

# ROOTS OF EMPATHY & NONVIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD

A Presentation & Dialogue with  
MITCH HALL



# Mohandas K. Gandhi,

## 11/19/31



“If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children, and if they will grow up in their natural innocence, we won't have to struggle; we won't have to pass fruitless, idle resolutions; but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace until at last all corners of the world are covered with that peace and love for which consciously or unconsciously the whole world is hungering.”

# Empathy

- \* “The essence of empathy is the ability to stand in another’s shoes, to feel what it’s like there and to care about making it better if it hurts.” Szalavitz, M. & Perry, B.D. (2010). *Born for love: Why empathy is essential & endangered*. New York: William Morrow, (p. 12)
- \* “Empathy is actually a *hypothesis* we make about another person based on a combination of visceral, emotional, and cognitive information...an attempt to experience the inner life of another while retaining objectivity.” Cozolino, L. (2006), *The neuroscience of human relationships: Attachment and the developing social brain*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.



# Nonviolence/*Ahimsa*

- \* Nonviolence is “the absence of the desire, or intention, to harm.” Nagler, M. (2004). *The search for a nonviolent future*. Maui & San Francisco: Inner Ocean Publishing, (p. 44).
- \* Nonviolence also refers to principled action, using nonviolent means, to create nonviolent social, economic, political, & cultural values & structures.
- \* While direct violence kills 1.5 million people/year (WHO. Violence Prevention: The Evidence), structural violence kills 18 million/year. Gilligan, J. (1996). *Violence: Reflections on a national epidemic*. New York: Random House.

# Empathy & Nonviolence

- \* Empathy & nonviolence, when highly developed, motivate compassionate action for personal, interpersonal, and societal healing and protection.



# Evidence

Historical, Cross-Cultural,  
Epidemiological, Psychological, ...



# Poisonous Pedagogy & the Holocaust



- \* “People with any sensitivity cannot be turned into mass murderers overnight. But the men & women who carried out the final solution did not let their feelings stand in their way for the simple reason that they had been raised from infancy not to have any feelings of their own but to experience their parents’ wishes as their own” (p. 81).
- \* Miller, A. (1983). *For your own good: Hidden cruelty in childrearing and the roots of violence*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

# Childhood Roots of Altruism

- \* Only 0.5% of gentiles risked their own lives to rescue Jews in Nazi holocaust. 40 years after end of WWII, Samuel & Pearl Oliner interviewed 406 rescuers, 126 non-rescuers, & 150 survivors. What distinguished the rescuers from others?
- \* Rescuers had been raised nonviolently, with close family ties, rare to no physical punishment, & parents who used much reasoning, modeled caring behavior & values, & were respectful in relation to people from diverse backgrounds.
- \* The rescuers showed evidence of being **securely attached** with a “capacity for extensive relationships,” that is, a “stronger sense of attachment to others and...feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside their immediate familial & communal circles” (p. 249).
- \* Oliner, S. P. & Oliner, P. (1988). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. New York: The Free Press.



# Cultural Geography of Nonviolence

- \* DeMeo analyzed ethnographic data--Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* (50 variables, 1,870 cultures) & Textor's *A Cross-Cultural Summary* (63 variables, 400 cultures)-- & found strong association between more peaceful cultures and nurturing, nonviolent child rearing. DeMeo, J. (1998). *Saharasia: The 4000 BCE origins of child abuse, sexual repression, warfare, & violence in the deserts of the old world*. Greensprings, OR: Orgone Biophysical Research Lab.
- \* Prescott reviewed data from 49 cultures . In nonviolent ones, children were raised in nurturing, physically affectionate, nonviolent ways. Prescott, J.W. (1975). Body pleasure & the origins of violence. *The Futurist*, April, 1975.

# Nonviolence & Absence of Physical Punishment

- \* In a worldwide sample of 48 societies, the psychologist Barry found...
- \* Frequent physical punishment of boys in late childhood is the formative experience most highly correlated with violence
- \* Absence of physical punishment is especially associated with infrequent violent crimes
- \* Barry III, H. (2007). Corporal punishment and other formative experiences associated with violent crimes. *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 35(1), pp. 71-82.



