Gillian McLean

A Dangerous Journey: The Impact of Violence on One Woman's Life

For forty years, violence was Gerry's[1] constant companion. She did not suffer occasional trauma; instead she regularly endured physical, emotional and mental abuse, sometimes daily. This paper explores Gerry's life of violence.

It addresses the impact of trauma and discusses her ways of coping with abuse. Moreover, it describes her search for meaning and a new identity. Essentially, it provides a snapshot, a pen portrait of the culture of violence.

Naturally, the text has limitations. In recounting one woman's experiences, it is personal, subjective, and open to bias. The author's own prejudices and misinterpretations add further distortions.

Theory of Violence

Before we look at Gerry's story, it is first necessary to review the theory of violence—to address the question: Why are humans violent? Xavier Bichat wrote: "Life is the struggle against death."[2]

While Sigmund Freud described violence as a "life and death impulse," he further alleged that violence is a characteristic of life, a permanent feature of human nature.[3] Accordingly, René Girard described violence as an "indestructible force, a natural life-force, which can be repressed but never destroyed. … It is a force which will always seek and find an object."

Girard also identified the contradictory nature of humanity's violence: "It may be invested in a rival and lead to a brawl with her or him, but it may also unite two rivals if together they invest it in an expiatory victim."[4]

Still, the question remains unanswered: Why are humans violent? Jesus Christ identified the seeds of violence that exist in the hearts of all people (Matthew 5), whilst Carl Gustav Jung alleged that this aggressiveness was concealed in a human's "shadow side."[5]

1 To maintain anonymity, I have used pseudonyms throughout the text. In addition, place names have also been altered. The information in this paper was obtained during two interviews with Gerry on June 15 and 16, 2005. The first interview was tape recorded; the second was transcribed during a phone conversation. Hopefully this paper provides an accurate representation of Gerry's words, her experiences and her values and beliefs.

2 Tournier Paul, *The Violence Within*. San Fransisco, 1978. 8.

3 Freud Sigmund, *Civilisation and its Discontents* (tr. Riviere J.) Vol. XXI. London – New York, 1961. 114.

4 Tournier, 67–68.

5 Ibid., 41.

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Perhaps from these theories we can conclude that a human is simply a "sinful and violent being."[1] With this insight in mind, let us now look at Gerry's personal story of violence.

Lost Childhood

"Everything can be taken from a person, but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one's own way."[2]

Gerry was born in Toronto, in the year 1944. Although the war in Europe was coming to an end, Gerry's life was a constant battle for survival. Gerry never knew her mother, because she was abandoned at birth.

Throughout her early years she was passed like an unwanted parcel from one relative to another, from aunt to aunt, and then back to her father. As she bounced from Pembroke to Oshawa and back to Waterloo, there was no stability, no consistency.

Meanwhile, in addition to the abandonment and rejection, Gerry also suffered physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Perhaps mercifully, her father died when she was six years old, and she was transferred to the reluctant care of an aunt.

Sadly, this home proved to be another toxic setting. Gerry quickly realized that she was neither wanted nor loved; after all, her aunt and her three cousins constantly reminded her, "You are no good. You are just like your mum. You are just another mouth to feed."

It is no surprise that Gerry confided, "I never had a childhood. I never played." For the next five years, the mental and emotional abuse continued at the hands of her

1 Ibid., 48.
2 FRANKL Victor E., *Man's Search for Meaning*. London, 1987. 85.

relatives. Then one morning in the year 1955 she was taken into the nearby town of Pembroke.

Surprisingly, her aunt announced that she was taking her shopping for new clothes and school supplies. Gerry was delighted. Normally, she had to be content with cast-offs from her cousins.

Sadly, this promise was a cruel lie. The Romans were the inventors of formal law: *Summum ius – summa iniuria.* Ironically, the most perfect law may constitute the worst injustice.

Instead of shopping, Gerry was taken to the courthouse, where the judge pronounced her "incorrigible," labelled her a delinquent and sentenced her into the care of a remand home, the Humber Training School near Toronto.

Shell-shocked and terrified, she was taken away to a nearby holding cell. Twenty-four hours later she was driven to the borstal. Already in the taxi en route, her male escort attempted to rape her.

She managed to elude him, but later when she tried to tell of her treatment, she discovered that she had no voice. No one believed her; she was now vulnerable and powerless. Her confession merely led to further harassment.

