

On Torture:
The Truth That Lies Within (Excerpt)

Arthur Silber

Children who become too aware of things are punished for it and internalize the coercion to such an extent that as adults they give up the search for awareness. But because some people cannot renounce this search in spite of coercion, there is justifiable hope that regardless of the ever-increasing application of technology to the field of psychological knowledge, Kafka's vision of the penal colony with its efficient scientifically-minded persecutors and their passive victims is valid only for certain areas of our life and perhaps not forever. For the human soul is virtually indestructible, and its ability to rise from the ashes remains as long as the body draws breath.

— Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good*

I have read extensively in my life, and Alice Miller is the most profoundly courageous writer in the world today to my knowledge. She writes unflinchingly and with a gaze that never turns away from what it perceives, no matter how horrifying it may be. Miller describes the untold cruelties that are inflicted on the most innocent and defenseless of victims — infants and very young children. Almost all of us accept these cruelties to one degree or another. I am not speaking only of the obvious cruelties, of corporal punishment and similar barbarities — although we should never forget that the great majority of parents believe that spanking is sometimes necessary. I will begin to trace the connections here at the outset: just as Charles Krauthammer maintains that we are “morally compelled” to utilize torture in rare circumstances in the name of our own survival, so most parents believe that physical violence is sometimes morally “required” if their children are to be taught to be “civilized.”

Let us try to be as brave as Alice Miller: what we mean by “civilized” when we speak in this way, is that children must be taught to obey. If the principle of obedience is instilled in children from earliest infancy, and if parents further teach their children that physical violence is the means of commanding obedience, why do we wonder that some adults will torture those who have been rendered helpless and delivered into their control? They are merely reenacting what their parents taught them.

But we refuse to see this. We will not acknowledge what has been done to us. Miller continues in her work, because she understands better than anyone that these issues must be understood if the horrors are to be stopped. But she has met with fierce resistance every step of the way. In a similar way, although on an immensely more modest scale, I have found that many readers who agree with me on many issues — and many readers who may have followed this series so far, nodding their heads in confirmation at every point in my argument — will stop here. They will not acknowledge these particular truths, because they are too threatening.

This is because there is a necessary corollary to the obedience we are taught: the idealization of the authority figures in our lives. As children, we dare not question what our parents do: we depend on them for life itself. To

comprehend fully what is being done to us would be unbearable, and it might literally kill us. So we must believe that, whatever our parents do, they do it “for our own good.” To believe otherwise is the forbidden thought. So we must deny our own pain when we are young; such denial is necessary if we are to survive at that stage in our lives.

But if we maintain the denial when we become adults, it spreads throughout our lives. When such modes of thought are established in our psychologies, they cannot be isolated or contained. We deny our own pain — so we must deny the pain of others. If we acknowledge their pain fully and allow ourselves to realize what it means, it will necessarily call up our own wounds. But this remains intolerable and forbidden. In extreme cases, we must dehumanize other human beings: they become “the other,” the less-than-human. By using such devices, we make inflicting untold agonies on another person possible: if they are not even human, it doesn’t matter if we torture them. This is always how we create hell on earth.

I said I was not referring only to the obvious cruelties inflicted on children by physical violence. Just as important, and often of much greater significance, are the psychological agonies to which parents subject their children. How often do we hear parents say to a child who will not follow an order: “Why are you making me so unhappy? You don’t want to make your mother unhappy and sad, do you, darling? Now just do what I say.” We should recognize this for what it is: emotional blackmail. The unstated threat — but the threat that is deeply felt by the child, even if he is not able to understand it — is that the parent’s love will be withdrawn unless the child obeys. Since the child knows that his life depends on that love, the threat is a terrifying one. Such blows are delivered countless times every day, by millions of parents around the world.

This knowledge is inaccessible to the majority of adults. We are taught to obey, and we learn to idealize our parents. We tell ourselves they did the best they could, or they couldn’t help it. In one sense, that is true: they raise their children as they were raised. They learned obedience very well, and they do to their own children what was done to them. But most of us cannot leave this truth at this point: to maintain the veneration of our parents, we must insist that they in fact were right — that they did it “for our own good.” That is where the great danger lies.