# Aggression, Anxiety, & Physical Punishment

- \* International study: China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines, & Thailand
- \* Kids subjected to maternal physical punishment showed more aggression & anxiety than peers who were not physically punished.
- \* Lansford J.E., Chang, L., Dodge, K.A., Malone, P.S., Oburu, P., Palmacrus, K., Bacchini, D., Pastorelli, C., Bombi, A.S., Zelli, A., Tapanya, S., Chaudhary, N., Deater-Deckard, K., Manke, B., & Quinn, N. (2005). Physical discipline and children's adjustment: Cultural normativeness as a moderator. *Child Development*, 76 (6), pp. 1234-1246.

# Research Review on Physical Punishment

- \* Review & meta-analyses of several hundred published studies spanning a century.
- \* Substantial evidence: physical punishment makes it more, not less, likely that children will be defiant, aggressive, delinquent, & antisocial in future, more at risk for mental health problems, serious injury, & physical abuse.
- \* Gershoff, E.T. (2008). Report on physical punishment in the United States: What research tells us about its effects on children. Columbus, OH: Center for Effective Discipline.



# Words, Like Sticks & Stones, Can Hurt

- \* Parental verbal abuse alters neural pathways affecting emotion regulation, language development, psychopathology, anxiety, & depression. Choi, J., Jeong, B., Rohan, M.L., Polcari, A.M., & Teicher, M.H. (2009). Preliminary evidence of white tract matter abnormalities in young adults exposed to parental verbal abuse. *Biological Psychiatry* 65(3), 227-234
- \* Kids of professionals by age 3 hear 500,000 encouragements versus only 80,000 discouragements. Kids of welfare parents hear only 80,000 encouragements versus 200,000 discouragements. Tough, P. (2008). *Whatever it takes: Geoffrey Canada's quest to change Harlem & America*. NY & Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

# Childhood Roots of Tyranny

- \* A study of 14 20th century tyrants found they had suffered repeated childhood humiliations, grown up in violent, authoritarian families, were shame-based & insecure, & had severe personality disorders.
- \* Their insatiable craving for power and ruthless violence were rooted in unhealed childhood traumas & humiliations.
- \* Stephenson, J. (1998). *Poisonous power: Childhood roots of tyranny*. Diemer, Smith Publishing Co., Inc.



# Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence

Karr-Morse, R. & Wiley, M.S. (1997). *Ghosts from the nursery: Tracing the roots of violence*. NY: The Atlantic Monthly Press.

- \* Maltreatment & deprivations in early life predispose to violence.
- \* Prenatal exposures to lead predispose to paranoia, impulsive rage & aggression; alcohol & heroine--increased aggressiveness & impulsivity; nicotine & cocaine--increased impulsivity
- \* Physical trauma to some areas of head leads to increased aggressiveness.
- \* The authors identified over 30 “factors associated with violent behavior that can be modified or prevented by early intervention” (p.p. 299-300).

# \*“The Vortex of Violence”

Perry, B.D. (2002). The vortex of violence: How children adapt & survive in a violent world.

[www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org).

- \* The major context of violence in America is the family.
- \* 27% of violent crimes are family-on-family crimes, & 48% involve acquaintances (often in the home). FBI, 1995.
- \* Community & predatory violence are rooted in intrafamilial violence & impacts of abuse & neglect on development of children.
- \* 4/5 of assaults on children are at hands of their parents. van der Kolk, B.A. Posttraumatic stress disorder & the nature of trauma, pp. 168-195, in M.F. Solomon & D.J. Siegel (2003). *Healing trauma: Attachment, mind, body, & brain*. NY & London: W.W. Norton & Company.



