

## The Diametric Dichotomy

By Robert Lackey '18

It is a great romantic ideal in modern western civilization to be wholly opposed to the practice of violence. It has been several generations now in the United States where one of the greatest ethical appeals a speaker can give is testament to the vehemence with which they politically oppose all forms of violence and war. This is not to say though, that we as nation have been particularly effective in eliminating the despised acts of barbarity: we have only just managed to extract ourselves from the longest war in the history of our nation, our domestic police forces have militarized—gaining ever greater capacities to kill, and the illegal drug trade has managed to turn many poverty stricken urban communities into warzones.

Despite all of our pretenses of being a civilized and noble species, humans were created by the indifferent forces of natural selection and as such we are instinctively inclined to become violent in response to the set of vague stimuli that our collective ancestry found benefit in responding to with force. With sufficient circumstantial pressure, there is no person who could restrain themselves from engaging in violent behavior. The pressure requisite to commit the most atrocious of violence is present throughout the narrative of Geoffrey Canada's *Fist Stick Knife Gun: a Personal History of Violence*.

The aforementioned stimuli, though, elicits the more ethical of the two forms that violence can take: retaliatory violence as opposed to the harsher confrontational violence. Retaliatory violence is committed in response to confrontational violence, most often with the intent being to defend one's person or property against an attacker. If retaliatory violence adheres to this definition—that it is committed only in to the end of defending against confrontational violence—then its practice is entirely necessary and just. It is the hallmark of the barbarian

society to permit justice to lie with whoever is capable of inflicting the greatest harm upon their opponents, and it is the duty of the modern society to prohibit that exact form of tyranny.

In childhood situations such as mine, it is reasonable for a person to depend on police forces, and the unity of the collective parent community to suppress on my behalf any who would attempt to violently repress me. For people in childhood situations such as the Geoffrey Canada's as described in *Fist Stick Knife Gun*, they must depend on whatever barriers that they can erect for themselves for protection. In Canada's words, "The Police didn't care....Like many others trapped in the ghettos of this country, I had learned that police are not the answer when trouble comes to your door." He was forced to insulate himself against the tyranny of others with ability, attitude, and reputation. The violence which he was forced to practice as a way of life was entirely retaliatory in that, as he described it, he never fought for the purpose of plundering, he only fought to defend himself from immediate attacks, and subsequent attacks that would ensue were he to fail to demonstrate the customary level of "heart." I can find no legitimate dispute as to the necessity of this form of violence: it is expressly in the defense of basic human rights. Confrontational violence is another matter entirely.

As the intention of confrontational violence is to plunder from another that which is rightfully theirs, it can never be entirely justified. In the complexity of reality there will always be bizarre circumstances in which the benefits—even the ethical benefits—of some petty confrontationally violent act far outweigh the associated ethical costs, but these are then justified by the circumstance and not by the virtue of being confrontationally violence. Despite their dubious philosophical authority, perhaps none have described the impetus behind the persistence of confrontational violence in human societies with greater pith than the creators of South Park when, in the infamously censored 201<sup>st</sup> episode of the television series, Santa Clause informed

the child protagonists that “All you need to do is instill fear and be willing to hurt people and you can get whatever you want. The only true power is violence.” Given the human lust for power, there will always be, in any environment, people willing to commit confrontational violence.

To borrow from Economic theory, the law of supply and demand applies to the market of violence: as an offender’s ability to do confrontational violence increases, so too must the ability of the victims to defend themselves rise—be it by retaliatory violence or otherwise—else they shall be subject to an increase in the magnitude of violent impositions. By this model, the phenomenon of a culture immersed in violence and death as described by Geoffrey Canada in *Fist Stick Knife Gun* is simply the result of a supply side market failure—that is to say that there is a much greater supply of violence than there is capacity to resist it. A person with the gun is the ultimate supplier of violence as there is no commensurate defense against guns now or anywhere nearby on the horizon of innovation—save preemptive murder. In a scenario such as this, the invisible hand shall see to it that in the violence market, brutality and death are cheap and plentiful.

In a scenario where failure to kill will result in consequences greater than the consequences of killing, it is economically justified—logical even—to kill. Should it be, for example, between killing a person and having them stalk not only you, but whatever family and friends you have and eventually killing them, no rational person can legitimately pretend that they could not justify killing the assured murderer. In the world prior to the proliferation of firearms, there may have been alternatives to the murderer’s preemptive death: some petty show of force or some other intimidation may have been sufficient. In that world, it would clearly be classified as confrontationally violent to kill the would-be murderer. But in the gun-laden world of today, it would seem to be retaliatory to kill the subject. There is no mutually assured

destruction in handgun fights, whoever lives is right. It is a regression to the barbarian ideal of “might makes right.” Considering the ease with which death can be dealt, a teenager trapped in a ghetto surrounded by guns may find it—quite rationally—justifiable, even necessary to murder. Given the choice between a criminal life, or death, a reasonable person would choose to be “judged by 12, rather than carried by 6.” The only solution to this is to eliminate the overwhelming presence of guns in urban environments and make non-lethal retaliation possible once more.

It is by the same rationale that a nation would establish a military and police forces that a person confronted with persistent assault would engage in defensive retaliation. It is just and necessary for people to engage in retaliatory violence to defend themselves and their own against those who will inevitably commit confrontational violence. The youth experience of Geoffrey Canada is testament to this, as he was overall opposed to violence, and a morally sound person—though he often found it necessary to do violent things. Violence, when it is the only rational choice, is entirely necessary.

