

AVP

An Instrument of Peace

by John A. Shuford

When I became involved with the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), I had no idea how important the underlying principles were. The experience of AVP—seeing myself and others change—was simply enjoyable and rewarding. Since its beginnings in New York in 1975, AVP has spread all over the country and the world. It has been used in prisons with inmates and staff, in schools, in communities, and as the basis of a university course. It has received the President's 1,000 Points of Light Award, the International Association of Correctional Training Personnel's 2004 Award of Excellence, and awards for healing in areas of war and genocide.

As I began writing this article, I realized the reason for AVP's popularity and success: within it lie the seeds of peace—building community through connection. Peace comes when there is a sense of connection, and a community built on trust and respect creates this experience of connection. It is not accomplished by telling people what to do, how to feel, or how to behave; it happens when people experience it. But how does this occur?



Photos courtesy of John Shuford

Central to AVP is the concept of *transforming power*, a term derived from the biblical passage, "Be ye transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). Transforming power (TP) is that power that works within us to transform violent, potentially violent, unhealthy attitudes, relationships, or lifestyles into more positive, healthy, nonviolent ones. This power is available in each of us. TP cannot be directly defined or described; it simply works, whether or not we understand it or how it comes in-to being. It cannot be confined to words. It can only be experienced or observed. I will, in spite of this, try to shed some light on the possible processes of TP. This may be helpful in attempting to explain TP to others.

There are three levels from which one could approach an explanation of TP: the spiritual, the interpersonal or social, and the psychological. None of the three is independent of the others, yet viewing each separately reveals many of TP's qualities. For many, the understanding of TP as grace or the power of God/Spirit is sufficient and no further exploration is needed, nor may it be desired. For others, however, an understanding of how TP might actually work would be informative.

TP can be seen as a spiritual phenomenon, tapping into that which connects us all. We can think of an individual as being a series of concentric circles, with the core being our innate health or goodness. As we let our barriers down or remove them, we move closer to the center of our being. When we tap into that central core, we experience a self-acceptance and a sense of peace that allows us to connect with others without fear or apprehension. It is this connection that transforms us and others. That core can also be thought of as the river of Spirit that flows within us all, and by tapping into it we connect with that Spirit and with the interconnectedness of all. We no longer feel separate or isolated, which changes our experience of ourselves and others, and thus transforms our attitude and view of the world. This change gives us a sense of hope that the future can be better than the present or the past. When this occurs, everything is different.

There are three levels on which to explain "transforming power": the spiritual, the interpersonal, and the psychological.

The perspective of seeing TP as interpersonal has at its core the experience of community. By creating psychological and physical safety, AVP develops a sense of community, with levels of safety and security that allow participants to lower their defenses and barriers. Participants are then able to look into themselves honestly, and as they increase their awareness of who they really are—rather than who others need or expect them to be, or who they think others want them to be—they can more fully embrace and accept their true selves. This new self-awareness and higher self-esteem allows them to

be more open to new experiences, thought patterns, and behaviors. Participants realize they are connected to each other in positive, healthy, interdependent ways, rather than negative, disconnected, and manipulative ways. They no longer feel they are alone, but feel connected to something bigger than themselves. Their experience of themselves and others is transformed.

The experience of positive emotions and positive self-regard cannot be overemphasized. An article in May 2006 by Michael R. Bridges of Temple University in *Psychotherapy in Practice*, a branch journal of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, states that "numerous studies have shown that positive emotions broaden one's thought-action repertoire while also 'undoing' the physiological arousal associated with negative emotions and specific action tendencies." Also, "It is now clear that the experience and expression of positive emotions such as love, compassion, gratitude, and forgiveness are essential for adaptive and healthy functioning across a multitude of human endeavors ranging from individual coping with bereavement and trauma, to marital relationships, and even to corporate team building."

Some comments from AVP inmate participants illustrate this transformation:

It made me look at how I relate to other people, that I was doing it on a threat to threat basis, and the fact that that is not necessary. We can stand with each other and experience each other without wondering what the other is going to do, what the threat is, being on the defensive. What I like about AVP is that I look at others differently and I look at myself differently. I look in the mirror and for the first time in my life, I actually like what I see. I like what I've become and what I've become inside. I never before thought of how I related to other people; the defensiveness and intimidation. It just never occurred to me to think about it, that there was another alternative, not until AVP.

Before AVP I only thought about violence, there was no second option. AVP saved my life, it gave me another option. The violence in my life got worse and worse. I spent most of my 11 years in prison in the hole. I am not a sensitive, caring, understanding individual, but this program has really had an impact on me. During my first basic as a trainer, there were a number of inmates there whom I had been very violent to before. I knew if I was to be a role model, to live AVP, I had to apologize to them for what I had done. It was odd to apologize to someone I had defeated and who had pleaded for his life to me.

It is not fail safe, but it does work 90 percent to 95 percent of the time for me. Guys who knew me on the street come up to me and say I've changed, that I'm a new person. That really makes me feel good to hear that. It was inside me all along; I just didn't know how to bring it out without feeling less of a man.

A comment from a community participant in Russia is also revealing, "I have seen a new side of the Russian soul."

This experience of feeling connected is very powerful, and it leads us to explore TP from a psychological perspective. We all have a core psychological need to feel connected and not isolated. This connection may be to others, to a group, or to something that is bigger than ourselves. This explains the immense impact religion, gangs, and the military have on shaping behavior and attitudes, especially today when we are more and more disconnected from our neighbors and our communities. The lack of feeling connected is also one of the prime psychological and social factors leading to criminal behavior, according to Daniel Amen in the video *Firestorms in the Brain*.