# Birth & Maternal Loss or Rejection

- \* Adrian Raine of UCLA followed 4,269 males from birth to age 18. Birth complications coupled with early maternal separation or rejection was leading risk factor for violence by age 18.
- \* Raine, A., Brennan, P., & Mednick, S.A. (1994). Birth complications combined with early maternal rejection at age 1 year predispose to violent crime at age 18 years. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 51, 984-988.

# Childhood Roots of Political Attitudes

- \* Punitive political attitudes, such as favoring war as an instrument of national policy and capital punishment, result from punitive upbringings.
- \* This is especially so for males who have not benefitted from psychotherapy.
- \* Childhood anger is displaced onto political issues & outsiders.
- \* Milburn, M. A. & Conrad, S. D. (1996). *The politics of denial*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.



# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

- \* Epidemiological study of 17,338 adult HMO patients
- \* **9 ACEs**--recurrent physical and/or emotional abuse; contact sexual abuse; alcohol &/or drug abuser in home; incarcerated household member; someone chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal; 1 or no parents; emotional or physical neglect
- \* In graded fashion, the more ACEs, the greater the risk for dysfunction in affective, somatic, substance abuse, sexual, and aggression-related domains.
- \* Anda, R.F., Felitti, V.J., Bremner, D.J., Walker, J.D., Whitefield, C., Perry, B.D., Dube, S.R., & Giles, W. (2006). The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood: A convergence of evidence from neurobiology and epidemiology. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*, 256, pp.174-186.

# Effects of ACEs

\* Exposure to each ACE category is counted as an ACE point. Compared to having an ACE score of zero, having four or more ACEs leads to the following increased risks:

- ischemic heart disease 220%
- diabetes 160%
- chronic bronchitis or emphysema 390%
- past-year depression 460%
- ever attempting suicide 1,220%
- currently smoking 220%
- ever using illegal drugs 470%
- becoming an alcoholic 740%
- injecting illegal drugs 1,030%

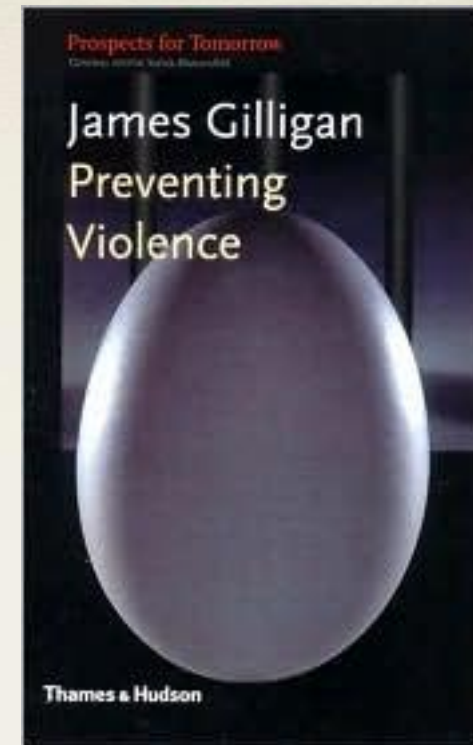
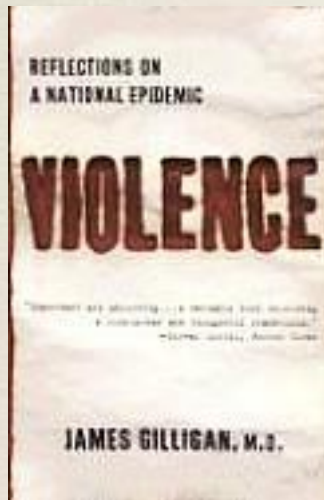
\* An ACE score of 6 or more may reduce life expectancy by two decades.



