

## **Disturbing Thoughts About A Possible Lacuna in AVP**

I am relatively new to AVP and apologize at the outset for bringing up an issue that has undoubtedly been long been discussed before. I do so, however, in the light of the recent experiment in Philadelphia of a high school wide involvement in AVP Basic workshops.

As facilitators shared their first day of experience at Tacony High School, one person shared that a student had wondered if the school had scheduled the AVP Basic workshop because the students were perceived as violent. Some facilitators had been afraid of how AVP might unintentionally communicate this to the youth and had steered clear of the word “violence” the first day, using the language of building communication and conflict resolution skills instead. This seemed particularly important for the many youth of color at the school, since “a tendency toward violence” is all too often projected onto these youth. I suspect we all knew, however, that there was a concern about violence that had broken out last spring outside the school. We came to know that some youth have experienced violence directly in their neighborhoods and families. We learned some were also familiar with police violence and racial profiling. Some had witnessed gang shootings, and others police brutality. Some students expressed anger about conditions at their school. It was a hot week in northeast Philly. The school is not air-conditioned. The classrooms are small for the number of students, and there is no outdoor space the youth can enjoy on their breaks. They are upset that they are forbidden water in the classroom despite temperatures in the mid-90’s, and receive poor quality food at lunchtime. Some spoke to me about going into the army in order to be able to get to college. Some wanted only to pass their classes and be able to escape high school without any thought of college. When we did a daily check-in with our twenty-six 11<sup>th</sup> graders, the majority reported being tired, hungry, or both. Some travel one to hours to school each day on several public buses.

Nevertheless, we set about the task of hosting an AVP Basic Workshop, deciding to focus on self-expression, affirmation, listening skills, exploring overlapping feelings, I-messages, Transforming Power, and apologies. When we brainstormed about “What is Violence?” the students gave the vast majority of their definitions from the close range of their personal relations. I tried to add my own two-cents about “structural” violence and “horizontal” violence, but

found that these concepts and their corresponding realities were quickly surpassed by a curriculum that is largely based on building personal communication skills through greater self-knowledge. On the fourth day we discovered that the students were particularly good at learning how to apologize. Although this is part of the advanced workshop, we had all decided to include it based on the kinds of situations the students said they wanted help with.

I think knowing how to craft an apology is an extremely useful and powerful skill. I don't regret our working with them on it, but as I had the chance to metabolize the week working with these students in their less than auspicious setting, I began to think more about apologizing to them than helping them to feel and express apology. Many of these youth are struggling with the effects of poverty, drug addiction in their families, the long sting of racism, family dissolution, and some with the pain of having an incarcerated parent or older sibling. I began to recognize that I had also had this feeling of wanting to apologize for the larger system of structural violence when in an AVP workshop in a state prison in California. It was hot those three days as well, well over 100 degrees, and the food was also poor. The setting was also less than auspicious, even more so than the school. Indeed, the architecture of the prison alone was worth apologizing for. It was an affront to human dignity.

It seems to me that in AVP's striving to not be political it holds up a distorted mirror to workshop participants. Horizontal and structural violence have political dimensions. Part of our understanding the seeds of violence in our treatment of ourselves and others necessarily depends on our gaining a clear understanding of how violence functions at multiple levels of organization that affect our affect, relationships, and modes of being.

When systemic violence is clearly included as a theme in work that strives to develop nonviolent lifestyles, the strategic importance of nonviolence in social struggle can be meaningfully discussed. I am thinking here in particular of Gene Sharp's work that shows that choosing violence in social struggle subjects oneself and one's movement to the violence of forces that are most often vastly more powerful and destructive. Instead one needs to understand how unjust systems sustain themselves so that their pillars of support can be thoughtfully and strategically eroded and removed.

If we are to work in schools, ought not the personal level of AVP be combined with a wider lens that grapples with systemic, structural, and horizontal violence and the relevant **nonviolent** tools that are available to transform their powerful practices and ideologies? I think some of our students would have acted less tired if our lens was widened.

Mary Watkins

## **On the train**

I am returning from 4 days in a Philadelphia public school where I was part of a tired, disturbed, face-to-face with the problems we have created for young people in the inner city.

How can one intervene, make a difference, the system is overwhelming

The train wends to Trenton. I know Camden is nearby. I think of our wars, our stupid spending for armaments and intelligence, while we create whole regions of mis-education and neglect

AVP does not do a good job of helping people understand the wider context of societal violence.

We are helping child participants to learn how to craft an effective apology. In this exercise they are positioned as the wrong doer. Who would they like an apology from? About what conditions would they like an apology?

We may be helping them to avoid bullying behavior. Who bullies them at a societal level?

We are working with them on alternatives to violence while they are victims of systemic violence.