

Separating the guilty

Petra Gimbad, originally published 12 October 2006 in [The Sun](#)

I am in the midst of Alice Miller's *For Your Own Good: The Roots of Violence in Child-rearing*. It is not an easy read. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to Hitler's upbringing; rooting his need for control and cruel Nazi policies in his violent childhood. My heart constricted at each intricate description of the abuse his father inflicted in the name of discipline - how he was forced against a tree till he dropped unconscious, how his father had to be restrained from killing him and his eventual immunity to pain.

Reading about Hitler's childhood made me realise how the Holocaust might have been averted.

It is so easy to believe that criminals are born and not made, to call death upon a human being and support fiercer punishments. Why only interfere after the crime is committed? What role have most of us played in preventing the crime?

We have to ask ourselves the uncomfortable question: how have we failed both the perpetrator and the victim?

I love what Kahlil Gibran wrote of our collective responsibility in regards to crime:

You cannot separate the just from the unjust and the good from the wicked;

For they stand together before the face of the sun even as the black thread and the white are woven together.

We, as individuals and a collective society must look towards alternative methods of handling crime. In New Zealand, mediation sessions are held between first-time teenage offenders and their victims. It may not work for every criminal or criminal-in-the-making, but it has made all the difference for many youths who might have gone on to commit more crimes.

Brought face-to-face with their victims, a youth offender is forced to confront first-hand the consequences of his or her actions. A successful case had a young mugger realise how his theft has led to several months of mental trauma. After seeing the face of her young mugger, the victim realised the poverty and social circumstances that led him to choose theft. Friends who are involved in mediation services tell me that the offenders are asked, "How will you make this up to the victim?" and perform compensation accordingly.

The few I have spoken to have touching stories of how victims have later offered their perpetrators small loans to open a business or apprenticeships in their mechanics garage. This happens more rarely than one would initially assume. Of course, it does not work all the time and therefore other solutions will need to be implemented - but it is effective for the less hardened criminals. Lest we argue that such policies cost too much, an American judge has pointed out that the cost of housing young offenders in a nurturing environment with a strict houseparent is less than the cost of crime in the long run.

Everywhere, Malaysians talk about how the growing reports of crimes in the papers reflect that our country is going to the dogs. Our judgmental attitudes are not making things better. The task is arduous, but the only way to change crime rates is to stop resorting to black-and-white explanations and start understanding how criminals are made and not born. What is it like to be a troublemaker in school, and not receive help? What is it like to commit a crime for the first time, and to be thrown into a jail cell with seasoned offenders for the night?

Rather than limiting ourselves to simplistic solutions, we must call for better policies, free teachers to actually teach, even give a little of ourselves to spend time with someone and just pay attention.

However, the many choices we make depend on the options we have. The evil we accuse others of is present in all of us.

In the words of Kahlil Gibran:

Oftentimes have I heard you speak of one who commits a wrong as though he were not one of you, but a stranger unto you and an intruder upon your world.

But I say that even as the holy and the righteous cannot rise beyond the highest which is in one of you,

So the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower than the lowest which is in you also.

Petra believes that people deserve to be acknowledged as individuals, not as a statistic. She is a law student in her spare time. Comments: feedback@thesundaily.com