

Journal #25

Read William Golding's essay below. Annotate the essay (highlight, circle, underline key points and ideas that stand out as significant to the overall theme) and answer the questions at the end as your journal response. Remember, your response should be a minimum of three paragraphs.

"Why Boys Become Vicious" ~ by William Golding

Pick any of the great saints or moral leaders of Western civilization - Jesus, St. Francis, Mother Teresa - and the characteristic that stands out is their simplicity. If it is true, as it seems to be, that there is a simplicity about human goodness, then it is just as true that there is a corresponding complexity about human evil.

Hitler, Stalin and Idi Amin - to name just a few in the 20th century catalog of evil - were far from being simple men. At times they were childish, at times mad, at times pathetic. But their deeds were the twisted deeds of tangled and contorted souls.

So there is nothing the slightest bit simple about what happened to 2-year old James Bulger after he was led out of a Liverpool area shopping center by two older boys. We are told that he was beaten and then dumped in the path of a train so that his injuries would be disguised. To contemplate that deed, as we must if we are to live in the real world and not little worlds of our own making, is to face a peculiarly stark form of horror. And the cruelty behind it is nothing if not complex.

It was nearly 40 years ago when I wrote about the cruelty boys can inflict on each other in *Lord of the Flies*. It was, of course, not the first time that I had thought about human cruelty and its various manifestations. Since then, too, I have had plenty of reason and opportunity to think about it more. **Are men and women born with cruelty as a deep component of their nature? Is civilization largely a heroic struggle to build layer upon layer of varnish upon the rough and splintered raw material of humankind? Or does it make a truer picture if we imagine the newborn child as a blank slate upon which the harshness of experience soon prints its indelible and frightening patterns?**

I believe all attempts to answer these great questions are doomed to end in doubt and confusion. I leave them to psychologists and prophets. I can only speak as a man who has lived long. But there are certain things about cruelty - and especially the cruelty of boys - which I believe may be true and from which we can learn: though I also believe in the end we can never completely banish the kind of concentrated horror that has brought to us in the story of James Bulger.

There are, for instance, conditions in which cruelty seems to flourish, which is different from saying that it has clear causes. What are these conditions? Chaos is one, fear is another. In Russia after the First World War, there were, I believe, gangs of children who had lost their parents. Dispossessed, without anywhere to live or anything to live on, they roamed the country

attacking and killing out of sheer cruelty. There was, at that time, social chaos in many countries, and, left to themselves, these children found a kind of elemental cohesion in their viciousness.

We are told that in some parts of Britain today there are new gangs of children - offspring of an underclass that seems to reject conventional parenting. Without the support of mothers and fathers such children have nothing but the fruits of what they can beg and steal. It would not surprise me if in these conditions, where the orders and patterns of society cease to matter, gangs begin to find cohesion merely in the joint fulfillment of their darkest instincts.

Add to this heady cocktail the other element - fear - and you get a mixture that is more than doubly terrifying. When people are afraid they discover the violence within them and when they are afraid together they discover that the violence within them can be almost bottomless. I do not think it is too unlikely to suppose that children living without adult protection are often frightened. Add to that the sudden fear or capture or prosecution - or simple fear of what they had unthinkingly done - and one can see how horrors come about.

Is it also true that the capacity of the young male to maim and torture is somehow connected to his long-forgotten beginning as a hunter and killer - a beginning that is very different from the female's hearth?

The truth must be that both components are of equal importance. We are born with evil in us and cruelty is part of this. (Though there is also a capacity for selflessness and love: otherwise we are denying part of our human nature.) But what must be true is that we can be twisted and distorted beyond recognition by the guidance - or lack of it - that we absorb directly from our families.

If there is no one around to guide children, then they go wrong. The people who guide children are their fathers and mothers. Children need both and in the later part of this century they often have neither. And when children go wrong they can often go wrong with a vengeance. There is such energy in children; they are more powerful than any bomb. Many modern childhoods must be sheer horror, though I do not believe this is necessarily anything new - history has been full of horror and children have always suffered their share of it. If parents are absent, if fathers do not provide strength and mothers do not provide love, then children will plumb the depths of their nature.

Old men perhaps are hard to surprise. If this is what happened in the case of the killers or James Bulger we should not be surprised. But we can be shocked into recognizing evil when we see it. The poor child's pains are over. God help us all.

25. 4/21/17 - What is the primary message of Golding's essay? What does Golding say about fear? Do you agree with Golding's proposed ideas? Use specific examples to support your point.