# Epigenetics & the Riddle of Human Nature

- \* Neither nature nor nurture alone determines whether humans are violent or nonviolent. Rather, our experiences, particularly in our formative relationships early in life determine how our genes, particularly those controlling our stress response, are expressed.
- \* Child abuse leaves epigenetic marks on DNA.
- \* The neuroscientist James Fallon's brain shows deficiencies in his OMPFC & he has the MAO-A (monoamine oxidase A) gene pattern of sociopaths, but he is nonviolent and prosocial due to early nurturance despite being descended from a family in which some ancestors had been violent sociopaths.
- \* Hagerty, B.B. (2010). A neuroscientist uncovers a dark secret.  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=127888976>

# James Gilligan, MD



- \* Posits universal cause of violent behavior: being overwhelmed by feelings of shame & humiliation, as well as being insulted, disrespected, ridiculed or rejected by others, or treated as inferior or unimportant. That is, violence is always a desperate & risky attempt to gain respect, attention and recognition for oneself or one's group & to displace shame onto others. Egregious child abuse is documented in over 90% of backgrounds of the most violent offenders. Perpetrators see themselves as agents of "justice," avenging themselves for past injuries.



# Violence Is Made, Not Born

- \* Gilligan observed most people not violent; even violent people are not violent most of the time.
- \* Lonnie Athens' interviews of violent offenders over 20 -year period found 4 stages of becoming violent: brutalization (victimization, witnessing close others abused, violent coaching); belligerency (harm or be harmed); violent performances; virulency. Athens, L. (1992).

*The creation of dangerous, violent criminals.* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

# Most Soldiers Do Not Kill Easily

- \* U.S. military firing rates at exposed enemy soldiers were only 15-20% in WWII. Due to new training methods, rates rose to 55% in Korean War & 95% in the Vietnam War. Grossman, D. (1996). *On killing: The psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society*. Boston: Little Brown & Co.
- \* Symptoms of perpetration-induced trauma have been found to be more severe than in PTSD of victims. McNair, R. (2002). *Perpetration-induced traumatic stress: The psychological consequences of killing*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- \* 1/6 US servicemen on at least 1 psychiatric drug. Levine, B.E. (2010). Psychologists profit on unending U.S. wars by teaching positive thinking to soldiers. *Huffington Post* 7/22/10



# Psychohistory

- \* deMause interprets history & politics in relation to evolution of childrearing as practiced by different “psychoclasses:” infanticidal, abandoning, ambivalent, intrusive, socializing, & helping.
- \* Wars and social violence are seen as re-staging early traumas.
- \* His extensive research is largely ignored in academia.
- \* deMause, L. (2002). *The emotional life of nations*. New York & London: Karnac.

# Effects of Socioeconomic Deprivation on Children

- \* “Children growing up in groups or societies under threat will be more likely to be raised with harsh or distant caregiving” Szalavitz, M. & Perry, B.D. (2010). *Born for love: Why empathy is essential & endangered*. New York: William Morrow, p.341.
- \* The case of the Ik. Turnbull, C.M. (1972). *The mountain people*. New York: Touchstone.



# Kids under Threat Worldwide

- \* child laborers--246 million
- \* child slaves--6 million
- \* child soldiers--300,000+
- \* primary-school-age kids not in school--101 million
- \* kids lacking adequate shelter--640 million
- \* kids lacking access to safe water--400 million
- \* kids without access to health care--270 million
- \* IRC, Fall 2010 Newsletter

# Attachment Theory & Research

Light on Empathy & Nonviolence



# What Is Attachment?

- \* Attachment is an innate, evolutionarily based behavioral system that motivates us to seek proximity to one or a few wiser/stronger people (attachment figures) who will provide a safe haven for comfort, safety, & meeting basic needs, as well as a secure base from which to explore the wider world on a sustained basis.
- \* Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment*. New York: Basic Books

# Secure Attachment



- \* “All of us, from cradle to grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures.” Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory*. London: Routledge, p. 27.
- \* Attachment, self-esteem, and worldview form a tripartite security system. Hart, J., Shaver, P.R., & Goldenberg, J.L. (2005). Attachment, self-esteem, worldviews, and terror management: Evidence for a tripartite security system. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(6), 999-1013.



