HEARTS AND HANDS

Creating Community in Violent Times

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Introduction

What the Craziness Is

When the culture fails to draw out the innate beauty of its children, it's deciding to turn that beauty to violence.

—Michael Meade

There is a wound in the land, the body politic, and the collective spirit. Healing involves going directly to the wound, not recoiling from it. The wound, the damage, can be the mother of our rebirth, the reconciliation. If revolution isn't about this, it isn't about anything.

An aim here is to help span the seemingly insurmountable gulfs in our society so that we can provide the revolutionary teaching, caring, and genuine leadership that young people today are craving—and, in many cases, dying for.

I remember the day well. On April 20, 1999, two teenage gunmen rampaged through Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, with shotguns, semiautomatic weapons, and homemade bombs, killing thirteen people before shooting themselves and petrifying the nation with their fury and callousness. This was the most destructive of what had been an outbreak of school shootings in less than a two-year period. Scarcely twelve months earlier two boys, ages thirteen and eleven, gunned down four fellow classmates and a teacher in a Jonesboro, Arkansas, Middle School during a prank fire drill. The previous December a fourteen-year-old shot to death three classmates and wounded five others, members of a prayer group in a Kentucky school. Earlier in October a sixteen-year-old in Mississippi killed three people and wounded seven in a rampage that included a stop at his school.

From October 1997 to May 1999, similar assaults by kids occurred in towns like Moses Lake, Washington; Springfield, Oregon; Conyers, Georgia; and Edinboro, Pennsylvania. The assailants ranged in age from eleven to eighteen. Collectively they accounted for thirty-one deaths and seventy-five wounded. Then, on March 5, 2001, after a much-welcomed lull in such shoot-

ings, a fifteen-year-old high school student in Santee, California, opened fired on fellow students, killing two and wounding thirteen. Barely seventeen days later in the same school district, an eighteen-year-old senior in El Cajon High School took a shotgun and blasted several rounds, wounding five.

These events exploded in communities that were largely white, rural, or suburban, relatively crime free, and dotted with churches. The general sentiment: These things should not have happened there.

So why did they?

For some time the tragedy of kids killings kids has blown up in poor urban core communities, kicking off a spate of draconian laws and repressive measures. The popular perception in these cases was that they were "expected." Events like the one in a poor Flint, Michigan, elementary school in early 2000, when a six-year-old boy shot and killed a six-year-old girl (the boy's teenage uncle was later convicted in this case for "leaving the gun around"), further aggravated this notion.

By designating this violence as "inner city," and only affecting black and brown communities, most policymakers, driven by interests in more powerful well-off communities, showed little empathy or connection.

But we are connected. As we can see, this destructiveness can happen anywhere. The disaffection of our young people is deep—and no gated community or relatively wealthy environment is going to buffer them from the smoldering rages.

As reported by most of the media, blame for these tragic events was easily and randomly assigned: guns, violent movies, gang affiliations, video games, lack of moral training, bad parenting, bad kids. In various ways these elements do play a role in the violence, but none can hold up for long as a principal basis for these murderous assaults.

"It's the wordlessness of the schoolyard massacre that is so destabilizing," wrote Rick Moody. "Kids with weapons let weapons do the articulating. The triggermen themselves are notorious for their inability to explain their motives.... They have found the one rhetorical strategy that supervenes all others, that makes the chatter of parents and newspapers and television commentators dumb, that replies to all questions and all controversies in a final, incontrovertible splatter."[1]

So if a few kids are having guns do their talking, what are they saying? How do we intrepret the signals, the premonitions, the initial sparks of vicious outbursts in children who seem normal? "The murderer who talks with the

voice of a child puts forth the dangerous proposal that we are all capable," Moody continued. "That adolescence is often fatal. That only good luck distinguishes the guilty from the innocent."[2]

We seem to be in a general state of depression—a cultural malaise of isolation and meaninglessness. We are feeling more rootless and hopeless than ever before, despite the unprecedented prosperity permeating our society—where consumer products strain warehouses and retail outlets; technology and rapid service is at our fingertips; TV, video games, books, music, and movies bombard us at every turn; and access to every imaginable drug, drink, and sexual release is commonplace. It's a time when "life seems utterly devoid of purpose. No path beckons. Eventually a kind of paralytic cynicism sets in. You believe in nothing. You accept nothing as truthful, useful, or significant. You don't value anything you're currently doing and can't imagine doing something of value in the future."[3]

What can we do? How can we get off this continually accelerating merry-go-round? How do we regain our unmediated ties to nature, our innate purposes, and the paths of creativity and caring?

