On Human Stupidity and Violence

Jack A. Digliani, PhD, EdD

Albert Einstein once said "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe." Seems he was sure about human stupidity.

In light of human history, it is somewhat difficult to argue against Einstein's position. The human capacity for stupidity, especially when assessed through the observations of nearly incomprehensible and sustained human violence, certainly seems unlimited.

As a species, humans are an interesting lot. Collectively, we have developed sciences and created technologies that would have appeared magical just a century ago. Modern medicine, space exploration, computer science, electronic communication, social media, and numerous other disciplines reflect unprecedented technological advances. Most of these advances have benefited humankind, notwithstanding the long-term and unknown possible undesirable outcomes. Hopefully, we will become more vigilant about such outcomes and take steps to address them directly. If we do this, we may not be infinitely stupid after all.

But there is another side to the human equation. This side has less to do with science, technology, and achievement. This side has to do with our inherent or perhaps inherited view of ourselves and the world. This side has to do with how we conceptualize ourselves and everything around us, including other people. This side has to do with what we are taught and what we have come to believe is true. Interestingly, once we "decide" what we believe is "true" we often lose the capacity to consider, appreciate, or even just tolerate, beliefs outside our own.

It sometimes feels that the world is in dire straits. This is nothing new. Previous generations have reported feeling similarly. Currently, one thing seems certain, there are parts of the world that are in dire straits. There are also worldwide circumstances that are dire. In our world today we are confronting seemingly endless warfare, governmental corruption, human trafficking, a plastic catastrophe, environmental pollution, poverty and hunger, religious conflict, and so on. Hopefully, we will successfully address these circumstances and bring about positive change. In the end, only time will tell if the world as we know it will improve or collapse under the weight of present-day human activity.

If our technology permitted time travel, it would be interesting to see how the current state-of-the-world evolves (if at all) over the next century. Perhaps greater human harmony. Perhaps not. One thing seems certain, in spite of all our positive science and technological accomplishments, we have yet to learn how to respectfully live with one another.

Violence continues to plague our species. Why? Why has violence comprised so much of human history? Why is violence so much a part of modern life? There are many thoughts and theories about the causes of human violence. Most acknowledge

the influence of human biology and our "animal nature." Some theories emphasize instincts, early development, cognitive structures and conceptualizations, learning, emotional maturity, and social environments. Others cite the struggle for survival, personal and social competition, a desire for power, and the need to control territory or resources. Regardless of the basis of any theoretical perspective, it seems reasonable to conclude that there are likely a myriad of non-mutually exclusive causes for violent human behavior.

Several of the causes of violent human behavior are more readily understood than others. Some violence is generated from an injured, diseased, or otherwise malfunctioning brain. Persons with such brain disorders often have a medical diagnosis, such as traumatic brain injury, tumor, or degenerative brain disease. Some persons with a brain disorder are given a psychiatric diagnosis and are considered mentally ill.

Persons that become violent due to mental illness are sometimes psychotic. They experience delusions (irrational false beliefs) and hallucinations (disorder of perceptions). Although hallucinations can occur in all of the senses, the most common type of hallucination in psychotic disorders is auditory. Auditory hallucinations involve hearing sounds, almost always voices. They can be complex or simple, and can be comprised of a single voice or several voices. Auditory hallucinations can be perceived as coming from inside or outside of the person. The voice can be perceived as coming from someone known or unknown, alive or dead, natural or supernatural, and even from pets or inanimate objects. At times, the voice or voices tell a person to do things. Such auditory hallucinations are known as *command hallucinations*. Command hallucinations can be remarkably influential and may or may not occur in conjunction with a delusional belief system. Command hallucinations can produce very violent behavior. How influential are some command hallucinations? So influential that some persons will kill themselves or others on command. While command hallucination in psychotic disorders is more common than once thought, it is important to remember that most persons experiencing a psychotic disorder do not experience command hallucinations. Additionally, not all command hallucinations involve harming oneself or others. Command hallucinations can be resisted. A person experiencing command hallucination does not always follow the command, regardless of its content. In fact, most persons experiencing a psychotic disorder do not become violent.

Some violence has its origin in human emotion. Violence that is driven primarily by emotion can be impulsive (losing one's temper), planned (getting even for a perceived transgression), or generated out of fear and anxiety (seen most often when escape options are unavailable).

Related to emotionally-driven violence is violence driven primarily by thought. Thought-driven violence occurs in the relative absence of emotion. It is often the result of "cold and calculating" cognitive aforethought, situational decision-making, an effort to attain some goal, and structures of self-concept. Completing a "contract" for murder,

when the "contractor" has no emotional connection to the victim, is an example of the first type of thought-driven violence. Thought-driven violence in situational decision-making is illustrated in the case of a bank robber who wishes only to obtain bank money and quietly depart. However, when the bank alarm is triggered and police officers surround the bank, the robber decides to shoot it out with officers instead of going or returning to prison. Thought-driven violence to attain some goal is frequently observed in political coups and similar attempts to secure power or position. Violence related to self-concept involves thinking about, identifying with, and subscribing to a "thug" lifestyle. Within a thug or similar self-concept, violence becomes integrated into everyday life. It becomes a way to earn a living, a means to settle disputes, gain or retain social position and "street cred", and so on.

Perhaps the greatest cause of human violence is opposing belief systems. Beliefs are incredibly powerful and frequently drive behavior. Some humans will die for their beliefs. Some humans will kill in the name of their beliefs. Some humans will kill and die in the name of their beliefs, as is the case of suicide bombers.

When belief systems clash, very violent behavior becomes possible. Such violence serves some internalized or organizational purpose such as compliance with religious or other doctrine, advancing a cause, righting a perceived wrong, attacking a conceptualized enemy, and so on. History is replete with belief-clash violence. The modern world is inundated with it. Belief-clash violence is an age-old story that has involved countless individuals and groups over thousands of years. Untold millions have died as a result of belief-clash violence.

Given human history and the current state of human affairs, is it possible for people with different or even opposing beliefs to live together peacefully? Perhaps, but it would require a monumental alteration in the collective human consciousness.

What is needed is:
- Nothing less than an evolution in human thinking. Such evolution would represent an unprecedented redefinition of what we are as a species.
- Moderation or reinterpretation of extremely disparate and potentially conflicting views.
- Respect for and acceptance of one another despite differences.
- A universal commitment to mutual coexistence based on our *similarities* as human beings. Only then can we avoid the conflicts that arise out of our personal or group differences.

Clearly, unless the differences between and among human beings can be better understood, respected, moderated, and accommodated not much is likely to change. After millennia of recorded history, there has been remarkably little sustained advancement in how human beings treat one another. Maybe Einstein was right.