

Malrecognition and Martyrdom

What do school dropouts, computer hackers, and suicide bombers have in common? They all suffer from “recognition disorders.”

Recognition is the meat and potatoes of our identity. It is as indispensable to mental health as food is to physical health.

A baby’s cry commands recognition from the day it’s born. Toddlers demand it from adults, making their parents’ lives miserable until they get it. Adolescents show off, even take insane risks, to extract it from their peers. Adults risk their reputations and sacrifice their health in its pursuit.

Like nutritional deficiencies, recognition deficiencies can stunt growth and impair performance. As their hunger for recognition mounts, those who feel invisible become increasingly desperate. What begins as a deficiency congeals into full-blown pathology. Like their nutritional counterpart—eating disorders—recognition disorders can prove fatal.

The English writer John Fowles warns, “The sense that you are nobody can drive you to violence and unreason. Through all human history it has been the hidden motive—that unbearable desire to prove oneself somebody—behind countless insanities and acts of violence.” A confidant of one of the Columbine students who killed a dozen of their schoolmates in 2000 said of his friend, “He was afraid he would never be known.” His sentiment brings to mind William James’s observation that “The deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated.”

Acknowledgement from others gives shape and coherence to our identities. It is through the give and take of recognition that we define ourselves as individuals, build integrity, and develop a sense of dignity. Recognition confirms identity and affirms dignity. Contrariwise, removal of the integrative effects of recognition, as happens in the extreme with solitary confinement, causes our identity to become unglued and is experienced as a loss of dignity. Deprivation of dignity breeds indignation, and with indignation, a martyr is born.

Today the word “martyr” usually conjures up the image of a suicide bomber or terrorist. In the present context, the term is used more generally to refer to people who sacrifice their development or well-being for a principle or cause. In virtually every instance, the underlying issue is one involving dignity. Sometimes the dignity is their own, sometimes it’s that of a group to which they belong. Sometimes others praise their acts, sometimes they condemn them. But invariably, martyrs see themselves as taking a stand against those who would deny their dignity.

From this broader perspective, martyrdom is seen to have many forms, not just the murderous, suicidal acts of terrorism that make the front page. It is a path that draws millions, not just the handful we read about. This broad, inclusive approach helps us understand why people choose martyrdom and what can be done to make any and all of its forms seem unattractive and unnecessary.

Martyrdom can be either active or passive. Passive martyrs repress the resentment that stems from lack of recognition and typically go unnoticed. They are prone to resignation, self-effacement, sometimes even self-destruction. Our schools are filled with students who opt out of learning rather than risk being stigmatized as “losers.” For blacks this can mean resisting what they see as the “white way.” For students in general it means refusing to do things the “right way,” as held up to them by teachers and parents.

The reason so many pupils withhold their hearts and minds from what is being taught is that their first priority is to steel themselves against the indignities that beset our educational system from preschool on. The long-term consequences of doing this are often easier to bear than the brutal pain of derision. Society pays a terrible price for sponsoring institutions that force its young to make such tragic choices. Worse still is the fact that our schools merely reflect societal practices which force the same choice on adults.

In contrast to the passive martyrdom chosen by legions of students, active martyrs strike back at those they view as causing their torment. But despite their high visibility, they are only the tip of the iceberg. Below the waterline lie multitudes of passive martyrs resigned to deprivation and dissatisfaction. Though not willing to rebel openly like their activist comrades, they nonetheless usually sympathize with them.

The aftermath of an act of blatant terrorism often provides us with a glimpse of the full extent of passive martyrdom. In the weeks following the shootings at Columbine, thousands of school outcasts voiced complaints about intolerance, humiliation, and bullying. When an employee goes “postal,” browbeaten workers from near and far, while distancing themselves from the violence, urge that their employers appoint ombudsmen. In the wake of the attacks of 9/11, thousands of disenfranchised young Muslims celebrated in the streets of foreign capitals.

