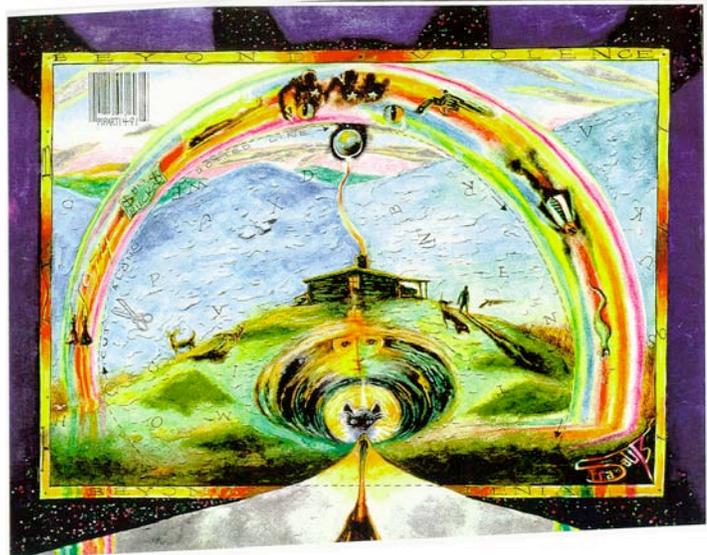


The Violent Price of Denial

Thomas Merton Brightman

This is one of my most difficult truths. It is one of the most humbling episodes that I shared with my children when I spoke to them about the family history that could show up in their lives. The very day that I wrote these words, I received a phone call telling me that my forty-nine year old first cousin had died of alcoholism, following in his father's footsteps, only younger.

In explaining the consequences of growing up in a dysfunctional family, I told them that they could neither drink nor drug in safety. Since they knew that I was not addicted to drugs or alcohol, they wanted to discount my warning. Telling them about parts of my life like this story got their attention. There are things other than drugs and alcohol that kill.



Leaving my children in 1974 was traumatic for me. Children on television, pictures in magazines and being in homes with other children all brought forth sadness. In private, the tears seemed as if they would never end. I was raw. I had reduced my fear of abusing my children by moving out, but my aloneness was terrible. Neither work nor play could fill the hole left by their absence.

I tried to fill the void with work and community activities. I stayed as busy as I could. I acted out sexually. Nothing soothed the pain. I finally succumbed to a powerful encephalitic virus and came within a breath of death. The department that I headed at the bank was disbanded. I needed to change jobs and this meant moving to another city, even farther away from my children. In a sick ploy to make me jealous, my girlfriend had an affair. My world was a mess.

I found a new job. I ended the relationship with the girlfriend. I moved to the Shenandoah Valley. My job had a higher title. I was making more money. I rapidly turned on my workaholicism. I immersed myself in community leadership. I continued to act out sexually.

On the surface, all appeared well. Covertly, I was trying to end my pain by indirect suicide. Among other things, I was sleeping with the wives of law enforcement officers. Any of the husbands would have killed me on sight and been able to justify it. My behaviors were insane. Only the survival skills learned in my family of origin allowed me to live with the craziness.

I invited my sister to live with me when her marriage ended. That worked for a short time, but as she watched my behaviors she tried to control and change me. I asked her to leave.

In my privacy, I could continue my denial a little longer. My promiscuity caught up with me with a case of venereal disease. My embarrassment around that toned me down sexually, but continuing unresolved grief over separating from my nuclear family was unabated. I was sad. I was angry. I was depressed. But somehow I kept up a front that allowed me to appear to function normally.

It was only a matter of time before I exploded. In my wildest imagination I could not foresee the events that were building. The violent resolution would be triggered symbolically. I pay close attention to symbols in my life today, as the failure of intellect and the presence of symbolic gestures have kicked-off most of my growth events.

I had a great many animals on my little hill top farm. They were every shape, color and variety. I had critters all around me, a magnificent menagerie. Then there was the wild animal: deer, fox, raccoon, opossum, squirrel, skunk, snake, mouse, quail, dove, hawk and more. I was retreating to nature and withdrawing from people. In winter, feeding them was a challenge. With a cistern, I had to cut through ice to haul water for my seventy companions.

Home was a two-hundred-year-old cedar cabin with a blue limestone foundation resting upon a remote knoll. From my front porch I could see the Allegheny Mountains, Blue Ridge Mountains and Massanutten Mountain. Prevailing winds moved storms past my cabin and rainbows sat down in my yard. It was a heavenly setting by my standards.

Internally, I was in a self-created private hell. Again, I was attempting to fix myself by sheer will. Yet it wasn't working any better this time than it did before. If it was my best thinking that got me into this mess, then how was thinking going to get me out of it? Thinking would not. Feeling could. The way out lay in the power of feelings beyond those of victim, pity and rage which had been my inheritance.

I had two tomcats. One was black with white feet and white chest. He was as striking as the other was subtle. The second cat was grey and white with longer and softer hair. The black cat disappeared and did not return. The grey cat who was always more loving, became even more attentive to me when the other cat left. But the constant rubbing at my feet was not welcome.

The more the cat loved me, the more anxious and agitated I would become. I reconstructed later that the unconditional loving of the cat was a reminder of what I missed most in my life from people. I couldn't stand the reminder. The intensity of this interaction grew and grew. I became more and more irritated and began to project my self-created agony upon the cat. Then a point came when I could not stand it anymore.

I went for a walk with my cat. I also took a sidearm. The cat did not return with me. The only consolation I have is that it was not another person or myself who didn't return from that walk. The violence of that moment finally took me to my knees and humbled me to a recognition of

how sick I had become. I either had to change or risk killing myself or someone else. I was horrified at my action.

In another article about my life, I stated that cats were among the greatest teachers. This cat gave its life that I find mine. I cannot tell you in words what it's like to face the dark side of one's self. But in doing so, it is possible to find the light again. Having been as low as I have, there is a kind of confidence that anything is possible. If I didn't die from what I put myself through, then there must be a new purpose waiting for me.

I had to confront the ghost of this experience many times. On one particular occasion, I was studying shamanism. One of the exercises is to go to a cave in the mind's eye and then follow that opening in the earth into the underworld to meet with the animal powers. I had put my cat's body in a cave. It doesn't take much guess work to understand what I faced as I entered the cave.

I have faith that God's understanding is far beyond my own. What I believed to be unacceptable led me to put myself in a prison of remorse and guilt. I believe that God forgave me before I forgave myself. I constantly remind myself that absolutely everything in my life, whatever my earthly judgment or that of others, has led me to the path of loving service to God and healthy community with fellow human beings.

How often I have strayed into the unrestrained impudence of questioning God.