

A LINE ON LIFE

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Violence vs. the Gift of Choice

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During the Christmas season, as we think of "*peace on earth and good will toward mankind*," most of us notice how far we are from this goal. Various accounts of violence are strikingly evident in the newspaper, radio and television reports. This is especially true with the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Why does this violence occur? What can be done about it?

Anyone is capable of extreme violence – even you and I. The violence can be directed at others or ourselves (suicide). Although may view yourself as a peaceful and easy-going person – under specific conditions – you are capable of violence. So am I.

The main emotion that increases the likelihood of violence is **fear**. Yes, most violent people are afraid. However, it is more than just fear. The threatened person is in a situation, where he sees **no options** other than violence. Usually that person sees himself as **powerless** – having **no control** over his situation. Literally, he is "*cornered*" either physically or psychologically.

In reality, there may be other available options beside violence. However, the violent person is often unaware of peaceful alternatives. He *lacks information* about these alternatives or their probability of success.

In addition, people who are not treated with *dignity and respect* often believe that they need to be violent to get attention. They are not treated as *persons*. This is typically true of minority groups – religious, racial or ethnic. However, it is often true of the handicapped, children, students, customers and workers or employees.

Once the violence starts, it is difficult to stop. Once someone threatens violence, it produces fear in others. In turn, this fear may lead to threats of retaliation. If the cycle is continued, violence is inevitable. There is no absolutely sure method to avoid this cycle. However, there are methods that work in most situations. Even before violence is threatened, those in power – parents, teachers, employers, therapists, government officials, police officers – can *share their power*. Mainly this is done by allowing those under your control to make decisions about options available to them. Rather than saying, "*You will do this*," it is more efficient in the long run to give the person the choice among several options. However, as the responsible party, these options should be alternatives that you can "*live with*."

To the extent they are known, you can give the person information about the costs and rewards of the available options. **Costs** include investments (time, energy or money), risks and lost possibilities. **Rewards** include any positive payoff, either immediate or sometime in the future. This can be used in a wide variety of situations –

- an intoxicated driver taking a breath analysis or not,
- an employee doing a distasteful task – and doing it well – or not,
- a spouse choosing among divorce, separation or seeing a marriage counselor,
- a high school senior deciding on going to college, a trade school, the service or directly into the work force,
- a voter making a decision at the polls.

It can go on endlessly. Although the options may not be very good or very clear, the choice still belongs to that person.

This holiday season and the whole year through, give the gift you want to receive – an increased **feeling of control** over your own life. To the extent that you have the authority to do so – and to the extent that the other person is *capable* – allow others to make their own decisions. Not only will this reduce violence, but more people will become able to make intelligent decisions.
