

Working With Aggression

Bill Cornell Essential Conversation

January 16th, 2021

NOTES

Maybe – A Poem By Mary Oliver

About how it is when something different crosses the threshold, things that are ‘other’ than us?

The connection between ANXIETY, AGGRESSION, and a loss of structure.

What moves people towards absolute thinking and acts of violence?

We have a need for structure. The absence of structure creates anxiety.

In our anxiety, we need help from the environment.

When we are deeply anxious, we need something to come from the environment, to help us out. Something or someone to be reliable, consistent, grounding, steadying.

When the environment is inconsistent or unreliable, we develop *an ambivalent relationship towards the people around us*. Sometimes this is conscious, sometimes it is not.

This ambivalence can gradually deteriorate or erode into distrust.

Winnicott’s Notion of Aggression

We all have an anti-social tendency.

When we are in trouble, when we are overtaken by anxiety, we push against the environment, we make demands upon the environment to respond to us.

The aggressive pushing against, to demand help when something goes wrong, *is an attempt to make the environment important again*.

What we see going on everywhere in our world these days are reactions to the fact that the environment is not responsive.

When the environment chronically fails, the following is inevitable:

1. *Withdrawal, collapse or resignation as a result of prolonged depersonalization.*
2. *Reactive and violent attack and escalation.*

Bill's example of ending up in front of a judge:

He gets recognized as having something to offer the world. The judge tells him:

"Most of the people who end up here are angry. Do something with your anger that is useful."

Huge portions of the population are ignored or set aside. We leave people out on the margins.

His colleagues view of the capital attackers:

"So many broken little boys, ignored, shut off, like fodder for a psychopathic leader. We can hate them, we can dismiss them, but they all have a deep need for genuine recognition."

THE FUNCTION OF AGGRESSION

It is about our need for genuine recognition. To move one's self out and towards the environment, to demonstrate that 'I am here', that I exist, and that I matter.

This is not inherently hostile in any way, this is in service of life.

Dissociation is a means of self-protection, an automatic evacuation and withdrawal from a perceived threat or displeasure.

How much can a compassionate and responsive human being take in? What kind of meaningful action can be taken? What is the capacity for agency?

These are the essential questions to ask, and to reflect on about our clients.

We can avoid dissociation and/or passivity by enacting a level of engagement that feels worthwhile, something that is productive and useful.

When people are in trouble, they need people they can turn to.