

Violence on Bowen Island*

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In September 2000 thirteen people trekked to Bowen Island for a two-day seminar on violence. The first of what is to be an annual “Joanne Brown Symposium” (named for a generous benefactor of the Institute for the Humanities) was held at the Lodge at the Old Dorm on Bowen, just a short walk from Snug Cove. From Thursday evening until Saturday afternoon the participants enjoyed that most pleasurable of academic pursuits, the discussion of and debate about complex issues in an environment abstracted from offices, electronic mail, and interruptions from the usual suspects. Host Dan Parkin provided gourmet meals, the weather was suitably benign (non-violent) and the living room-cum-seminar room seated thirteen in intimate comfort. What better place to engage with “Systemic Violence: An Interdisciplinary and Comparative Approach to Understanding, Experiencing and Responding to Violence”?

Three individuals were asked to prepare papers for the symposium; John O’Neill from York University (Sociology), Wolf Dieter-Narr from the Free University of Berlin, and Debra Pepler from York University (Director of the LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution). These papers along with the introduction to the seminar by Jerry Zaslove provided the substance around which the discussion and debate took place. The format meant that each paper could be presented and discussed at length and the speakers had the opportunity to prepare responses to the discussion. The informal setting, ample time for discussion, communal meals and evening visits to local establishments gave each participant the opportunity to explore issues in depth, ask questions, and present their own ideas both informally and in ad hoc sessions.

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In such a ‘hothouse’ atmosphere a wide range of ideas and perspectives are generated, especially since, as Margaret Jackson pointed out, this first symposium was meant to be a “painting of the landscape.” Crudely summarized, John O’Neill offered a philosophical and aesthetic look at violence with, as Ian Angus pointed out, a focus “...on violence as suffering, on the phenomenology of violence as seen by the victim.” Wolf Dieter-Narr’s contribution turned our attention to state violence and the structural dimensions of violence and, as Larry Green noted, the implications of culturally imposed “bloodless abstractions” as commonplace as “personalities reduced to job descriptions.” Finally, Debra Pepler brought the discussion to the very particular case of schoolyard violence, bullying and the other oppressions of youth. The discussion of Pepler’s work, as Ian Angus noted, was “...pervaded by a sense of sadness, of personal hurt...” as people recalled their own memories of life in the schoolyards, neighbourhoods, and streets of their youth.

In the post-mortem (!) of the symposium two points seemed to be salient in terms of where the symposium should go in its commitment to engaging with the issue of systemic violence. First, there was the feeling that such a phenomenon cannot be understood in the abstract. While it is important that we attempt to create and sustain a theoretical perspective on violence, that attempt needs to be enriched by analyses of specific types or case studies. Second, we must be aware of the danger that ‘understanding’ violence can often lead to excusing or condoning it and hence the very practice of studying violence with the aim of understanding can have violent implications.