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On the Face of the Tiger

By [AL MARTINEZ](#)

The face of violence wears many expressions.

It can be a look of such malevolence that most will avoid it, or a mask of such benevolence that all will be drawn to it.

Violence smiles between explosions and speaks softly in a crowd but, like the smile on the face of the tiger, belies the hunger of its nature.

Ted Bundy was the pure, burning essence of violence and yet wore the demeanor of a man women trusted until the last tortured moment of their lives.

And there are many others who, while not serial killers, flash golden smiles through a furnace of dangerous emotions.

It has never ceased to amaze me with what sweet self-effacement violence is able to present itself and the cloak of pathos its excuses wear.

I heard many of those excuses over the weekend from men willing to reveal themselves because, in the words of one, "I don't want to be what I am."

These are individuals who, raised in violence, have continued a tradition beaten into them as children but are learning that they can no longer rely on the past as an alibi for their conduct.

They're among about 10,000 men arrested each year in L.A. County for beating the women to whom they have vowed enduring love. At a Simi Valley counseling center, at least some are beginning to deal with the tigers inside.

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Roughly 3 million women nationwide are subject to domestic abuse each year. My mother was one of them. Childhood memories of her screams continue to resound in a corner of my mind decades later. Whispered excuses from the man who beat her float through the pain.

He was otherwise a soft-spoken, almost shy person, not dissimilar from those I spoke with at the Cornerstone Counseling Center, housed in an upstairs room of a nondescript building near the Simi Valley Freeway.

I was drawn to the center on the basis of a paper written by one of its counselors, Craig Chalquist, who demands self-responsibility from the men he counsels but also understands the strength required to face one's self.

He wrote: "It takes courage and humility to know you're a mess and walk forward anyway." He cites a wife-beater who,

like a recovering alcoholic, knew the potential for his transgression was still there. The man told a therapy group, "I miss hitting people."

One could sense a similar attitude, a knowledge of his own darkness, in a man named Rick. Six-foot-1 and 200 pounds, he tried to kill a stepfather who had broken his nose and arm in separate fits of blind rage. Years later, he did kill a man in a juvenile burglary attempt. Out of prison, Rick attacked his wife and ended up at Cornerstone.

Today, still struggling with a memory of "the old man who made me mean," he is now able to make choices in situations of potential violence; able, as he puts it, "to walk away before I put my boot up someone's ass."

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Most of the center's 30 patients are, like Rick, sent there by the courts, but some volunteer. One is a baby-faced, self-described "ordinary guy" named Mike. A college-educated computer consultant and himself a victim of childhood abuse, Mike never hurt anyone . . . but was never sure he wouldn't.

In public, he was one of those people you wouldn't think had a hair-trigger temper, but the sweetness of his everyday demeanor masked the roaring tiger of a rage that never abated.

Alone, he acted out that rage by putting his fist through a wall or throwing household items across the room of his apartment and wondering how far the fury would take him.

He too was raised by a father who beat him but who years later apologized and went into counseling. The father understood that Mike had inherited a legacy of violence and urged him to get help too. Father and son reached out to save themselves by acknowledging existence of the tigers within.

"I once felt empowered in the rage zone where I lived," Mike said. "I don't need that anymore."

Cornerstone teaches responsibility and choices, understanding that yesterday's abuse is a factor but not an excuse for today's fury. The clenched fist can pause. The fire can be damped. The tiger can be tamed.

In a world that has taken violence to the very edge of existence, the same lessons could apply on a universal scale. The problem, sadly, is that there are so many tigers and so little time.

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