## Geoffrey Canada Essay, Question #2

By Elizabeth Quartararo '15

There is a point in “Fist Stick Knife Gun” when Geoffrey Canada says that violence among youth in US cities isn’t going to be solved by a policy or philanthropy. This is discouraging to read, because these are two of the first places readers are tempted to turn after reading his story. Considering some of Canada’s experiences, I agree that policy and philanthropy cannot solve these problems *alone*. But I do believe that policy and philanthropy can help *support* some other approach that can solve the problems described in “Fist Stick Knife Gun.” And it seems that this other approach is to start with the person—the whole person, including internal self, familial and environmental contexts, and material needs.

I’ll use a metaphor here. When building a cathedral in centuries past, the cornerstone was laid first. That stone would determine how and where every subsequent stone was laid. In solving issues like violence, it’s important that the cornerstone shapes the rest of the model. That cornerstone should be the child him or herself. If the child is the cornerstone, the philanthropy and policies will fall into place according to the child’s needs. Too often, winning a grant or attracting donors or political support become the cornerstones of intervention work, and care for the person is shaped according to grant- and policymakers’ wishes.

Many of Canada’s efforts put the whole person first. This is best exemplified in his Beacon Community Centers, which I consider an effective intervention. Most Beacon programs are operated in schools, but since the book’s publishing, it seems that Beacons have become their own community centers, though the schools still do provide services

that are above-and-beyond typical schools. Beacon Centers address nearly every aspect of the whole person, providing but not limited to tax assistance, which helps community members get fair guidance and economy-boosting returns; “one stop” legal guidance for social services and assistance; GED classes; early childhood education; martial arts instruction; and parenting classes. This list does not cover all of the services, nor does it touch on the many services provided by the whole Harlem Children’s Zone umbrella.

I think this holistic approach is successful because it acknowledges that simply changing one facet of a child’s life cannot overcome the forces children contend with in their neighborhoods. Today’s trendiest interventions, backed by trendy philanthropists, focus only on teacher effectiveness. But in-class instruction alone cannot combat the temptation to pick up a gun. We know Canada’s success is in part due to his academic achievements, positive mentors, and personal moral beliefs. A mentor alone, or academic success alone, might not have impacted his critical choice to get rid of his gun: sometimes the biggest decisions we make in life require *all* of the wisdom we have receive from *all* areas of our lives. That is why Beacon Centers’ holistic approach is so important.

I believe schools are the right places to administer these wide-ranging supports. Every child attends school, and they’re a sure way to involve as many young people as possible. Some educators may resist the suggestion that schools become total-service centers. I understand the hesitation, but I believe the hesitation comes from a fear of the complexity of implementation. Implementation anxiety is not a good enough reason for adults to look away from an idea that might save their students. As I will explain later in

this piece, I believe Beacon schools have ameliorated implementation issues by embedding services into the model rather than employing them as add-ons.

The reason schools should do more than schooling itself is clear if we look at students who witness violence, which is a very real possibility for hundreds of thousands of students in the US. Students who witness violence in their communities have lower grades and standardized test scores (Matthews, T., Dempsey, M., Overstreet, S., 2009, 586). Attendance is especially affected by exposure to community violence, as children may try to avoid reminders of the violence and may fear traveling to school or being in school itself (587). Post-traumatic stress resulting from exposure to community violence may mean students have a more difficult time managing irritability and anger, and therefore have higher rates of school suspensions. Most typical schools are not prepared to handle all of these issues, especially as social workers, school psychologists, and other support services are cut due to budget constraints.

Just by looking at the example of exposure to violence in the community, it is apparent that one cannot separate the community from the child or the school from the community; in fact, this evidence further highlights the need for community-focused outreach. Matthews et al. write, “First, these findings emphasize the need for school-wide curricula aimed at preventing community violence in an effort to decrease students’ exposure. Second, school-based programming focused on building students’ resilience in the face of violence exposure may serve to prevent the development of PTS and depressive symptomatology in at-risk youth” (589). Based on these suggestions, schools should not only be seeking community partners, but seeing themselves as major facets of

the community itself. I agree with the authors: if schools are serious about helping their students succeed, then they *do* have a role in preventing community violence. And the community isn't something schools should reach out to—the community is something the school is already a part of. With purposeful curricula and programming, schools can be a tremendous asset to the community by developing in the youth the skills, traits, and values they will need in order to navigate hardships in their communities and to transform their communities as they grow older.

I believe in the Beacon Schools model because it allows for clean and simple implementation. Academic, nonprofit, and policy-based centers in the US and abroad are looking at research-backed solutions to end cycles of youth violence. The problem isn't so much with the solutions they're coming up with but with the implementation of the solutions. Many districts have models where schools provide multi-service offerings, but adding them onto the traditional school model often creates an insurmountable burden. Adding services onto a traditional school demands more work from administrators and teachers, time spent negotiating and clearing bureaucratic hurdles, and sometimes paying for these services with dwindling municipal budgets. But the Beacon Schools Canada describes already have these things embedded in them, and all of the services are provided by his employees. The services are provided by the same organization asking for them, meaning that everyone's on the same page—and if they aren't, the problems require the easier lift of internal brainstorming rather than requiring an external (and sometimes political) balancing act.

Community involvement in students' lives is integral to child success. By placing students' needs at the center of intervention efforts, policy and philanthropy can fall into

place in supporting roles that will actually be helpful. Further, by offering all of these services from the same intervening organization, implementation is streamlined and easily managed. The Beacon Schools model Canada co-founded is able to address issues that seem impossible to surmount. But because the cornerstone has been properly laid, all the support elements, like philanthropic donors and policy that will expand the model, have fallen into a place that will allow the model to improve lives and community far into the future.