Indeed, the only person who displayed any concern for her was the doctor who examined her upon admission. Surprised that she was only eleven years old, he asked: "What are you doing here at your age?"

Gerry could not answer him. Confused and bewildered, she was taken into an isolation cell. Here any delusion of reprieve, any hope that things would be well, evaporated. Her incarceration and her education had begun.

Humber Training School

Doctor Hacker writes: "Prisons, especially those that are camouflaged under the name of borstals, are training centers for crime."[1] Certainly, Gerry's own experience upholds this view: "Everything I knew I learned in there. I did not know anything about crime before I went in, but when I came out, I knew everything. They taught me how to lie, how to cheat and how to steal."

Humber was a harsh place to grow up. As Gerry admitted, "You had to be a total survivor or you died. I became very tough. For me, it was my way or the highway." The abuse was constant.

Physically, there were slaps, pokes and even jabs with pencils. Gerry still has a piece of lead embedded in her shoulder, a painful reminder of one reprimand. Emotionally and mentally, the girls endured a steady flow of verbal abuse, undermining and degrading remarks, lies and more lies.

Then there was the sexual abuse. Several of the guards were lesbian. These women often forced the girls to comply with sexual favours. In addition, the school employed a Mr. Goodwin, a gardener and odd-job man.

Regularly, he would entice one of the girls into a small hut on the property, where he would molest and rape her. Gerry suffered at his hands on more than one occasion. Over time, Gerry learnt the language and ways of Humber School.

Like her colleagues, she developed coping skills. At times, her emotions and feelings

1 Tournier, 61.

were blunted. A protective shell formed around her. She became apathetic, no longer caring.

In contrast, at other times, she responded violently to the abuse. Often it was not the physical pain she endured, but rather the injustice and the sheer unreasonableness of it that caused her to react in self-defence.

Thankfully, there were occasional acts of kindness, small lights flickering in the darkness. These spontaneous gestures of human decency came from both sides of the fence, from both residents and guards.

Cooper House

Later, at age 14, Gerry was transferred to Cooper House. A residence for older girls, this home provided increased isolation and security for its inmates. These were further years to be survived, time to "get through" the best way she could.

During her institutionalization, Gerry lost her old identity. This loss can be attributed to a number of factors: breakdown in relationships, poor education, lack of support and violence. In the six years of her incarceration, Gerry received no visitors.

Tragically, the only times her aunt or cousins came to see her, she was in isolation and was not allowed any company. Not surprisingly, her former relationships disintegrated during her time inside.

Gerry also described the very poor education offered at both Humber School and at Cooper House: "No one teaches you anything. You have no skills. You are out of touch with everything."

Accordingly, there was minimal spiritual support. There were no priests or ministers connected with the homes. The guards officiated at the Sunday services, and consequently these were considered a "meaningless joke."

In speaking of the violence at both schools, Gerry commented: "Violence begets violence." These words mimic the sentiment expressed by Dr. HACKER: "Violence is as contagious as the plague."[1]

He suggests that humans threaten violence in order to win respect. Furthermore, he asserts: "Everywhere and always, the strong has triumphed over the weak; the law of the jungle is the fundamental law of life."[2]

Ironically, the violence of the guards generated only hatred and disrespect among the girls. Moreover, deprived of the right to retaliate, *lex talionis* (Lev 24,20), the girls' thirst for violence escalated.

Gerry herself hated many of the guards; she detested one in particular. Mrs. JOHNSTON was cruel and vindictive. She picked on Gerry constantly. She had it in for her, perhaps because Gerry never conformed to the rules.

One day, Gerry snapped. She crossed the Rubicon and set in motion a chain of events. She planned and organized a "hit" on Mrs. JOHNSTON. During the evening shift Gerry, together with a group of other girls, ambushed the guard.

They hustled her into a room, cut off the long black braids she wore, stuffed sanitary pads in her mouth, tied her up and locked her in a closet. The following morning, Mrs. JOHNSTON was found and released, and Gerry was thrown back into the "hole".

1 Ibid., 14.
2 Ibid., 32.

Once again she was the ritual sacrifice, the one punished to restore unity and peace. Identified as the scapegoat, she was "banished to the desert", taking with her all the sin of the community (Lev 16,10).

She offered no reprisal whatsoever. Interestingly, in hindsight Gerry felt no remorse for her actions. Perhaps she repressed her guilt, projecting all her feelings onto someone else.