# Neurobiology

- \* Extensive neuronal networks in the human brain are dedicated to attachment. The brain is primarily a social organ. It develops optimally with secure attachment.
- \* When attachment needs have been met well in early development, the complementary caregiving behavioral system can function optimally.
- \* When attachment needs are not fulfilled, the consequences to the individual and society cause a wide range of dysfunctions, from moderate to severe.

# Attachment Styles

- \* Extensive, worldwide research has found 4 basic attachment styles, beginning in early childhood and persisting in later life, resulting from the relationship(s) with the primary caregiver(s).
- \* Influences on attachment styles include the caregiver's own childhood experience, even if not explicitly remembered, family history, trauma, culture, socioeconomic conditions, and politics.



# Unequal Attachment Experiences

- \* The quality of care we receive from our early attachment figures affects, for good or ill, all levels of our development, including the growth, structure and functioning of our brains; baselines of neurotransmitters & hormones; capacity for self-regulation; health; emotional awareness; cognitive development; internal working models of self and others; & more. Early care influences the expression of the genes controlling our stress response.

# Overview of Attachment Styles

- \* 3 organized attachment styles:
  - \* Secure attachment. (~55%)
  - \* Avoidant, insecure attachment. (~20%)
  - \* Anxious, insecure attachment (~10%)
- \* 1 disorganized, insecure attachment style (~15%)



# Secure Attachment

- \* Primary caregiver (mother or other): free, autonomous, available, sensitive, attuned, perceptive of child's feelings & needs, responsive, effective, caring, fun, helpful, encouraging, amplifies happy feelings, soothes distress (not 100% of time, but reliably)
- \* Child: easy to soothe, confident, expects to be helped, positive sense of self & others, internalizes carer as source of comfort & refers internally to her/him to feel safe while seeking stimulation elsewhere.

# Avoidant, Insecure Attachment

- \* Carer: **Dismissive**, unavailable, distant, rejecting, unexpressive, does not recognize or empathize with child's feelings; discomfort with closeness & interdependence; extreme self-reliance, positive sense of self, negative sense of others.
- \* Child: shut down, turned inward, does not expect to be soothed, under-expresses feelings, does not seek proximity to mother in "strange situation."



# Anxious, Insecure Attachment

- \* Carer: **ambivalent**, inconsistently available, at times responsive, at times unavailable, at times overly involved, enmeshed, intrusive
- \* Child: fears unlovability & rejection; angry at threat of separation; strong, insistent need for love & approval; preoccupied with attachment needs; emotionally expressive/overly expressive; negative sense of self, positive sense of others.

# Disorganized Attachment

- \* Carer: frightens child; unresolved trauma and/or grief; traumatizes, abuses, &/or neglects child; may be depressed, personality disordered, mentally ill, addicted, aggressive &/or sexualized...
- \* Child: behaves chaotically; injures selves and/or others; dissociates; freezes; contradictory behaviors; dysregulated on all levels
- \* High correlation with personality disorders, severe psychiatric disorders, aggression, violence, criminality.



# Empathy & Secure Attachment

- \* Being secure with respect to attachment--either by disposition from having received consistently empathic care in childhood or momentarily due to experimental intervention--is associated with empathy, compassion, & responsive, altruistic behaviors.
- \* Gillath, O., Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2005). An attachment-theoretical approach to compassion and altruism , in P. Gilbert (ed.) *Compassion: Conceptualizations, research, and use in psychotherapy*. Hove & New York: Routledge, 121-147.
- \* Mikulincer, M. & Shaver, P. R. (2005). Attachment security, compassion, and altruism. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14 (1), pp. 34-38.

# Compassion, Altruism, & Secure Attachment

- \* Compassion & altruism are related to secure attachment.
- \* Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P.R., Gillath, O., & Nitzberg, R.A. (2005). Attachment, caregiving, and altruism: Boosting attachment security increases compassion and helping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 817-839.