When the idealization of the authority figure spreads once we become adults, it can encompass additional authority figures. There are two primary such figures: God — who may have been there from the beginning, if the child is raised in a very religious household where God is the ultimate authority, and the parents only speak on His behalf; and country. When one’s nation becomes such an authority figure, there are subsidiary ones as well: the nation’s leaders, and the nation’s military.

Many of today’s hawks exhibit the kind of denial to which I refer in an extreme form: because they will not acknowledge any of this, they must insist

that the U.S. military could never commit such atrocities. It must all be a vicious lie. As I explain in [When the Demons Come], this was the ultimate root of the hatred heaped on John Kerry: he dared to speak the truth about what had happened in Vietnam. For the deniers, this is the one crime for which no forgiveness is possible. As I wrote about this kind of denier (Rich Lowry and Andrew Sullivan were the particular writers to whom I was responding, but the same is true of many millions of additional people):

With no effort at all, you could multiply examples such as these a thousandfold, every single day. In this manner, defenders of our current foreign policy wipe out of existence all the facts, all the costs, all the deaths, and anything else that might bring into question what is an absolute of their faith: the United States is right, what we have done and are doing in Iraq is right, our military is right, we are inherently unable to make mistakes, and the authorities must not be questioned.

These are the victims described by Miller — now grown into adulthood, continuing their denial, with additional authority figures added to the ones they first had. Besides the original parent, they now revere our government and our military and, beyond a certain point, nothing they do is to be challenged. . . . to do so would bring into question these individuals' entire false sense of self, it would undermine their worldview completely, and it represents a threat that cannot be allowed to come too close. As always, what is dispensable in all this are facts, untold national wealth, reputation and prestige, and above all, the lives of human beings.

As I have said before, it is in this manner that horrors are unleashed upon the world. And if this mentality is carried far enough, you will finally end up with the kind of thinking, and the kind of psychology, that lies behind the journal entry from World War II (written by a German soldier) that I quoted in the previous part of this essay:

“On a roundabout way to have lunch I witnessed the public shooting of twenty-eight Poles on the edge of a playing field. Thousands line the streets and the river. A ghastly pile of corpses, all in all horrifying and ugly and yet a sight that leaves me altogether cold. The men who were shot had ambushed two soldiers and a German civilian and killed them. An exemplary modern folk-drama.” 1/27/44

If you never allowed your authentic self to develop (or your parents never allowed you to develop one), if you denied and continue to deny the reality of your own pain, then you will deny the pain of others, even as the corpses pile up — and you will be prepared to believe anything.

And the horrors continue, beyond all human reckoning — and without end.

In *When the Demons Come*, I also offered a brief summary of my own of Miller's central thesis:

By demanding obedience above all from a child (whether by physical punishment, by psychological means, or through some combination of both), parents forbid the child from fostering an authentic sense of self. Because children are completely dependent on their parents, they dare not question their parents' goodness, or their "good intentions." As a result, when children are punished, even if they are punished for no reason or for a reason that makes no sense, they blame themselves and believe that the fault lies within them. In this way, the idealization of the authority figure is allowed to continue. In addition, the child cannot allow himself to experience fully his own pain, because that, too, might lead to questioning of his parents.

In this manner, the child is prevented from developing a genuine, authentic sense of self. As he grows older, this deadening of his soul desensitizes the child to the pain of others. Eventually, the maturing adult will seek to express his repressed anger on external targets, since he has never been allowed to experience and express it in ways that would not be destructive. By such means, the cycle of violence is continued into another generation (using "violence" in the broadest sense). One of the additional consequences is that the adult, who has never developed an authentic self, can easily transfer his idealization of his parents to a new authority figure. As Miller says:

"This perfect adaptation to society's norms—in other words, to what is called 'healthy normality'—carries with it the danger that such a person can be used for practically any purpose. It is not a loss of autonomy that occurs here, because this autonomy never existed, but a switching of values, which in themselves are of no importance anyway for the person in question as long as his whole value system is dominated by the principle of obedience. He has never gone beyond the stage of idealizing his parents with their demands for unquestioning obedience; this idealization can easily be transferred to a Fuhrer or to an ideology."



Tongues like fusillades! Eyes Like fire!

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