Alternately, she may have believed that hers was a "just violence." Comparable to Jesus Christ's clearing the temple courtyard (Mark 11,15), she viewed her own attempt to resist wrongdoing with aggression as reasonable. In rebelling against an unjust power, her hostility was legitimate.[1]

The Hole

"The worst prison would be a closed heart"—Pope John Paul II.

Residents of the school who either misbehaved or broke the rules were punished and sentenced to time in the "hole." The hole was a small and windowless cell. The door was barred, and the floor was bare save for a mattress in one corner.

Meals were pushed under the door on a tray. There was no contact with either residents or guards. It was a quiet and lonely existence, with nothing to do unless the captive shouted loudly enough to be rewarded with a book.

Obstinate and out-spoken, Gerry spent many periods in the "hole"—sometimes days, sometimes weeks. Primarily she coped by escaping from reality; she retreated and regressed into her dreams.

Interestingly, Gerry's escapism now allows her to understand her son Ian. Ian has schizophrenia. With her ability to dissociate, to put herself into a new reality, she has insight into his world. She can understand his illness:

"I lived outside myself. I put myself in a situation far, far away. Nowadays, they would call it visualization. But I would just sit and think to myself. I would think that my mum and dad were coming to get me. I would imagine that I was having piano lessons and that I was in school. I created a whole new identity for myself. I had animals, a nice house, and lots of money."

Unfortunately, Gerry had to return to reality. She had to leave her dreams and face the truth of her actual daily life. The hole confined the girls, preventing them from discharging the unavoidable rage and violence contained within them.

Inevitably, the period of isolation caused them to turn their violence inwards, redirecting their aggression towards themselves. Sadly, the girls who saw no sense to their lives lost the desire to fight.

No longer were they able to endure the hopelessness of a "provisional existence," as Thomas Mann expressed it, without a time frame and without aim or purpose. Suicide was the only solution available to them.[2]

Accordingly, Gerry confided: "Some people could not take it! Some of the girls killed themselves, they could not tough it!" In contrast, Gerry was able to hold onto the belief that somehow, someday, things would get better.

Stubbornly, she knew she would survive. She rose above her despair and loneliness by looking to the future. Perhaps, unknowingly, she escaped the existential void by realizing truth. Instead of expecting things from life, she recognized that life expected

1 Ibid., 60.
2 Frankl, 16.

things from her. In spite of the deprivations of the hole, Gerry's spiritual life constantly deepened.

Indeed, because of her stark surroundings, she retreated into a firm inner freedom. Certainly while in isolation, Gerry was permanently and acutely aware of God's presence:

"I am sitting there by myself, and I know that someone was there looking after me. Sometimes I would close my eyes, and I would have this warm sensation going through my whole body. I would have a vision of a dove."

Liberation and New Life

Upon her release from Cooper House, Gerry had much to learn. In particular, she had to adjust to her new freedom. During her time in the borstal, she had undergone a depersonalization.

She no longer knew how to live in the real world. Normal social mores were a mystery to her, and she had lost contact with many of her former acquaintances. To a certain extent, she had even lost her ability to enjoy herself.

By now everything was tainted with mistrust and full with fear. In retrospect, Gerry now realizes how violence had stolen her youth. Basically, it had taken more than thirty long years from her life:

"It changed my life. It ruined me. When I got out of prison, I did not know how to live. I did not know anyone. It was horrible. I gravitated towards like-minded people. They were the wrong people, but I did not know any better. I was 17 years old. I became involved with these people because they cared. They were the only ones who gave me any love."

Sadly, this was an empty and dangerous love. Not knowing anyone, Gerry moved to Orillia at the invitation of a friend from Cooper House. "She introduced me to all her friends. They were all crooks, but I did not know that. One day when I opened a closet door and a body fell out, I knew then. I was not involved in the killing," she argued, "but I did see it."

Mercifully, although Gerry was a part of the crime culture, she somehow avoided being trapped in the "revolving door" of further convictions and imprisonment. Then, at 19 years of age, Gerry married her first husband, Frank.

She acknowledged the marriage was not for love; it was merely an escape. Frank was an angry, abusive and violent man. He beat Gerry frequently. When pregnant with her second child, Frank beat Gerry so badly that she fell down the stairs.

Tragically, Ian was born mentally disabled, and he later developed schizophrenia. Faced with life-threatening violence within her marriage, Gerry sought solace and direction from the Church.

She approached her local priest for support. Disregarding her cry for help, ignoring her admission of the verbal abuse and violent beatings, he counselled her to remain in the marriage, cautioning her to remember that this was her duty as a wife and mother.