A major purpose of this book is to attempt a deeper inquiry into these issues, to engage people in an ongoing dialogue about why young people seem to be more brutal, more willing to take it to the limit, more intent on resolving issues with a total and desperate finality. This is not so much about the right "answers" as it is about the right arguments. It's time to make sense of the senselessness.

Around thirty years ago I committed myself to making sense of the senselessness of my own life. I became politically active in the barrios of Los Angeles during the tumultuous period of civil unrest in the 1960s and early 1970s. I obtained a new direction to my life, using abilities I barely discovered I possessed. Around eighteen I let go the most virulent aspects of my adolescence, including drugs, jails, and gang warfare. To survive and stay out of trouble, I worked in factories, foundries, refineries, construction sites, and four years in a steel mill. I acquired organizing skills as well as work skills. By age twenty-five, I resumed my education and embarked on the long and arduous road to become a writer and speaker—in effect, to merge intellectual activity with an active community life.

But I never forgot my youth, the most intense period of my life. The death-defying acts, suicide attempts, drug overdoses, homelessness, and staring down of bullets described a traumatized, rage-filled, and impulsive young

man. It is the same craziness that makes a teenager drive ninety miles per hour down a highway. It does no good to say this is useless behavior—the point is it's so prevalent (sixteen-year-olds are more likely to be killed in auto accidents than any other age group).[4] However, as storyteller and mythologist Michael Meade has stated, "we need to ask what the craziness is."[5]

For me, the street battles, drugs, and shadow-walking stank so sweet. It was the perfume of an otherwise aimless existence. Once caught in the web of a crazy life, nobody could untangle me. I had to unravel myself.

First of all, I had to want to. I had to have a vision, a sense of destiny for my life that went beyond the adolescent rages and uncertainties. I had to gain a worldview—tied to something deep in the soil and deep in the soul. Some embrace religion. Others, political or cultural awareness. Or science. Almost always the development of a worldview is linked in some way to art—music, the visual arts, dance, writing—to the intersection of external and internal energies that impel us onto a creative terrain where spirit and body, the conscious and the unconscious, the universal and the singular, the personal and the social live through us in a delicate dance.

Once I'd found a direction, I had to remove myself from the powerful pull of self-destructive impulses. I did this by helping transform the lives of other youth in my neighborhood and other parts of Los Angeles. Giving back to others, most of whom were in similar circumstances, became my way out of the madness.

A dropout at age 15, I now returned to high school and got involved with a Chicano student empowerment group. I became active in the neighborhood community center, which included an alternative school for teens, a preschool center, family referral and counseling, and a youth activities facility. Having been an outlaw graffiti writer, I eventually learned to draw and paint. For a year and a half I painted murals—sometimes with gang youth—for the community center, on the walls of various businesses and parks, and at a children's library. I even learned Mexika (Aztec) indigenous dance steps, which I performed at the school and in a couple of community events. For a brief time I tried my hand at amateur boxing, martial arts, and playing sax and conga drums for a garage band.

Later I participated in demonstrations, door-to-door organizing drives, youth dances, and retreats. Even when I worked in industry, I continued with these efforts in communities throughout the Los Angeles area, along with my first wife, Camila, and other young revolutionaries.

As described in my 1993 memoir, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*,[6] at the age of eleven, I turned my whole being over to a gang. As part of this, I took a variety of drugs, particularly aerosol sprays, but also heroin. In the gang I was not a leader; I was a good soldier. The new roles that I assumed required a more conscious participation in my life.

