

The Murder of Eros



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It is the collapse of Eros that leads to what we have called the murder of Eros. Wilhelm Reich called this “the murder of Christ.” By “Christ” he meant Eros or life force. This is one of the most common but hidden dimensions of human existence. To live an erotic life, we must guard against the murder of Eros. This is a fundamentally denied yet ever-present human impulse. Human beings may be ready to confess many sins, but all feign innocence when accused of the murder of Eros. And yet this primal impulse is as old as civilization itself. Despite our genuine moral evolution in many regards, this fundamental human compulsion has changed little. What has changed, however, is that because the murder of Eros is no longer socially acceptable, the impulse is carefully disguised.

It is what moves Cain to murder Abel. It is what has always moved ambitious but broken princes to kill their father the king. It is what has always moved ambitious but broken students to murder their teachers. The human feeling that moves a person to murder Eros is called malice. The murder of Eros is motivated by some combination of greed, envy, and rage. These are three ingredients that nourish malice.

Malice is virtually always hidden, however. If you do not understand that malice is always hiding itself, then you will never see malice functioning even when it does so right in front of your eyes. Not to see malice for itself is a mistake that often brings in its wake the most grave of consequences, including the most heinous forms of injustice. Malice must never admit to itself, so it must always plead other motives.¹ The other motives pleaded are usually those of a rescuer or protector. In psychology this is called the victim triangle, where the perpetrator disguises him- or herself as a rescuer or even as a victim. When someone obsessively tries to destroy someone else, claiming to be rescuing victims, red flags warning of malice should go off in culture. When accusations are made, fair process and fact-based decision making are absolutely necessary as essential expressions of democratic love and consciousness. Authentic victims must always be protected. But we need to be no less wary of perpetrators disguising their malice under the fig leaf of the rescuer. Is the rescuer person genuinely heroic and concerned? Or is he a person of malice disguising the truth that he is perpetrator, under the mask of the victim advocate or even the victim?

PROJECTION

Remember as well that malice is always filled with projection onto, and distortion of, the object of malice. This is the rationalization for the vicious attack that is launched by people of malice. One’s pathology is projected onto the object of malice. When the person of malice describes what they see in the one they are moving to destroy, in effect they are but confessing to their own dark interiors. That is why malice is so hidden, even to the perpetrators of malice. It is because the people of malice so cleverly disguise their motives even to themselves. They are forced by social convention and the psychology of self-deception to pretend to profess noble intention.

Malice is both the polar opposite of Eros as well as one of the most sophisticated forms of pseudo Eros. Like all pseudo Eros, it is rooted in the failure of authentic Eros. Wilhelm Reich calls the murder of Eros “the emotional plague of Man.” He gives a stunning description of how it plays out in public culture. The murder of Eros plays to sold-out crowds in a subset of the public culture, which we might call the takedown culture. Whether the method is the old Salem witch trials or contemporary internet smear campaigns, the murder of Eros is at play. Replace the word witch with a psychological designation—sociopath is the most common one—and you have moved from the pre-modern witch trial to the modern smear campaign. Facts are not checked. Motives are not examined. False claims to patterns and manipulation of language are not exposed. The goal is the murder of Eros and its methods are anti-erotic and therefore cruel in the extreme.

THE EMOTIONAL PLAGUE OF MAN

Here is Reich's description of the murder of Eros. When you read it, try and track not only the content but also the feeling of murdered Eros.

When the emotional plague strikes its victim, it strikes hard and fast. It strikes without mercy or regard for truth or facts or anything else except one thing: to kill the victim.

There are public prosecutors who act as true lawyers, establishing the truth by evidence from many sources. There are other prosecutors whose only goal of the prosecution is killing the victim, no matter whether right or wrong, just or unjust.

And this is the murder of Christ today as it was two thousand and four thousand years ago.

