

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

If asked, psychologists will explain the driving force behind vandalism is "unmet emotional needs". The explanation irritates me almost as much as the senseless acts of destruction do.

And yet, the notion may have certain merit. Not much, you understand, but maybe some. It's conceivable people with unmet emotional needs might vandalize to satisfy their desires for recognition and attention. Certainly most of society responds negatively to acts of vandalism, and the perpetrators do then feel their acts of despoilation are attention-getting.

Every one of the almost eight billion humans on earth yearns for attention and recognition. For the most part this universal hankering is satisfied within family and community circles. What of those whose desires are unfulfilled? They may vandalize or commit other crimes.

If those who vandalize do so because any sort of attention and recognition is preferable to being ignored, perhaps it lies within the power of families and communities to minimize the problem.

Most parents are aware that when small children purposely defy house rules the kids are being naughty primarily to gain attention. When a child misbehaves, knowing full well the result will be punishment, the child is signalling his needs for attention. Any attention is better than none at all.

The child may also be testing the limits of parental strength and ability to control, and establishing the extent of parental discipline. Children, well aware of their own inability to exercise self-controls, look to mothers and fathers, or other authority figures, to provide the disciplines they haven't yet learned to exercise themselves.

The vandal, much like the little child, wantonly and maliciously destroys or defaces public or private property through ignorance of his own emotional hungers. He experiences secret satisfaction when his acts engender outcries from the enraged society; he also experiences excitement while committing the nefarious deed since there's a chance he will be caught.

The outrage boosts his ego, feeds his need for attention; the excitement relieves boredom, enhances his feelings of self-importance. "Something I did has finally made them pay some attention to me."

Although I hate to admit it, it does seem possible this could be the emotional basis for vandalism. The person who seeks negative recognition has a warped and deprived ego (or sense of self-importance).

What made it misshapen? What was lacking? Perhaps the firm parental discipline the child sought wasn't provided, and as a result the child grew to adolescence or beyond without developing the self controls each of us usually acquires during the growing-up period.

Why does this sense of self-importance need enhancement? All of us have this need.

All this psychological analysis is an exercise in futility unless the knowledge is somehow utilized to help us learn to deal with our human problems. Parents need to be helped to recognize and put into practice methods of transmitting from one generation to another the purposes of discipline and the results of teaching children self-control.

Until parents know how to discipline their children and the reasons for it, our cherished monuments, our public and private property will continue to be targets for vandals, and we will continue to be victims of apparently senseless crimes.

Don't, please don't misunderstand me; I'm not defending the criminal; neither do I believe every rotten kid is a rotten kid because his or her parents were seriously neglectful. I can conceive, however, of parental inability to meet the emotional needs of each child.

Some children have greater emotional needs than others. And I don't think anyone knows why this is; it just is. Given enough attention of a positive nature, perhaps, the child with the greatest emotional need could be helped. In too many instances, obviously, parental capacity to provide adequate attention or recognition is limited.

Parents are people, too; they are people first, before they are parents. Fathers have responsibilities for feeding, clothing and housing three or four people besides themselves. That's a big order today.

Mothers have responsibilities for fulfilling all the phys-

VILLAGE ADVERTISER July 6, 1978

al needs and demands of husband and all of the children in the family. In addition there are emotional needs of each other, as well as those of the kids. Parents probably have a good many unmet emotional needs of their own; the biological fact of reproduction doesn't automatically confer upon men and women abilities for adequate parenting.

Too often, alas, parents haven't fully matured, emotionally, themselves. A great many people who are parents achieved that status more by accident than design. That they are parents and have responsibilities for each other and their children is frequently more burden than blessing.

In such families discipline is interpreted as meting out punishments whenever the children interfere with what mother or father wants; as long as the kids don't get in the way of parental desires, things go smoothly in the household and no one pays much attention to what the children are doing.

Discipline, then, becomes punishment for being a nuisance instead of a process of teaching the younger generation ways to exercise self-control and ways to satisfy the entirely natural need each has for recognition and attention.

From such homes (and today we see large numbers of such homes with single-parent families, broken marriages, missing role-models for growing youngsters) come vandals.

Solutions? It's easy to say we should magnify the importance of the family. Achieving that end is far from easy.

We live in a society dedicated to satisfying each individual rather than one devoted to building strong loyalties to family and community. The trend to dissolution of family solidarity increases with every passing year.

Recapturing the idea of integrated family life may appear to be an unattainable goal; unless we manage it, however, we can expect to see more, not less, vandalism, crime, and social breakdown.

Last week in Osterville, headstones in Hillside cemetery were vandalized. In recent months vandals have defaced public buildings, broken windows, destroyed public and property throughout the town. And throughout the nation, crime and vandalism are on the increase.

At sporting events public behavior is violent; at baseball stadiums proposals to limit the sale of alcoholic beverages to two bottles per person are being considered. Fights and bottle-throwing are threatening the safety of spectators. Fewer and fewer people exercise self-controls and discipline over themselves.

While the roots of the problem lie within the family, society as a whole can help meet the emotional needs of its individual members by giving to one another the attention and recognition everyone craves.

Enhancing other people's self-esteem can help prevent vandalism and violence of all kinds. Through the act of giving, others learn to pass along the gift, in kind.

If youth is vandalizing, youth is showing ignorance and immaturity in the same ways children do when they disobey their parents. Possibly youth should be given responsibility of preventing vandalism and thereby earn the recognition they seek. With adult supervision the young people (if it is indeed young people who are responsible for the destruction) vandalism might well be reduced considerably.

Vengeance may be more appealing to most law-abiding citizens, but is it productive? Can violence best be overcome by more violence? Or can it best be controlled by caring, giving, supporting and paying attention?