The extent to which active martyrs depend on passive sympathizers for material and psychological support varies from one situation to the next. Not infrequently there are significant differences between the political motivations and goals of the activists and those who applaud their exploits. It is likely, for example, that many who regard themselves as supporters of Al Qaeda do not share either the specific political aims or the extreme antipathy for modernity and pluralism of its leadership. Sometimes all it takes to expose the divergence in goals between terrorists and their passive supporters is a visa to the West or a meaningful job at home.

But for there to be a renewable supply of suicide bombers, volunteers must feel they are acting on behalf of others subject to the same indignities who regard their martyrdom as a noble act. Most martyrs need to believe their sacrifice will not only bring recognition to themselves personally, but will draw attention to the indignities endured by an entire group to which they belong.

The American civil rights movement showed the world what happens when passive martyrs find a way to make their resentments known. For centuries the martyrdom of blacks took the form of stoic resignation to either slavery or menial jobs in a segregated, racist society. Protest had to remain covert—as in foot-dragging, sabotage, etc.—because more overt actions were summarily punished. In the 1960s, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Gandhian strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience gave millions of passive martyrs who were unwilling to perpetrate violence an acceptable way to become active martyrs. Thousands marched in the streets and subjected themselves to arrest and police brutality as the nation watched with mounting apprehension.

Any cause that can draw significant numbers of the countless passive martyrs

out of their latency poses a grave threat to the status quo. As the ranks of nonviolent civil rights protestors swelled, Congress took steps to redress the injustices against which they were demonstrating. Faced with escalating disruption, Americans realized that evil lay not in the martyrs but in the racism that fueled their outrage, and began working to eliminate its degrading practices.

To combat terrorism societies must of course pursue and neutralize known perpetrators just as they do criminals. But the ultimate outcome of the struggle hinges on preventing a wholesale shift from passive to active martyrdom. We're unlikely to succeed in eradicating either domestic or international terrorism unless we alleviate the systemic indignities that depreciate lives and force people to choose between martyrdom and shame.

As it was in the sixties, so it is today: the suppression of active martyrs is not enough. We have to deal with the issue of passive martyrdom as well. At that time the root of the problem was racism—discrimination and exploitation based on race. Today it is “rankism”— discrimination and exploitation based on rank.

Rankism is abuse of the relatively weak and vulnerable by those who have higher rank and the superior power that comes with it. When rank is earned and exercised appropriately, people do not object to it. But when those of higher rank use their power for selfish or exploitative purposes, they provoke resentment. Rankism is *the* source of indignity and leads inevitably to indignation. Its perpetrators, in demeaning their victims, trigger recognition disorders, thereby ensuring a steady supply of willing martyrs.

The twentieth century is replete with horrific examples of the lengths to which individuals and nations will go in quest of pride and dignity. Time and again a humiliated people has heeded the call of a demagogic leader in hopes of establishing a new, more respected identity. A Nazi SS officer, reminiscing about German military victories in the early years of World War II, remarked, “It was with unrivaled pride that we saw the world. We were somebody.”

The large-scale manifestations of recognition disorders that make news are like the periodic famines that draw our attention while chronic malnutrition, which leaves entire populations vulnerable to disease and death, goes unremarked. Left

unaddressed, recognition deficiencies fester and eventually are writ large on the face of the world. If we wish to change this dynamic, we must first come to understand it. Why do people begrudge others recognition? Why do they persist in subjecting others to indignity?

At first it might be thought that our parsimony in dispensing recognition stems from legitimate doubts about the value of other people's contributions. But even when recognition is clearly merited, we're stinting with it—a sign that something else is at play. The explanation lies in our misguided hope that by withholding recognition from others we can keep potential competitors weak and thereby protect whatever prerogatives we enjoy by virtue of our present station.

Moral considerations aside, this strategy is short-sighted because as terrorist attacks have illustrated, some people value dignity above life itself. And most of us will seize the first opportunity to even the score with those who do not give us our due.