From 1974 to 1978 Camila and I gathered around us a number of young leaders, helping them organize activities, gain knowledge, and find places to hang out. At first they included youth from East L.A., particularly from the Aliso Village and Pico Gardens housing projects. Later, in Pasadena, we worked with the local high schools, including students from the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MeCha—the Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán). (Prior to my marriage in 1974, I had been the MeCha organizer for East L.A. high schools.) We supported striking bus drivers and school integration efforts, and participated in youth leadership camps and demonstrations against police abuse.

In the Florencia barrio of South Central L.A., and later in Watts—where we lived in the colonia neighborhood between the Jordan Downs and Imperial Courts housing projects—we set up an arts/theater group with neighborhood youth (Camila had been active in teatro groups at Garfield High School in East L.A., like the Teatro Urbano). On some weekends children and young teens would come to our house for meetings and community arts events, where they displayed their dancing, singing, and acting skills while we showed politically charged films on the outside wall of our house.

We had a cadre of young people willing to look death in the eye, and as they became more active, they adopted a vision of a more passionate and profound existence. We also attended gatherings in other cities that gathered youth and activists from around the country. The whole world lay before us. Our efforts were fraught with blood and will. I had been a young man who only lived for and cared about my barrio. Now I was going to places like San Francisco, Denver, and Chicago, driving vans or beat-up cars across the vast expanse of this land. As new geographical horizons opened up before me, so did those in my heart and mind.

I did not know it then, but by consciously pursuing a spiritual quest—which all youth are on, including gang youth—by opening up to the world in its pain and glory, I was moving through an initiation process. I left my barrio and my family to penetrate a new source of power. By returning to the barrio and contributing to the spiritual and intellectual growth of other

young people, I was forging the character that would serve to carry me along divergent and sometimes treacherous paths.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a violent period in Los Angeles. However, they only laid the ground for a more extensive violence that would grip these streets and those of other cities in the 1980s and 1990s. But I had moved away from this. In one sense I had outgrown the gang rivalries, robberies, and street wars. Like all young people at some time in their lives, I also had to make a decision to grow up.

I won't recount here in detail all the personal setbacks I've endured over the years. Suffice it to say they involved failed marriages (Camila and I broke up in 1978), losing kids and family, drinking away my sorrows instead of facing them, failing in work, in my community commitments, as a writer, and even as a father. But by failing, I was preparing for the only success that was possible: the success that comes from having descended to the depths and learning how to gather the psychic and spiritual energies to rise out of them.

All this has gone into the writing of this book, which summarizes much of what I've learned about life and working with young people through extensive study and practice.

The majority of the lessons here came from my fifteen years in Chicago, beginning in 1985. There I participated in organizations such as Youth Struggling for Survival as well as the Increase the Peace Collaborative, the Community Renewal Society's Anti-Violence Initiative, Guild Complex's Writing Through the Prisms of Self and Community Workshops, Tía Chucha Press, the Latino Planning Committee for Peace and Justice, and Humboldt Park's Teen Reach. Only recently, in the summer of 2000, did I return to Los Angeles. A year and a half later I helped launch a center of intellectual and arts enhancement called Tía Chucha's Café Cultural (a bookstore, coffee bar, performance space, art gallery, and computer center) in the Northeast San Fernando Valley—"Where Art and Minds Meet—For A Change."

In addition, for more than two decades I have spoken at hundreds of conferences, retreats, public and private schools, universities, prisons, migrant camps, homeless shelters, worksites, churches, libraries, and juvenile facilities throughout the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Central America, and Europe.

On the day that Eric Harris, eighteen, and Dylan Klebold, seventeen, slaughtered their fellow students and a teacher at Columbine High, I was doing a poetry reading and talk to several hundred students at Fremd High

School in the Chicago suburb of Palatine. Many of these students later wrote me about how my words helped encourage them to live more intentional lives. We can't forget that the vast majority of U.S. schools did not report any violence that day.