# Humane Values & Secure Attachment

- \* Mikulincer, M., Gillath, O., Sapir-Lavid, Y., Yaakobi, E., Arias, K., Tal-Aloni, L., & Bor, G. (2003). Attachment theory and concern for others' welfare: Evidence that activation of the sense of secure base promotes endorsement of self-transcendence values. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 25, 299-312.

# Tolerance & Attachment Security

- \* Securely attached people show greater tolerance for out-group members
- \* Mikulincer, M. & Shaver, P.R. (2001). Attachment theory and intergroup bias: Evidence that priming the secure base schema attenuates negative reactions to out-groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 97-115.



# Self-Worth & Secure Attachment

- \* Securely attached people:
  - \* Show lower physiological reactivity to ego-threatening stimuli
  - \* Have a more stable sense of self-worth
  - \* Are less reactive to feedback about acceptance & rejection
  - \* Are less biased by self-promoting needs

# Empathic Responsiveness & Secure Attachment

- \* Securely attached people...
- \* Are more sensitive & responsive to others' emotional self-disclosures & need for support
- \* Express more affection & support before temporary separation, thereby enhancing relational security for self & others.



# Open-mindedness & Secure Attachment

- \* Securely attached people...
- \* Have more coherent, complex, & flexible knowledge structures
- \* Have more positive mental representations of self & others

# Development of Secure Attachment Later in Life

- \* Secure attachment, if not derived from early care, can be *earned*, through later, sustained relationship(s) with emotionally healthy, empathic others: therapist, teacher, mentor, friend, life partner, ...
- \* Mindfulness practices (e.g. meditation, yoga) have similar psychological & neurological correlates as secure attachment & can provide similar benefits.

\* Shaver, P.r., Lavy, S., Saron, C.D., & Mikulincer, M. (2007). Social Foundations of the capacity for mindfulness: an attachment perspective. *Psychological Inquiry*, 18, 264-271.



# Avoidant, Insecure Attachment & Empathy

- \* Avoidant, insecure people ward off their own feelings & needs; dismissive of feelings of others; lack empathy.
- \* Does this correlate with politically conservative denial, i.e. denial of the evidence of the suffering of others & denial of their own vulnerability. Milburn, M. A. & Conrad, S. D. (1996). *The politics of denial*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

# Anxious, Insecure Attachment & Empathy

- \* People with anxious, insecure attachment may become overwhelmed through identifying with and overreacting to others' feelings, thereby impeding empathy which is based on understanding both how another feels and also how oneself feels.
- \* Does this correlate with liberal politics, including liberal denial of one's own aggressiveness and of the capacity of others to act out destructively?



# Violence & Disorganized Attachment

- \* Traumatic abuse in child rearing leads to the hot, impulsive violence associated with borderline personality disorder.
- \* Severe, early neglect predisposes to the cold, predatory, remorseless violence associated with antisocial personality disorder (sociopathy).
- \* Schore, A. N. Early relational trauma, disorganized attachment, and the development of a predisposition to violence, pp. 107-167, in Solomon, M. F. & Siegel, D. J. (2003). *Healing trauma: Attachment, mind, body, and brain*. New York & London, W. W. Norton & Company.

# Some Helpful interventions

from among many that are needed



# Nurse Intervention Program

- \* Trained nurses visit new mother weekly during pregnancy and 1st few months after birth.
- \* 15 years later, study showed 59% decrease in arrest rate for teens whose mothers had been visited
- \* & a 50% decrease in substantiated reports of child abuse & neglect
- \* Szalavitz & Perry (2010), p. 333.