Thankfully, Gerry realized that his ideas were outdated, misguided and dangerous. She recognized that he represented a "toxic religion," a religion that led to control and shame.[1] At this point, she lost faith in the priest and to a certain extent, in the Church. She left her husband and moved South to Napanee.

1 MORROW William S., *Toxic Religion and the Daughters of Job*. Studies in Religion 1998/27. 276.

It was here at forty-five years of age that she met and married her second husband, Don. Thankfully, he proved to be her knight in shining armour, a friend and helpmate, someone who would help her to establish a new identity.

Not surprisingly, Gerry emerged from the schools bitter and angry. She raged at the injustice of her treatment. She was furious at people's indifference to her plight. No one understood what had happened. No one appreciated what she had gone through. No one even cared. Gerry fumed at her continued suffering:

"You come out with a terrible, terrible bitterness against society and against people. You think: 'They are going to pay!'" Yet, no one in the family was willing to talk. No one would answer my questions. When my aunt died in 1979, she called me to her bedside and asked me for forgiveness. I did what I had to. Well, I could not refuse a dying woman!"

The path to forgiveness has not been an easy one for Gerry. Having lived through an extended period of violence, having been hurt by so many people, her journey was long and tortuous.

As C. S. Lewis pointed out: "It is easy to forgive a single great injury, but to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life, that is a difficult task that requires humility and soul searching prayer."[1]

Fortunately, since living with Don, she has learnt to let much of the bitterness go. Inevitably, traces of anger and resentment remain. Vestiges of the past linger; she is resistant to promises and she remains fiercely cynical of the power of wealth, saying: "If you have money, you can get away with anything."

Gerry's theology is clearly one of protest. Yet, unlike Job, she had no complaint against God. Having suffered violent abuse at the hands of authority figures, powerful individuals, Gerry believed people were the enemy.

She did not feel that God had betrayed or abandoned her. Indeed, she was firmly resolved that had God not been in control of her life "things would have been a lot worse." With this in mind, she clung to the hope that God could and eventually would enable her to recover and rebuild her life.

During the long years of abuse, she learnt the cry of lament.[2] She poured out her distress to God, sharing her feelings of abandonment, isolation, pain, rejection and worthlessness.

Like the Psalmist, she screamed for divine vengeance and justice, crying out for vindication and healing (Psalm 35). Her recovery and healing is ongoing. Slowly, she is regaining her self-respect.

Nevertheless, Gerry remains haunted by her past. She confides: "Once you have a record, you always have a record. You are always guilty. There is no such thing as the past, because it is the past that makes you what you are today. Your past is your present. It is still with me."

In particular, Gerry lives in fear and absolute distrust of the police. In the past, she has heard officers give false evidence in the witness box. She is troubled by their authority, power and their lies:

"I learnt at a very early age to hate cops, and I still do today. They ruin people's lives." Recently, during a visit to the local mall, her fears were realized. Gerry became involved in an altercation with another customer.

1 Lewis C. S., *Forgiving and Excusing. Restoring Justice: A Christian Perspective.* Kingston, 2001. 26.
2 Anderson Bernhard W., *Understanding the Old Testament*. Prentice Hall, 1986. 551.

The store manager summoned the police. When the officer arrived, he ran a check on the two women. Upon discovering Gerry's record, he immediately charged her with assault, even though she was innocent. In addition, Gerry's criminal record has hindered her career opportunities. Despite her recent successes, she struggles with regrets:

"There are many things I wanted to do in my life, but I could not because I had a criminal record. I would have liked to help people who were wrongly convicted. My uncle was a crown attorney. He said I would have made a good lawyer. But because of my education, I missed out.

"I have always felt inferior. Over the years, those thoughts boil and fester. I wanted to make a difference in my life. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of people around me. I wanted to be remembered for the good I had done. Yet, I know I have to realize that there are things that I have done. Maybe I have touched someone's life and that has saved them. Sometimes we do things, but we never hear what happens."

Perhaps her thoughts echo her questioning of life's purpose. They also illustrate her efforts to discover her responsibilities in life, her attempts to fulfill the tasks it has laid before her.[1]

The Teachings of Violence

"If there is any kindness that I can show, any good that I can do for any fellow human being, let me do it now, and do not deter or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again"—William PENN.

Violence has shaped and moulded Gerry over the years. It has influenced every part of her life—her thoughts, emotions and beliefs. Initially, it determined the choices she made, the people she befriended.