So while today there may be an alarming number of young people who are losing it, the vast majority of teenagers in the country are not committing violent acts. They are trying to negotiate their lives, with many problems, naturally, but still somewhat intact. Many of them are responding in heroic, even if mostly quiet, ways to these problems—and often without much support from adults.

In his book, *Framing Youth: Ten Myths about the Next Generation,* Mike A. Males reports that twelve- to nineteen-year-olds made up 14 percent of the U.S. population in the mid-1990s. They accounted for 18 percent of the country's violent crime (slightly more than their population), 15 percent of murders, 7 percent of suicides, 2 percent of drug deaths, 14 percent of highway deaths (reflecting the exact proportion of their numbers), 9 percent of drunken driving deaths, 12 percent of births, and 15 percent of HIV infections. Given the statistics, Males concludes that youth do not account for a high percentage of America's social ills.[7]

In fact, after studying data from the California Department of Justice—California crime figures are the most complete and consistent, as well as harbingers for the rest of the country—Males maintains that the greatest rise of violence and crime from 1980 to 1997 came from white male adults over age thirty.

To consider truly innovative responses in meeting the needs of young people, we must start with real assessments of what their situations consist of—away from the political spin doctors, sensationalist headlines, and general fear mongering going on today about children and youth.

Closing in on a half century of existence, I'm in the afternoon of this day called life. Only now do I feel I can contribute an ounce of cogency to this conversation. I am compelled to try because of the growing fissures between youth and elders, wealth and poverty, men and women, parents and their children, and the resultant rise of violence and substance abuse, home and community dislocations. There is also an astronomical and detrimental growth of prisons and law enforcement as the preferred remedies to what are essentially economic, political, sociological, psychological, and cosmological matters.

There is a meaningful connection between this ruptured social contract and the fact that so many have been pushed aside by the economy. "One paycheck away" is the defining phrase of this period—one paycheck away from losing one's home, education, and a place in the community. One paycheck away from a fall with incalculable consequences, even in times of a so-called growing economy.[8] What is the phrase that defines the opposite direction? Where is the compass to a true north of victory and reconciliation?

From the segmented and conflicted class structure in our society, a new social class is emerging. Excluded from the technologically driven economy, this class is also politically, socially, and culturally ostracized. They are the exiled, the alienated, the abandoned, the demonized. Included are those on welfare, the homeless, prisoners, migrant workers, urban and rural poor (of all races, including the working poor), the indigenous and the undocumented, but also former managers, professionals, teachers, artists, and intellectuals who have been unable to make a transition through the recent societal changes. They are the ones capitalism can no longer effectively exploit, and therefore value—the locked out as well as the locked down.

As the core culture becomes increasingly materialistic and profit oriented, it also becomes mean-spirited, intolerant, and devoid of a regenerative spirit. So, where do we turn when the center of the culture becomes hollow? As many others have poignantly remarked, to the margins, to the so-called periphery where everything is struggling and alive, to the "outcasts" and outlawed. Just as the extremities of the body energize the heart, so, too, do the peripheries of a culture revitalize its heart.

Here is where the imagination of the possible expands, where change and creation find seed and root. This is also where other social classes can make a link to the developing movement for a shared future of peace, justice, and plenitude and where the needs, desires, and longings of all the people can be realized.

However, the period of possibility we are in suggests that shifts in policy won't suffice. Instead we must reorient our thinking on how young and old are joined in the political and social matrix of the land—where the people are fully activated and their dreams, aspirations, and strivings are central to what makes up community.

As Goethe once said, "Everything has been thought of before; the difficulty is to think of it again."[9] Or we can proceed from Osip Mandelshtam's statement: "Everything existed of old, everything happens again, and only the moment of recognition is sweet."[10]

At the nexus of the sweet encounters between old issues and new demands, something indeed is being born. Our society is pregnant with such potential. It's time our institutions, relationships, and collaborations were seen as birthing centers.

So this is a good place to start: To reimagine the issues and bring complete community attention and intention to the crisis faced by our youth and, consequently, the whole culture.

The people and events discussed in this publication are real. However, many of the names and circumstances were changed to protect those involved.