When the emotional plague strikes, its victim is exposed to everybody's eyes and judgment; all accusations against it are spread out in full daylight. The victim stands naked before its judges like a deer in the open clearing in a forest ready to be shot by the hunter well hidden in the bushes. The real accuser rarely appears on the scene; his identity is kept secret until very shortly before the final kill. There exists no law to punish the sniper from ambush.

To be standing in the middle of an open clearing in a dense forest, widely visible to everyone, and to be shot at from the bushes on all sides is the situation of the victim of the emotional plague, no matter what form it has.

When the emotional plague strikes, justice quietly recedes, weeping. There is nothing in the ancient books for justice to call upon to prevail. The sentence of death is perfected before the investigation of the crime. The true motive of the prosecution never meets the cleaning force of God's daylight. The reason for the killing remains in the bushes well hidden from anybody's eyes.

When you meet the accused but not the accuser, the charge but not the defense, the exact point of formal law but not the true reason for the accusation, you are dealing with a killing by the plague.

When the plague kills, it kills for wretched reasons.

Therefore, to assure the murder, it will not permit weighing accusation against the true, full being of the victim. It will tear down the victim's honor, besmirch every bit of innocent intention or act; it will pronounce innocuous details in a tone and with a slant of intonation which is meant to kill the last vestige of love or esteem for the victim in the hearts of the most devoted friends.

And this again is how the plague works and thinks and acts.

The perpetrators of malice cannot bear the Eros of the object of malice. Historical archetypes of this abound. In literature we think of Iago and Othello. In music we think of the movie Amadeus and its archetypal depiction of Salieri and Mozart. In both cases, the Eros of the object of malice causes a collapse in the Eros of the perpetrator of malice. Salieri is a well-respected court musician to the emperor of Austria. The intensity of his jealousy for Mozart's music makes him virtually mad. He becomes obsessed. While in other dimensions of life he remains civil and virtuous, when it comes to Mozart, the poison of malice has taken him over. He spends years on covert moves to destroy Mozart. He chooses the usual method, false or distorted complaints about sexuality. In the archetypal film version of the story he spreads rumors that Mozart is sexually engaging his young students, girls in their early teens. The claim is not true. But because of Mozart's apparently post-conventional sexual nature, and because of Mozart's outrageous way of living out loud, the claims are accepted as true without investigation. Mozart is unable to find patrons to support his work. The results are devastating to his personal and public life. Mozart dies in poverty writing his requiem.

None of this is surprising. Malice elicits forceful attacks and even what psychologists in the field have called “annihilating behavior.” Malice is not connected with legitimate causes at its core—it always hides behind them. It is painfully private, yet when it bursts out of control, it is publicly dangerous in the extreme. It is fed by what leading British psychoanalyst Joseph Berke calls a distorted “inner world of fact and fantasy, brought about by the confused interplay of perception, memory, and imagination.”ⁱⁱ

Envious destructiveness is deliberate. Envious people deny goodwill or love toward the object of their ire. What they want to do is remove the bilious anger and bitter vindictiveness that lurks just beneath their surface self. Their surface self appears more often than not as spiritual, and filled with ostensible good intention and light. It is also possible that the surface good intention and light are real. Envy is often a vicious streak in an otherwise decent and even good personality. This is precisely why the malice of seemingly good people is so persuasive. Envious people want to get rid of the feelings that they vaguely know exist right beneath their surface personality. They violate their own sense of goodness and even righteousness. Since the envious person (unconsciously) blames the one he envies for how he feels, he sets out to make him feel bad or appear bad. It is no accident that “evil” is “live” spelled backward. Evil stands against the life force. And the life force is nowhere more powerful than in the full bloom of the Unique Self.

Malice arises because the interior brokenness of the perpetrator makes her a vessel incapable of holding her own genuine Eros. In the example with Mozart, Salieri’s Eros collapses in the face of Mozart’s radical aliveness. This is the dynamic that catalyzes the murder of Eros. Salieri’s own music feels, to him, so essentially inadequate in the face of Mozart’s compositions that in his darkest moments he feels virtually nonexistent. He can only assert his own existence by attacking, distorting, and ultimately destroying the existence of Mozart.