Gradually, however, through daily prayer and reading, she sought to follow God's guidance. Now, in times of crisis, she endeavours to live by principles of truth and non-violence, not by aggressive self-defence.

Violence has proved a wise teacher. Ironically, it has taught her compassion and kindness. It has replaced her "heart of stone" with one of flesh (Ezekiel 36,26). Even today in her work as a DJ, she is drawn to those in need; she is compelled to befriend and help the underdog:

"It has taught me to have compassion on the down-trodden and unfortunate. I listen to these people. For a long time I was also a kind of Robin Hood. I used to steal stuff from shops, and then I would give all the stuff away to people who could not afford it."

Conversely, Gerry still wrestles with her inability to love her own children. This was a hidden cost of her time at Humber School. "I had never been given any love, so I did not know how to give it. I did not know how to love the children. Certainly Gord, my eldest son, has many problems. He is bitter and angry."

The violence she encountered has also provided Gerry with impressive survival skills: "It has taught me to look after myself. I am a survivor. I have no fear." Certainly, Gerry is afraid of no one, except God.

She is not reluctant to speak her mind. Indeed, she admits that she is sometimes bold and brutally honest: "I say things as they are. I will not play games; it causes too much

1 FRANKL, 77.

damage. I always tell the truth." Perhaps, her honesty is a reaction to evil. For when you have seen evil, when you have seen its devastating power, you want no part of it.

Living with violence also taught her to live by her senses. Like an animal, she became sensitive to sounds, feelings and movements. She learnt to listen to her own gut responses; she learnt to read people. Now she is careful with everyone, even friends: "I will never give my power away again."

Finally, Gerry reported how violence prompted and strengthened her faith journey. "Those who go through trauma at a young age are led down that path much quicker." Organized religion has been of some help to her, but her personal faith and spirituality were and continue to be her lifeline.

Faith has enabled Gerry to cope with and make sense of her suffering. For instance, when she looks back at her father's death, she surmises: "My dad died young. God knew I could not take any more. It could have been much worse: I could have got pregnant with my father's child." Today, Gerry's faith is strong and vibrant; she continues to delve into the mystery.

Suggested Reading

Anderson Bernhard W., *Understanding the Old Testament*. Prentice Hall, 1986.
Canfield Jack – Hansen Mark V. – Lagana Tom, *Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul*. Deerfield Beach, 2002.
Frankl Victor E., *Man's Search for Meaning*. London, 1987.
Freud Sigmund, *Civilisation and its Discontents* (tr. Riviere J.). Vol.XXI, London – New York, 1961.
Lewis C. S., *Forgiving and Excusing. Restoring Justice: A Christian Perspective*. Kingston, 2001.
Mann Thomas, *Magic Mountain* (tr. LOWE-PORTER H. T.). New York, 1958.
Morrow William S., *Toxic Religion and the Daughters of Job*. Studies in Religion 1998/27.
Tournier Paul, *The Violence Within*. San Francisco, 1978.

Gillian McLean: Un Voyage Dangereux: L'impact de la Violence sur la Vie d'une Femme

En décrivant les expériences d'une femme, cet article offre une perspective unique à propos de la violence. En se référant à la documentation, l'article présente l'affrontement de Gerry face à l'agression qu'elle a subie au cours de sa vie. Le dossier explore sa réaction à l'hostilité et examine la manière qu'elle y a fait face, d'abord au cours de son enfance et de son adolescence et par la suite, à l'âge adulte. Le portrait révèle la sagesse que Gerry a acquise à travers la violence et amène à découvrir la foi avec laquelle elle a lutté tout au long de son aventure. Cela met également l'accent sur sa bataille pour la survie et révèle sa recherche continuelle pour le sens et le but de sa vie.

Gillian McLean: Un Viaje Peligroso: El Impacto de Violencia en la Vida de una Mujer

Al describir las experiencias de una mujer, este escrito ofrece visiones únicas de la cultura de violencia. Con referencia a la literatura, el artículo retrata el encuentro de Gerry con la agresión a lo largo de su vida. Explora su reacción a la hostilidad y examina sus métodos de copiar, primero durante su niñez y adolescencia y después en sus años adultos. La viñeta revela la sabiduría que Gerry aprendió a través de violencia e identifica la fe con que ella luchó a lo largo de su vida. También documenta su lucha por la supervivencia y revela su continua búsqueda de significado.