Most men and women in prison have been abused physically, psychologically, or sexually while growing up. The impact of this abuse can be very damaging to their ability to develop connections with other people. According to Amen, when a child does not experience bonding with his or her mother or other adult, the child will not develop the capacity for empathy, which is a feeling of connection with others. Without empathy, a person can hurt others and not be bothered by it. This experience may be similar to

that of child soldiers and those who experience war and genocide firsthand. One female former inmate who was abused told me, "I would hurt you, I would hurt anybody and it meant nothing to me. I was mean." While in prison, this woman experienced AVP and the community that came with it. She is now one of the most caring, empathetic women I know. She has devoted her life to helping former inmates when they are released to the community.



Amen's research using the Single Photon Emission Computer Tomography (SPECT) scan, which measures brain activity levels, shows that physical or emotional trauma can result in reduced levels of activity in specific areas of the brain. These reduced levels are correlated with certain problem behaviors. It is as though these healthy parts of the brain become inaccessible to the conscious mind. Amen has used psychotherapeutic drugs to increase the activity in these areas to restore overall balance. This has resulted in dramatic behavior change. One patient recounted that he didn't want to be violent, but he couldn't stop himself. After the introduction of the drug, he had no problem controlling his violence.

Another example involves the prefrontal cortex, which performs functions related to attention span, perseverance, judgment, impulse control, self-monitoring and supervision, problem solving, critical thinking, etc. When the prefrontal cortex has a low level of activity, resulting in hyperactivity, impulse control problems, and the like, the pharmacological stimulant increases the activity in this part of the brain, restoring a more normal level of functioning, and behavior returns to normal. It has also been shown that some people who seek out conflict for the adrenalin rush are attempting to increase the activity level in certain parts of their brain, a sort of self-balancing behavior. Using drugs like Ritalin, which is prescribed for ADD and ADHD, to change the activity level in these parts of the brain may be effective for some individuals, but it may not be the only way to change attitudes and behavior.

We know that thoughts create neuro-pathways or thought patterns in the brain, and when they are continually reinforced they will create habitual thinking and behavior. We also know that established neuro-pathways that are not used will atrophy over time. This is why we are able to change habitual thinking and behavior. When a person is traumatized, he or she develops neuro-pathways that help him or her survive the trauma and the aftermath of the trauma. These new neuro-pathways may not be beneficial or healthy in normal situations. If the trauma is not treated and new, more healthy neuro-pathways are not created, these unhealthy responses become ingrained.



One explanation of this process is that we develop neuro-pathways in our brain that avoid the area of the brain associated with the trauma. By isolating that area, we no longer have access to it and the pain it causes. Sometimes we are so effective in isolating the area, we can't remember the event ever happening. Because we are unconsciously protecting ourselves from certain aspects of our life experience, we develop protective attitudes, behaviors, or emotional patterns that do not allow us to be fully present or fully ourselves in relationships. One example of an unhealthy thought pattern might be, "When I get close to someone, he or she will hurt me." This thought might have been necessary while being abused as a child, but now this thought inhibits me from getting close to friends, my spouse, or my children, and I will push them away or avoid them when they begin to get close to me.

The impact of trauma on the flow of our lives has been likened to boulders in a river; they cause turbulence and disrupt the flow of the river. Psychotherapy, especially Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, can reduce or eliminate these boulders. AVP, on the other hand, through the experience of connection and community, raises the level of the water so the river is less and less disturbed by the boulders. Eventually, the impact of the boulders isn't even noticed. This doesn't eliminate the need for therapy so much as mitigate the current negative impact of the past trauma and replace it with positive relationships and healthier thought patterns.

Another analogy is to take a pitcher of cola representing negativity and disconnected energy. If it is vigorously stirred, some of the negative energy will spill out, lowering the level somewhat, but most of it remains. Some talk therapies, or simply commiserating, are represented by this stirring. However, if you gradually pour in water (representing TP and positive energy), the liquid will become lighter and lighter until it is eventually clear.



The experience of community motivates people to continually seek it out. Within this AVP environment of trust, respect, caring, and connection, newer, healthier neuro-pathways are developed. As one experiences more and more of this new way of thinking, the old, unhealthy neuro-pathways atrophy, becoming less and less a part of one's life, and the new neuro-pathways become stronger and more integrated as they are reinforced.

I hope this has shed some light on the workings of transforming power. The interpersonal and psychological explorations do not negate the spiritual aspect of TP. There is no way to know if the transformation occurs because of the interpersonal/psychological changes or if the transformation is spiritual in nature, which then leads to the interpersonal/psychological changes, and it doesn't matter. TP works, and it is the most powerful outcome of true community. I believe the more we focus on connection and building true community in our lives, especially with those of us who feel marginalized and isolated, the more we will all experience peace.

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John A. Shuford, a member of Camden (Del.) Meeting, is coordinator of Alternatives to Violence Project/Delaware, past president of AVP/USA, co-clerk of AVP/USA's International Committee and Reentry Committee, and assistant clerk of AVP International. He has used the AVP method to train departments of corrections staff in several states and for the National Institute of Corrections. To find out more about the Alternatives to Violence Project, [visit the AVP/USA website here](#).



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