To reduce the incidence of nutritional deficiencies, we had to first determine what a healthy body needs and then take pains to ensure that everyone received enough of those vital nutrients. Although much remains to be done in both the developed and developing world, the 20th century witnessed significant progress toward ending malnutrition and eradicating hunger. For the first time in human history, it lies within our reach to end these scourges worldwide.

As proper food is necessary for our physical bodies, so is proper recognition for our psychological health and stability. As lack of proper food results in malnutrition, so lack of proper recognition results in what can be called “malrecognition.”

Identifying and naming a problem is sometimes half the battle. Questions regarding the appropriate acknowledgement and compensation due the various ranks within our social and global institutions are now largely taboo. Making malrecognition visible and giving it priority is a vital first step.

The second step is to develop the taxonomy and science of recognition, which today are in their infancy. As was the case with malnutrition, a great deal of study will be needed to devise effective remedies for the various forms of malrecognition. One can imagine experts who focus on diagnosing and treating this problem—psychologists, diplomats, and others whose specialty it is to spot symptoms of recognition deficiencies

and work with individuals, institutions, and nations to correct them before they assume the proportions of entrenched disorders.

Treating these maladies will require the understanding that in order to convey respect, recognition must be genuinely earned and given. Unless those acknowledged feel they have actually contributed something of value and thereby really deserve it, recognition just backfires. The condescension implicit in inflated praise feels patronizing and only exacerbates recognition deficiencies.

The way to a more equitable distribution of recognition is through authentic appreciation of the real value others create. As things stand now, when it comes to recognition, it's feast or famine. A few get the lion's share while a great many others must settle for crumbs.

But unlike the supply of food, that of recognition is unlimited. We don't have to disparage Peter in order to acknowledge Paul. To increase the supply of recognition we need only discern the varied contributions others make to the world and acknowledge them appropriately.

The difficulties involved in redistributing recognition without violence are great, but the costs of not doing so are far greater. Implementation will require ingenuity, perseverance, and patience. In the workplace it will mean that each person, from the boss to the janitor, must understand and respect the contributions of fellow employees and support a system of compensation that fairly acknowledges them. In the schools it means protecting the dignity of everyone, teachers and students alike, at every step in the learning process. We must stop using educational ranking as we have in the past—to effect and maintain a division between “winners” and “losers” and reconcile the latter to their station via humiliation and invalidation. Instead we must use testing exclusively and sensitively as a diagnostic tool that can help guide students towards specialization.

For conflicts between peoples or states, redistributing recognition means developing supranational institutions capable of taking a nonpartisan, comprehensive view of the legitimate interests of all parties and then mediating so that in the end everyone feels their concerns have received fair treatment.

Eliminating malrecognition is a task as daunting as ending world hunger. But the threat posed by malrecognition is even graver. Whereas malnutrition cripples individuals

and occasionally rises to the level of famine, it is not contagious. In contrast, malrecognition spreads because when our dignity is offended, our first impulse is to do the same to others. Most alarmingly, the 20th century amply demonstrates that war, unlike famine, can leap easily and quickly from one continent to another.

Wherever there is domination, paternalism, harassment, ostracism, exploitation, territorial occupation, or colonization—in short, wherever there is humiliation and indignity—there will be malrecognition and martyrdom. Passive resistance and violent outbursts in the workplace and schools, computer sabotage, terrorism, genocide, and war all have their genesis in recognition disorders which in turn stem from systemic abrogations of people's dignity. Seeing these behaviors in such light does not excuse them any more than attributing a theft or murder to poverty excuses it. But this reframing does suggest a way to break dysfunctional patterns that now mar personal lives, cripple social institutions, threaten entire societies, and preclude global peace.

The benefits of preventing malnutrition are now universally apparent. The effects of preventing malrecognition will be equally salutary. In a world where the few can hold the many hostage or threaten the health and security of the entire planet, there is no higher priority than the diagnosis and treatment of recognition disorders.