# Roots of Empathy Program

- \* Curriculum for grades 1 through 8
- \* 27 classroom visits during school year, 9 with a mother & baby
- \* Follow-up lessons
- \* Children are exposed to nurturing caregiving

\* <http://www.rootsofempathy.org/Research.html>



# WHO Violence Prevention: The Evidence

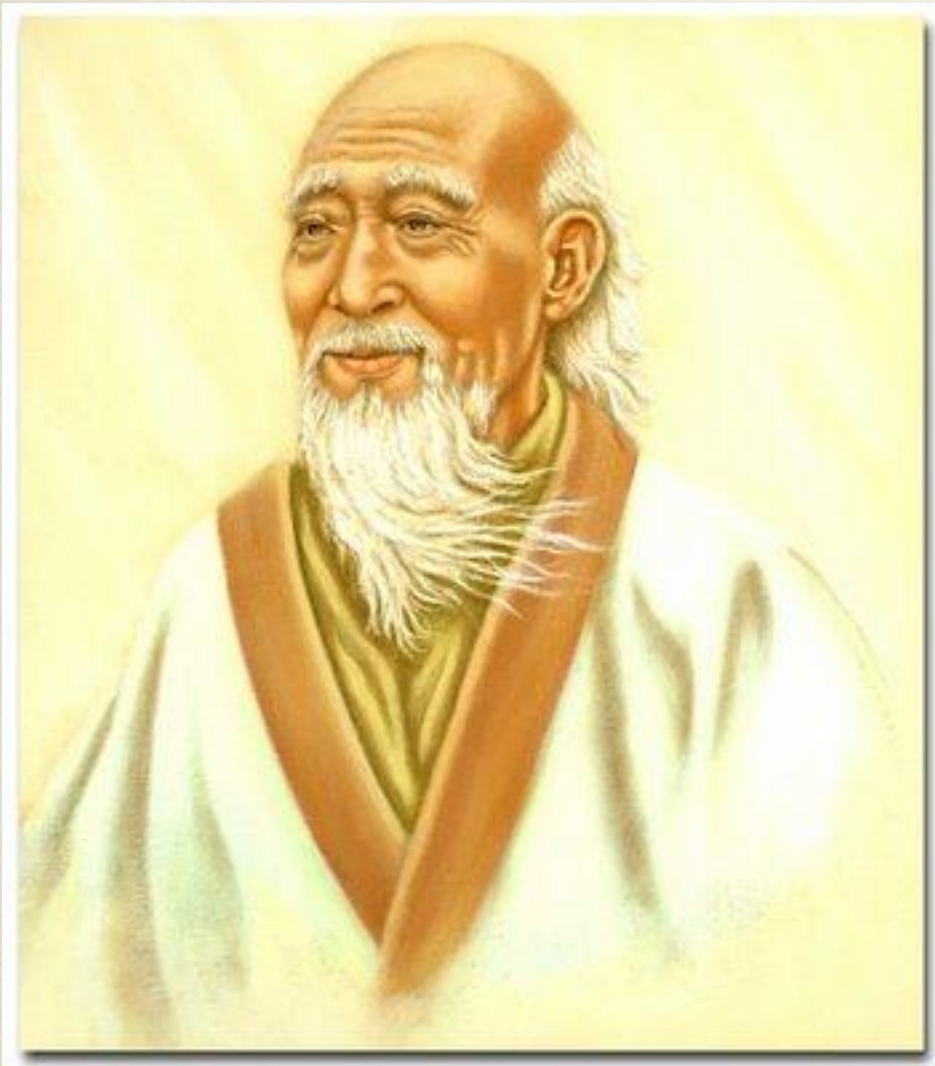
- \* Develop safe, stable, nurturing relationships between children & their caregivers
- \* Developing life skills for children & adolescents
- \* Reducing availability & harmful use of alcohol
- \* Reducing access to guns, knives, & pesticides
- \* Promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women
- \* Changing cultural & social norms that support violence
- \* Victim identification, care, & support programs
- \* <http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/publications/en/index/html>

# Social & Ecological Justice

- \* Eliminating egregious socioeconomic inequality, i.e. ending structural violence.
- \* Preserving the planet for future generations; i.e. ending ecocide.



# Lao Tzu--*Tao Teh Ching* verse 63



Nip troubles in the bud.  
Sow the great in the small.

Difficult things of the world can  
only be tackled when they are  
easy.

Big things of the world can only  
be achieved by attending to their  
small beginnings.



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