Malice is a primal form of rivalry that hides an obsessively dark and carefully hidden pseudo Eros. Isaac Luria, the great sage of Kabbalah, writes that obsessive malice occurs when two figures derive from what he calls “a common soul root.” The perpetrator feels that if the object of malice—often a brother, a colleague, or a teacher— prospers, it will be at his expense. The interior sense of the perpetrator is that they both occupy the same space in the world. The perpetrator’s pathology is rooted in the twisted belief that there is not enough nourishment from their common soul root to allow both to flourish.

SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF MALICE

As we alluded to above, the perpetrator of malice is recognizable— paradoxically—by the fact that she works so hard to disguise her motives. However, it is possible to discern between the authentic victim or genuine rescuer and the malice of the perpetrator by identifying the seven characteristics.

The first identifying characteristic of malice is its obsessive and virtually undying nature. The second characteristic of malice is the wild exaggeration and distortion of the person against whom the malice is aimed, coupled with an utter denial of any and all goodness that he or she might possess. The third identifying characteristic of malice is that action is taken, often deadly action, without talking to both sides of the conflict and without checking basic facts or underlying motivations. The fourth characteristic of malice is the radical demonization of the object of malice. Fifth, related but distinct, is the ascription of virtually occult-like powers to the object of malice, coupled with the infantilizing of his or her ostensible victims. Sixth is the active process of manufacturing victims, all of whom receive significant social and psychological reward. And the seventh is the fostering of a group-think context in which “the victims” or “the women” or “the community” speak as a collective in order to avoid personal responsibility.

This is not merely a theoretical conversation. The people of malice live among us. They live not only in politics and business, where power is an obvious currency of achievement. They live no less in the academy, in religion, and in spiritual circles. To return to Eros we must first recognize and disempower malice.

MALICE, EROS, AND THE UNIQUE SELF

The Unique Self is one of the primary faces of Eros. The core motive of malice is the destruction of Eros. Malice seeks to destroy or distort the Unique Self. The opposite of a Unique Self encounter is an encounter motivated by malice. Malice manifests as both the denial of and the attempt to physically or socially deconstruct the Unique Self of another. Paradoxically, this is based on a primal recognition of the other's Unique Self, and a feeling that somehow the other's self makes one less than, or not enough. Most of the literature of the human potential movement and its daughter, the New Age movement, ignores or even denies malice. But you cannot skip malice if you want to truly understand and practice outrageous love. Love is a Unique Self perception that creates pleasure and joy in its wake. Malice is a Unique Self distortion that creates envy and hatred in its wake. Malice is a verb in the same way that love is a verb.

The core identifying characteristic of the people of malice is that they attack, undermine, or demonize others instead of facing their own internal virulence. The attack may be subtle or overt. However, it is always covered by the sophisticated veneer of respectability, or even by noble motives.

Joseph Berke informs us that malice is to moderns what sex was to Victorians. It is to be repressed at any price. It is an obsession that is best denied, avoided, or forgotten. The perpetrators of malice often claim to be "protecting" some imagined victim from harm.

There is nothing the people of malice fear more than having the lie of their motivation or the ugliness of their hidden machinations exposed. There is a ferocity to malice. This makes it intuitively frightening for people to confront. Thus, most people withdraw into the shade of their own cowardice, covering their fear-stained tracks with well-reasoned and plausible disclaimers. Often the coward finds it easier to energetically join with the movement of malice than to oppose it. This is the worst and most deplorable form of laziness, albeit one of the most common, even if hidden from the public eye. It might take the form of blaming the victim or exaggerating their responsibility. If in some sense "he had it coming," it is easier to rationalize joining the executors of malice than it is to arouse the discernment and courage necessary to oppose them.

