

Minding the Issues - Gordon Brumm

The Milgram Experiments and National Self-Delusion

A couple of years ago Mary Hall of the Division of Youth Services spoke to Lakewood Kiwanis. Before beginning her presentation she pointed to bowls laid out on the lunch tables and asked that each of us put something of value in the nearest one. We all did so. (I put in a dollar bill and never got it back. I hope it went to a good cause.) As it turned out, her subject was child abuse, and her request was a way of illustrating how susceptible children are to adults' suggestions. But we didn't know that when we filled the bowls – we did what she asked simply because she was in a position of authority at the microphone. There was a professor at Yale University who would have understood.

Ordinary men made up the Reserve Police Battalion 101 during World War II – ordinary German men around 40 years of age. They had been born too soon to have been indoctrinated as Hitler Youth, and very few were in the Nazi party. Nor were they notably anti-Semitic. Too old for rigorous military duty, they were sent by the Nazi authorities to Poland with the mission of killing Jewish civilians as part of the "Final Solution."

Their first action was at a village named Josefow. Before the action began, their commander gave them the opportunity to refuse, without penalty. (Thus they were not coerced.) About a dozen refused (out of a total of about 500). Then the rest went to work. Part of the battalion sealed off the village while the rest went into the Jewish quarter, seized a hundred or so of the young men for forced labor, and shot the rest – including all the women and children – in a nearby forest. Their commander wept openly during the day, but insisted that "orders were orders." Many of the members of the battalion described themselves as disgusted and nauseated; some broke down midway through the massacre. Nevertheless, they followed their murderous orders

to completion. Subsequent massacres were easier to carry out, and in all the battalion killed 38,000 Jews over a period of several years. Christopher Browning, author of a book on the subject, remarked, "If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men could not?" There was a professor at Yale University who would understand.

Among the small group of individuals who have stood out for their contributions to our collective self-knowledge – Socrates and Freud come to mind – I would include Stanley Milgram, professor of psychology at Yale University during the 1960s and author of a set of experiments on obedience to authority that rank among the most famous and most important in the history of psychology.

Let's look at Milgram's experiments. Imagine that you are an ordinary citizen of New Haven. You have come to Milgram's lab in answer to a newspaper ad. You and another participant draw lots to determine who will be "teacher" and who will be "learner" – though as a matter of fact, the drawing is rigged to make you the "teacher." The learner goes into another room. The white-coated experimenter in charge tells you that your task is to administer electric shocks to the learner (who by the way has mentioned that he has a heart condition) whenever he gives an incorrect answer to a question. To administer the shocks, you have an array of levers, in increasing levels of intensity, ranging from "Slight" to "Danger: Severe." With each incorrect answer by the "learner" you are to give a higher-intensity shock. The learner continues to give incorrect answers from time to time, and you continue to give increasingly severe shocks. Soon the learner – whom you can hear clearly – complains that the shocks are too severe. Then he demands to be let out of the experiment; then he cries out that he

can't stand the pain. You may tell the white-coated experimenter that you don't want to continue, but the experimenter says, "The experiment must go on," and assures you that there will be no permanent tissue damage. So you continue to increase the voltage. At a certain point, the learner emits agonizing screams, and past that point he is silent. You continue to give increasingly severe shocks as long as the experimenter instructs you to.

After the experiment is over, you are debriefed. You learn the truth: The "learner" was actually an actor. He really felt no electric shocks. The purpose of the experiment was to find out whether you would inflict pain on another individual for no reason other than your being told to do so by an authority figure.

We should note that some of the subjects refused to go through with the experiment, but they were in the minority. About 65% went through to completion.

The conclusion of the experiment is clear: Anyone – or at least most persons – can be led to do almost anything under the right (i.e. wrong) circumstances.

There is a postscript to Milgram's experiments that is almost as important as the experiments themselves: They are almost universally judged to be unethical. When they are discussed in psychology texts, for example, it is with the disclaimer that such experiments could never be carried out under current ethical standards. The essential reason is that the experiments harm the subjects' self-image, that is, they bring subjects up against the realization that under certain circumstances they would harm another person without good reason. (We should note in passing that the subjects themselves apparently didn't agree with the criticism. When some of them were polled after the experiment, the overwhelming majority said they were glad they

had participated.) I am completely on Milgram's side in this. I find the criticisms appalling. To repeat, the thrust is that the experiments teach the subjects something they would rather not know. (If the objection is that fragile personalities might be undone by such knowledge, this could be forestalled by screening of prospective participants.) The critics are saying, in other words, that if the message is distasteful, get rid of the messenger. Swept away is the long tradition, beginning with Socrates and the classical Greeks, that extols self-knowledge. Forgotten is the Christian precept that all humans are prone to sin. The criticism and prohibition of Milgram's experiments are rooted in the rejection of self-knowledge and the enshrinement of self-delusion.

Is our self-image so uncertain that we must buttress it with fictions? Is our record so spotty that we must hide it from ourselves? Perhaps so, for self-delusion seems to be a national pastime. We are more attuned to hear that it is "Morning in America" than to confront our real problems. We like to hear that democracies and the United States in particular have never waged an aggressive war. (Tell that to the Indians, and the Mexicans, and the Spanish.) We are told the United States is the most generous country in the world. (In fact, we rank 21st in the amount of foreign aid per Gross National Income.)

Furthermore, self-delusion in this blanket form – the belief that "We never do evil" – easily translates into "Whatever we do, it is not evil," which is to say that "Whatever we do is right." Or to put it into crude practical terms, that our might is right. This arrogant stance may be developed to the greatest degree during the current administration, but it has always been with us and has always been both ugly and pernicious. We need to attend to our Milgrams.

LCC Offers Labyrinth to the Public

By Kathleen South

Lakewood Congregational Church is offering labyrinth walks to the public. The walk is a meditative tool "representative of life's journey," said Sue Ulmer, Director of Child and Adult Ministries.

Although many labyrinths are outdoors, the Congregational church's is an inside portable model, 36 feet in diameter. The labyrinth, a canvas that lies flat on the floor, is a continuous walkway made up of semi-circles.

Unlike a maze that has many paths, dead ends and ways to get lost, a labyrinth has one path and participants enter and leave by the same location.

The labyrinth has benefits, both spiritually and for physical health, according to Ulmer. "It provides for some, not everyone, a space in time away from the craziness of our schedules. It's a wonderful tool to just slow life down, if only for the time walking." She added that many hospitals are using labyrinths to reduce stress levels for patients and visitors.

Outdoor labyrinths are located at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral downtown, Unity Church in Rocky River and First United Church of Christ in Elyria.

For more information, call Sue Ulmer at (216) 221-9555 or visit the church's Web site at www.lcc-church.org. The labyrinth will be available at the Lakewood Public Library at 7 PM, January 31.

TED & LEE in

FISH EYES

written and performed by

TED SWARTZ and LEE ESHLEMAN

"I laughed, I cried, I thought, and I wanted more when it was over."

BEN PATTERTON

AN UNFORGETTABLE AND FUNNY SERIES OF DETOURS THROUGH THE GOSPELS.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2005, 2 P.M.

LAKWOOD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

1375 W. CLIFTON BLVD, LAKEWOOD 216-221-9555

NO ADMISSION CHARGE

Join the Discussion at: www.lakewoodobserver.com