Children learn from what they observe. Hence, we may preach to them about the value of nonviolence and peace, but if they see us behaving in ways that legitimize the use of force as a way of "getting what we want," this is what they will learn. In this time of war, our young people are especially vulnerable to learning that aggression is a solution. While they may hear spirited debates among adults ranging from their parents to political candidates, at the end of the day they live in a society actively engaged in the use of militarism as a method of managing a difficult situation. They also hear the often cited rationale for this force which is that "we have to get them before they get us." Such a message increases the likelihood that young people will resort to violence as a way of managing their problems and as a defense against their fear of being hurt. Hence, now, during these times of terrorism and war, when the fear of violence looms so ominously across this nation in a broader, more generalized way, now more than ever each of us must be attuned to, concerned about, and committed to addressing both potential and actual violence among adolescents.

Of course, we don't want to suggest that all is bleak. While terrorism and war having numbing and damaging effects, for sure, there also is a bright side that should be acknowledged. During times of great stress and turmoil people get motivated to take action. We live in a society that tends to be reactive rather than proactive. As a result, we are most likely to act with intention when confronted with a crisis. Our current state is just the type of crisis that can inspire organized peace-based activities. Feeling the threat of what might happen if we don't find less aggressive methods for managing the dilemmas we face, families and communities around the country are finding creative ways to develop nonviolent alternatives. We have talked with families that have responded to the increased violence in the world by initiating family conversations about how people can find diplomatic solutions to divisive conflicts. We have had the privilege of learning about schools and communities that have spearheaded initiatives designed to advance constructive approaches for responding to both global and local conflicts. And among adolescents, as often as we hear stories of violence, trauma, and pain, we also have heard stories of hope and healing, of young people who have pushed back against the pressure of fear and aggression through loving, peace-based collaborations. In

examples like these we see the seeds of hope that are directly reflective of an underlying thrust of this book, namely, that it is incumbent on each of us as adults to find ways to see the good in the bad, to replace cynicism with optimism, replace fear with courage, bitterness with forgiveness, and to challenge despair with hopeful possibilities. Throughout this volume we argue that young people will learn from what they see us do, and, as we live in times of extreme tension and aggression, now more than ever we must provide young people with living examples of how to promote healing and practice hopeful, positive action to counteract the pressure to succumb to violence.

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