



## Editorial The Use of Force



In William Carlos Williams's short story "The Use of Force," a doctor makes an emergency house call in response to a call from frantic

parents. Their child, a beautiful golden-haired girl, is limp and on fire with fever. Seeing the girl, the doctor suspects diphtheria. When he asks her to open her mouth so that he can examine her throat, she clenches her teeth.

"Will you open it now by yourself or shall we have to open it for you?" threatens the doctor. The father holds his daughter down and the doctor forces a wooden spatula in, only to have the girl bite down, splintering it. The doctor tries another instrument, this time a heavy silver spoon. In the final assault, he overpowers the child and forces the spoon in until she gags.

Her mouth is bleeding, her tongue is cut and she is screaming in wild hysterical shrieks. All the while the doctor justifies his behaviour. This is for her own good. This is for the good of society, which must be protected from her disease. But at the same time something not so noble is driving the doctor. He begins to view the child as a formidable opponent. "She surely rose to magnificent heights of insane fury of effort bred of her terror of me." He has engaged in a conflict he must win since "a blind fury... a longing for muscular release are the operatives. One goes on to the end." He would break the child—destroy the child—to save the child.

This story is a most succinct portrayal of the evil implicit in the use of force, regardless of the initial motivation. The use of force involves inflicting pain, sometimes to the point of death, which brutalizes the inflictor. In the overpowering of one human being by another, damage is done to both parties, the powerful and the overpowered. It is a violation to use force to impose one's will on another against their wishes and without their

consent. Yet those in power always use overt and subtle forms of coercion to get their way, justifying their use of force as necessary for maintaining order and for the protection of society. Force is supposed to be a measure of last resort, but sometimes it is the first resort because it's the easiest.

The summer I worked at the Baker Memorial Sanatorium where my mother was a nurse supervisor, I witnessed an alternative to the use of force. I was a maid on the children's ward. One day a big hubbub broke out when a nurse tried to take a blood specimen from a native boy. He was a tough little guy and there was no way she was going to stick that needle into him. The nurse called in reinforcements. Two nursing aides tried to hold the boy down, but the more they tried the more he kicked and screamed. They managed to pin him, but he twitched and flailed his arm so that they couldn't get the needle to stay in long enough to draw blood. By this time the boy was panic stricken and howling. Finally they called my mother.

She arrived, took one look at the terrified boy and told everyone to clear the ward. The double doors at the end of the corridor were shut and everything went quiet. I was mopping the floor in the outer hallway and I sneaked up to the doors and peeked in the window. My mother was sitting on the edge of the bed holding the little boy in her arms, rocking back and forth and quietly talking to him. I pulled away from the window and went back to my mopping. In a few minutes she came through the door holding a vial of blood and handed it to the nurse at the nursing station.

Here is the ending of Williams's story. Let's think about it as we ponder a world transformed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001:

"Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes."

—Jackie Flanagan