

Things Are in the Saddle*

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Emerson's idea (1842) that the attention of people in modern societies is dominated by things seems to have come true. We focus on the surface level, ignoring what goes on underneath.

“...Loughner's recent years have been marked by stinging rejection — from his country's military, his community college, his girlfriends and, perhaps, his father...” NYT, Jan. 16.

Why did Jared Loughner shoot Gabrielle Giffords and nineteen others? If he is anything like the 200+ cases of multiple killers in Websdale's study (2010), he would have a history of humiliation like theirs: so ashamed of his humiliation that he would hide it not only from others, but also from himself. Humiliation is painful but harmless when it is acknowledged; it becomes lethal only if it is kept secret (Gilligan 1997). In modern societies, we learn to hide our pain. At first we cover it up from others. After our early years, we learn how to hide it from ourselves.

What does acknowledgment look like? Sharing pain with others, or at least allowing one's self to feel it, is a safety valve. A tiny, everyday example of sharing occurred between husband and wife. The wife yelled at him about something he did or didn't do. Instead of yelling back, his usual response, he said: “Ouch.” She said: “Ouch?” He said: “That hurt.” They both laughed, quarrel over. It lasted about a hundred seconds.

Can a quarrel last a hundred years? Yes, if the parties are dominated by humiliation to the point that they refuse to negotiate. The problem with this strategy is that humiliating the other party for revenge sets up a chain reaction, revenge breeding counter-revenge.

The three wars that caused the most casualties in human history, seen in retrospect, may fit this pattern (Scheff 1994). The French felt humiliated after their defeat by the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War (1871), so plotted revenge for 43 years. They were able to involve Russia, England and the US on their side. In the months between the assassination of the Archduke and the beginning of the war, there were NO negotiation meetings between the two sides.

After losing the resultant war (WWI), the Germans, in turn, felt humiliated, which led to the rise of Hitler and WWII. 1871 to 1945: almost a hundred years and more than a hundred million casualties.

*Julie Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger gave helpful advice on earlier versions.

9/11 and the Iraq war may be a more recent example of revenge leading to revenge. In a broadcast on Al-Jazeera TV on Oct. 7, 2001, Osama bin Laden said:

“What the United States tastes today [9/11] is a very small thing compared to what we have tasted for tens of years. Our nation has been tasting...humiliation and contempt for more than 80 years. “

Bin Laden was referring to the final fall of the Ottoman Empire (1918) when the Allies dismantled it after WWI. Predictably, Bin Laden’s vengeance against the US touched off what may have been counter-revenge by the US. The official reason for the invasion of Iraq was their supposed attempt to develop nuclear weapons, even though the administration knew that there had been none, and that Iraq had not been involved in 9/11. One of several reasons for the invasion may have been the humiliation the regime suffered because 9/11 occurred on their watch.

Why is secret humiliation sometimes lethal? There are two patterns. Some of the multiple killers in Websdale’s study merely swallowed their humiliation until they could stand it no longer. After being fired, some of the men pretended to go their now non-existent job until the day they shot their family members, and in some of the cases, themselves. All of the women killers followed this pattern.

However, much more frequently, the cases involved men with a history of anger and/or aggression. Their pattern was to cover over their humiliation with anger. Fortunately, although most of us seldom acknowledge our humiliation, the cover-up with anger is much less frequent than simply swallowing the painful feelings, often resulting in silence or even depression, but not violence.

What can be done to stop the humiliation-vengeance pattern? Perhaps the public, and subsequently governments, could learn to give equal attention to the social and emotional sides of life, instead of focusing on the surface of things. One consequence might be to dole out to negotiation and diplomacy resources that approach those now being rained upon military force.

References

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