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Sunday December 7, 2014

Visibility for forgotten children

By Jim Taylor

Everybody, it seems, has heard that Malala Yousafzai, the girl from Pakistan who was shot in the head in retaliation for promoting education for girls, won the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize. But it also seems that few people know she shared the prize with Kailash Satyarthi, who has spent over 30 years battling against child labour in India.

Child labour is everywhere, unfortunately. If you own an Indian carpet, chances are good that its tiny knots were tied by children's nimble fingers. Your soccer ball was probably stitched by a child. Your chocolate was probably picked by a child.

But that's changing. In an interview published in *The Hindu*, India's third-largest English-language newspaper, Satyarthi said, "My biggest success is giving visibility to forgotten children."

The organization he created has lobbied for changes to Indian laws. It has raided sweat-shops to free children from slave-labour conditions. It has established child-friendly villages where "all children are freed from exploitation, abuse, risk of trafficking and child marriages, and are enrolled in schools..."

It has not been easy. "I started at a time when child slavery and child labour were non-issues," Satyarthi recalled. Children existed to be used. "My fight was against the ignorance, the neglect, the mindset, the greed that encouraged lack of respect for children."

It was also against "the vested interests of organized criminal gangs, corrupt officers, and politicians. In my early days of work, I lost two of my colleagues. My office was ransacked and gutted several times. My home was attacked."

The structure of social revolutions

Overturning long-held practices follows a predictable pattern. "Mahatma Gandhi had predicted the journey of ordinary people like me several decades ago," Satyarthi said. He quoted Gandhi: "First they ignore, then they laugh, then they fight, and finally you will win."

Gandhi's insight, it's worth noting, parallels Thomas Kuhn's in his landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argued that new concepts -- he gave us the term "paradigm shift" -- are first disregarded as irrelevant, then mocked by believers of the current truths. As evidence grows, those true believers attack the new idea. Even after it ultimately wins acceptance, a diehard minority will continue fighting it.

Kuhn's critics challenged the notion of a predictable pattern in scientific change, even as their own reactions demonstrated its validity.

Since then, Kuhn's pattern has been applied to other social revolutions. They are not limited to the scientific community.

Perhaps unintentionally, Satyarthi quoted Kuhn's terminology when he commented, "I have been partially successful in the paradigm shift from the notion 'children are subject of pity' to 'every child has rights and dignity.' For example, we free children, educate, and rehabilitate them."

Making education a priority

On that subject, Satyarthi's goals coincide with those of his better known co-winner, Malala Jousafzai. "The entire education system should be overhauled and made friendly to all children," he told *The Hindu*. "I insist on zero tolerance for discrimination in education. I humbly dedicate every single penny of the [Nobel] prize money for the freedom and education of trafficked, enslaved, and abused children, particularly girls."

Who could argue against better treatment for children? Surprisingly, given common perceptions of corruption in India's government -- a joke suggests that there are only two qualifications for entering politics; either you have a criminal record, or you are willing to acquire one -- Satyarthi expresses confidence in his country's politicians and bureaucrats: "Indian bureaucrats are the best brains in the world; I always try to awaken their hearts and souls."

He blamed opposition on "a handful of the corrupt who tried to harm and malign, who were able to make a bigger noise."

I doubt if Satyarthi was deliberately quoting Isaiah either, but his metaphor for his struggle against apathy and complacency in Indian society sounded familiar in this Christmas season: "It's difficult to find new roads, but even more difficult to make your own road levelling the rocks and mountains."

"Today," he continued, "thousands of organizations and hundreds of thousands of individuals globally are not only marching on the path I paved but are taking up the cause of child rights on their own, doing even better than me."

The "triangle of curse"

For Satyarthi, child labour is part of a bigger picture. "Child labour, illiteracy, and poverty form a triangle of curse for children. We must break it collectively."

The "triangle of curse" is universal. In India, it is compounded by the traditional caste system -- "one of the factors that [excludes] a particular section of society and keeps it away from the growth story."

Winning a share of the Nobel Peace Prize will not banish the caste system. But drawing attention to the plight of child labour -- whether in India or anywhere else -- offers what Satyarthi calls "a ray of hope for millions of marginalized children trapped in exploitation and slavery across the globe."

Provided the world hears about it. That's my reason for writing this column.

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YOUR TURN

A rare occasion -- I received only one letter about my column last week on crowdfunding, with particular emphasis on crowdfunding for my local food bank project.

David Shearman explained why he thought it was a bad idea:

"The whole point to the Aviva approach is that it is a competition. And for every 'winner' there are multiple losers. That goes against my own theology and what I understand the Gospel says. It's not just, nor justice. How many other worthy causes will not receive the funds they need if your local food bank wins?

"That is the primary problem with crowdfunding for basic needs. It depends on promotion of the cause as opposed to more foundational, systemic approaches. In addition, by promoting the contest or lottery (which is what the Aviva contest really is), entrants or voters are actually giving a for-profit company free publicity. Is that what we really want to do?

"Aviva is in good company. Kraft Foods did the same thing a few years ago, promoting big prizes if food

banks got people to 'vote' for them by clicking on an internet link and giving Kraft their e-mail address. The problem was that you could stuff the ballot box. Larger food banks, like the one here in Owen Sound, were able to motivate people to click and won the grand prize. Smaller food banks, with fewer resources, lost out initially until Kraft changed the prize distribution and gave grants to all the food banks entered in the contest.

"There are better and more appropriate ways to address the issue of what is called food security. The Aviva contest isn't one of them.

"BTW, you and I are both old enough to remember the days when food banks didn't exist. That they have existed for more than 30 years says that the problem is systemic and should be addressed in a systemic manner by all of us, not by free publicity for an insurance company promoting internet slacktivism."

What can I say? I agree with David, in principle. But when it comes to my own food bank, I'm willing to bend my principles if it will generate some necessary funds. My ethics seem to be fairly flexible....

Incidentally, as I write this note, the Lake Country Food Bank is running 6th overall in Aviva's "competitive lottery." We're feeling hopeful.

The only other letter came from John Shaffer, on the subject of addictions: "If people were worried about addictions, coffee would have been banned long ago. I had a dear friend in her 80s who went to a conference about addictions. When she was told that coffee could be addictive, she scoffed, but she decided to experiment. She went cold turkey off of coffee and she had serious withdrawal symptoms. She returned from the conference and changed to decaf coffee, both for her own health and also as a witness.

"For whatever reasons my family didn't drink coffee, so I have never gotten addicted to it.

"Years ago, I was a guest speaker at an United Methodist church in Michigan. When someone offered me coffee, I tried to be funny and said, 'No, I am a Mormon. I don't drink coffee.' The poor pastor was soon attacked by this layperson for allowing a Mormon to speak in our church! She must have 'missed the newsletter' about a guest speaker.

"I may not drink coffee, thanks to my family, but my weird sense of humour came from someone. I try to keep that addiction in check."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com

- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