In the great spiritual traditions, much of the judgment after our death about who we were in this world, as well as the greatest creator of karma, is related to how we behaved when confronted with malice that was disguised as a righteous cause. Did we speak truth to power? Or did we cleverly disguise our cowardice with a thousand rationalizations, even as the Unique Self of your friend, colleague, or teacher was thrown under a bus?

Let's look more closely now at the mechanism of malice, so you will be able to identify it clearly. It is absolutely necessary to liberate the world from malice in order to allow Eros and love to flourish.

Malice operates through a simple four-stage process. Malice (1) perceives genuine flaws, (2) exaggerates or distorts them, (3) minimizes the good in the attacked person's character, and (4) absurdly and insidiously identifies the person with his or her distorted caricatures, painted by the purveyors of malice themselves.

"There is bad intent that arises in the world; there is intent to hurt and do evil to other people—we have to confront that." This sadly correct truth was spoken by my beloved friend Ken Wilber several

years back in a public dialogue we did on the topic of evil in the world. Ken was responding to a questioner who made the all-too-common argument that all the tragedy that befalls us is ultimately our own creation, and thus we must take 100 percent responsibility for everything that occurs. The New Age narcissists cannot bring themselves to bow before the mystery, so they claim all power to themselves.

Of course, more often than not, the hidden agenda is that the victim has no right to be outraged or demand justice. Since the victim is the creator of his own reality, the ones who have been hurt should be taking responsibility. This cleverly lets the inflictor of pain off the hook. The moral context of justice and injustice, right and wrong, and good and evil is undermined by a subtle relativism in which no ethical discernments are genuinely possible. Or, in a related scenario, the abusers themselves claim to have been abused, thus legitimizing the pain inflicted by them on the true victim. This type of claim is one of the most aggressive and insidious disguises of malice.

This New Age view has found a strange bedfellow in distorted American presentations of Theravada Buddhism. Since everything is the result of cause and effect, you must be the creator of everything in your reality. If you take total, 100 percent responsibility for everything, you will find your way to spiritual depth and maturity, so the popular dharma goes. What is more accurate is that we must take appropriate responsibility and apologize on our knees for any and all hurt that we have inflicted. And who among us has not inflicted hurt? We must take 100 percent responsibility for whatever our contribution is in the system that created the trauma. For example, if we have 10 percent responsibility in the contribution system, then we need to take 100 percent responsibility for our 10 percent. But it is malice that distorts hurt in the normal arc of human relationships into a pathology of a far more sinister nature. This is the methodology of the murder of Eros.

This is the matrix of the endless cycle of demonizing by those disconnected from their demon and incapable of owning their demon. They lack the spiritual courage to name what moves them in their breast, which is that “he,” the always-flawed Christ they seek to destroy, has a light that threatens their light. He has an appeal, a draw, that is different from theirs. They cannot explain it. So they seek out his imperfections, magnify them a hundredfold, distort and add some major dose of lies for good measure, and the necessary mix for murder is set. This is the source of the “Foul whisp’rings . . . abroad” that Shakespeare saw as the source of villainy and even murder.

As author Philip Roth describes it:

The whispering campaign that cannot be stopped, rumors it’s impossible to quash . . . slanderous stories to belittle your professional qualifications, derisive reports of your business deceptions and your perverse aberrations, outraged polemics denouncing your moral failings, misdeeds, and faulty character traits—your shallowness, your vulgarity, your cowardice . . . your falseness, your selfishness, your treachery. Derogatory information. Defamatory statements. Insulting witticisms. Disparaging anecdotes. Idle mockery. Bitchy chatter. Gallingly wisecracks.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is in this regard that Geoffrey Chaucer wrote, “It is certain that envy is the worst sin that is: for all others sin against one virtue, whereas envy is against all virtue and all goodness.”

ⁱ Paraphrasing Milan Kundera.

ⁱⁱ See Joseph Berke, *Tyranny of Malice* (Pelican, 1988).

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Vintage, 1994).