

Why Are People Mean?

Don Carveth

(Talk given in April 2016 in Philadelphia to a grade 3 class studying bullying)

Why are people mean?

Because they've been hurt.

If you hurt a dog it growls and might bite you.

If you hurt a cat it will hiss and may scratch you.

People are the same.

Usually mean people have been hurt a lot—either physically (as in having been hit) or emotionally (as in having been rejected, abandoned, insulted, teased, bullied).

But mean people don't always remember having been hurt. They may not be *conscious* of their past wounds. But the hurts or wounds, physical or emotional or both, continue to exist in their *unconscious* minds.

The mind is kind of like an iceberg. Just as a great deal of the iceberg is under water, so a large part of the mind is *unconscious*, while only the surface part is *conscious*. Painful memories, feelings and thoughts are sometimes *repressed*, pushed out of consciousness into the unconscious. Sometimes the hurts were suffered in early childhood or even infancy and can't be remembered, but the resulting unconscious feelings of resentment and hostility stemming from the past are *displaced* onto people in the present.

Sometimes the hurts we incur were someone's fault. Someone might have a mean and angry father, for example, and his anger and yelling and unjust punishment makes one frightened and angry. But sometimes we are hurt by circumstances that are really nobody's fault—say, when you were a baby and needed mother but she had to go to the hospital to have a new baby and couldn't care for you properly, but you were too little to understand. To you it just seemed Mommy abandoned you, didn't love you anymore, and you developed a grudge. Maybe when she came home and tried to love you, you couldn't accept it, so now YOU rejected HER, as if to say "You weren't here when I needed you, so who needs you now! Go away!"

So now maybe you are left with a feeling, an attitude of mistrust. You may expect people to let you down. Ironically, your very mistrust and anger may lead people to leave you; it might actually drive them away. This is what is called a *self-fulfilling prophecy* or prediction: "Mother let me down; I expect people to let me down, just as mother did." My very suspicion and anger may lead people to dislike me. I may even *unconsciously* choose people who will let me down, just as I feel mother did and, in this way, I confirm my beliefs. This sets up what is called an unconscious *compulsion to repeat*.

So whether the injury was physical (hitting) or emotional (hurt feelings), and whether it was grounded in reality or in a misunderstanding (e.g., a medical operation, surgery or painful treatment that the child misunderstands as torture), the resulting pain makes one *angry*. Frustration and pain lead to anger. But what are we to do with the anger? Often showing it is too dangerous. For example, Dad asks his boss for a raise and the boss laughs in his face. This enrages Dad but he doesn't dare to yell at the boss or punch

him because he'd get fired or sent to jail. So what does he do with the anger? He stifles or bottles it up. Then what happens to the bottled up rage? There are three possibilities:

First, it backs up all over him (sort of like a toilet backs up). The anger is turned on himself. He beats himself up, like he would like to have beaten the boss. He calls himself names. He hates himself. This is depression, which is really self-hate, which is really anger and hate toward others turned on the self, leading to self-sabotage, self-defeat, self-harm.

Second, instead of turning anger on the self, some people turn it on others. For example, Dad comes home and kicks the cat, or yells at the kids, or is mean to his wife. Instead of beating up himself, he dumps his anger on a *scapegoat*, an innocent party who is attacked or targeted unfairly.

In ancient times people sacrificed animals. A goat, for example, came to be thought of as containing all the bad, and its sacrificial killing was thought to magically eliminate the evil. Today we still do this, not by sacrificing animals but by scapegoating innocent people. Instead of dumping anger on herself and getting depressed or suicidal, the angry person may become homicidal and attack or bully others instead. This is the root of racism: our frustration and anger dumped on targeted others, the scapegoats.

Happily there is a third, a positive, creative alternative to both dumping on oneself and others. It is technically called *sublimation* which involves taking the anger and *redirecting* it away from *antisocial* towards *prosocial* outlets. For example, one might find an outlet for one's anger in playing sports; or listening to or playing loud, crashing rock & roll music; or one might get revenge on the people who put one down by becoming a big success. "I'll show them! No matter how mean they are, how much they put me down, my teachers give me A's!"

Some people even learn to respond to meanness by being extra kind. They know what it is like to be hurt, so they seek to help, maybe by becoming a teacher, or a nurse, or doctor, or social worker, or therapist. Some very great people, like Jesus, or Ghandi, or Dr. Martin Luther King, learn how to "turn the other cheek." They practice *non-violence* in which we refuse to return evil for evil but try to return good instead.

Some people learn how to put their frustration, anger and pain into *art*—say, by writing stories, or making music, or drawings or paintings, etc. This is their creative outlet.

Finally, some people avoid hurting themselves or others by speaking to a therapist—putting it all into words to a trusted therapist who is trained to listen and to help.