

Toys Are Us

Donna Bryant Goertz

This is an old but true story. The children in it are not specific children but archetypal children who have cast themselves in the roles our culture offers through the world of children's play with its theme of violence as a necessary solution to problems and its roles of "good guys" and "bad guys."

His first year, Thomas entered our classroom community as a self-assigned "bad guy." Thomas had internalized that role from his good guy/bad guy toys, games, and entertainment featuring violence as necessary. The first year he was sullen and self-hating. He hurt as many children as he could, destroying their work, the all-too-solid evidence that they loved school and one another. He jerked subtly around the classroom like a robot, emitting quiet, high-pitched electronic sounds. Readily and often, Thomas dropped his chin and muttered how much he hated himself and school. He was ashamed of how he saw himself as being "bad."



Statuettes by Hans Hoekstra

The next year, partially transformed by his experiences in the community, Thomas switched roles and became "good." He worked hard and showed his work to whoever would admire it. His once incomprehensible, jerky scribbles became beautifully formed words. He wrote and illustrated reports with colorful charts. But for Thomas, an important part of seeing himself as a "good guy" was juxtaposing himself to a "bad guy," so he could do what good guys do, mete out necessary violence, and so Thomas identified the bad guy, the new boy Marco.

Most of the children with years of experience in our community have absolute clarity about the sickness of the "good guy/ bad guy" dyad and can live within the new paradigm most of the time, but Thomas hadn't come that far yet. In his mind, he was definitely "good" now, and Marco was "bad." Thomas became the secret self appointed community defender and avenger, always on the lookout for wrongs in need of righting through necessary violence. He found them-- often-- thanks to Thomas.

The following year, we saw signs that Thomas could become just a boy, neither bad nor good but in process, who loved school, himself, and his companions, who were neither good nor bad but also in process. Some days Thomas helped Marco find work and gave him big hugs; others days he was oblivious to him. But when Marco, or another child, bothered people and their belongings, called names or shoved when things didn't go their way, and had to be called aside for a little centering comfort, Thomas could still be electrified into regression. And, so, slotted in between Thomas's spectacular work and the natural rhythm of his life would

be a day of a good guy's sneak attacks on Marco or another child, a bad guy, to set him straight with necessary violence.

Thomas was in fact a kind and sensitive boy, generous and solicitous of others. But Thomas, with his natural temperament of the hero, had been deeply socialized to identify bad guys and to act swiftly to eliminate them when they triggered him back to the old play-culture of necessary violence. After all, it was not for naught that Thomas had spent six good years playing with games and toys that promote--even celebrate--the good guy/bad guy opposition. Now that he was in his third year with us, and had practiced living a new paradigm, he could still be sucked back into the old one, whereupon he would let loose his fury. Because Thomas was a person of passion and integrity, what he learned from his toys and games, he applied to everyday life with earnestness and energy. So, even though he now living his third year within a community that practiced mediation and reconciliation, saw one another in process, and worked for transformation, Thomas could be triggered back to his old life.

We were sensitive and cautious while dispossessing Thomas, now the good guy, of his well-integrated culture of necessary violence and good guy/bad guy archetypes. For the sake of his well-being we had to affirm Thomas's core goodness sufficiently first, so that he would not find himself abjectly vacant and bankrupt through losing the clarity of his old paradigm and its themes and roles too abruptly. Slowly we examined with him the competing principles by which his play life had required him to live. Slowly we helped Thomas integrate a new, higher set of principles, because make no mistake, Thomas's passionate nature demanded that he live by his principles.

Our next step was weaning Thomas from the joys and thrills of violence as the solution in playing and entertainment so that he could look at the community within the classroom and the world of humanity without in a way that corresponded. We saw the beginning of this stage one day when Thomas put his arm around Marco several times and invited him to work just at the moments he saw him out of sorts and looking for conflict. Then, at times when conflict was in progress, instead of taking sides with the good guy against the bad guy, Thomas stepped in and led a mediation between Marco and another child, treating both with love and respect. He was beginning to invest in transforming a distressed child and integrating him into our community, instead of attacking him to save the community. Thomas began to develop new skills that allowed him to see himself and others in a different way than that created by years of "good guy fights bad guy" entertainment, games, and toys. Now he was ready to support other children to do the same.

All children are happier when they are helped to live by cohesive sets of principles. They thrive on cognitive consonance and struggle under cognitive dissonance, which breeds depression, hyperactivity, and cynicism. Communities of children cannot assimilate struggling or distressed members when they themselves are already sapped by the demands of compartmentalizing their own lives—their interior lives of seeing in terms of good guys who must punish and bad guys who must be punished and exterior lives in the Montessori classroom of a range of children who work together to transform themselves and one another. This asks too much of young children.

When we are young, we imagine and play at what we will be when we grow up, and when we do grow up we take on those roles. Because as children we play at solving problems with violence, that is how we as a society solve our problems. Rather than acting violently ourselves, though, we find proxies.

As adults we cannot *yet* see how to preserve a peaceful and orderly society without turning to violence as a necessary solution. Try as we may, we cannot *yet* seem to establish justice by nonviolent means alone. How

can we ever hope to reach that stage if we don't begin from our earliest years in our earliest play to envision it, to enjoy it?

In our homes and in school we counsel the children to use their words not their fists, yet we give them toys to play at hurting and killing--videos, computer games, and movies where violence is ultimately "necessary." Indeed, we train our children to visualize human beings as "good guys" and "bad guys" and make sure our children take satisfaction in seeing violence used against the "bad guys."

With our background of playing at violence in childhood, some of our children grow up to be our "bad guys" and some our "avengers." They have prepared for it all their lives. Our children have both withheld and unleashed the violence they have watched and played at, through cruel words, rejection, hitting, and shoving. We strongly censure them for this while continuing to provide them with stories, pictures, toys, and games to practice what we forbid them to do in "real life." A few of our children grow up to act as proxies, carrying out the murderous acts others only dream of. They provide us with the opportunity to hate them and wish them a violent end. Other proxies carry out the violent revenge for us.

When they become adults, our children cannot wait to experience the violence to which they have become acculturated and conditioned--through news stories, movies, and books of crime and war. We crave stories of "good guys" killing "bad guys," news of violence pitted against violence. We were fed on violence for so long as children that we now have a powerful appetite for it.

Though we cannot *yet* see how to solve our problems without violence, we can begin to practice from earliest childhood playing with nonviolent toys and games. We can explore themes and roles of transformation and healing instead of killing and destroying.

Transforming, not killing, is a game to play. Can we make it exciting enough?

Creating, not destroying, is a game to play. Can we make it compelling enough?

Tools, not weapons, are toys. Can we make them satisfying enough?

Inventing, not attacking, is a game to play. Can we make it thrilling enough?

Rescuers, pathfinders, supporters, coaches, valiant leaders with wise, strong, and brave followers are role models--not "good guys" and "bad guys."

As a society we become what we play. Toys are us. If we seek peace and justice in our world, we must practice peace from our children's earliest years.

We need new games and toys that provide compelling but nonviolent action and conflict—peace force, soul force, peace action. Whoever has the imagination and skill to design these must think beyond the culture of cruelty and the myth of redemptive violence. Our children crave action and adventure. They want to make a difference, to effect changes. They long for heroes to emulate and admire. How will we provide for our children's needs outside of as well as in school?

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