

Sunday April 15, 2012

War wounds take generations to heal

By Jim Taylor

On Thursday, silence fell in Syria. For the first time in over a year, the rattle of gunfire, the thunder of artillery, the shock waves of exploding shells, ceased – even if temporarily.

For months, news coverage from Syria – often as cellphone video – showed us apartment balconies dangling like laundry on a clothesline. Streets choked with swirling dust. Bodies littering sidewalks. People running, ducking, scattering in fear...

The images are frightening repetitive. Today, from Syria. Last year, from Libya. Before that, from Afghanistan, Baghdad, Gaza, Bosnia, Beirut, Belfast....

News reports don't deal with what it's like to live – and to die – in those situations.

The temptation for most citizens, I suspect, is not to fight the forces of oppression, but to keep your head down and your nose clean. To draw no attention to yourself. And never to rock boats.

That policy doesn't work once resistance turns into open warfare. Artillery shells don't check your loyalties before they demolish your building. Improvised explosives and landmines don't ask for ID before they maim.

Long-term suffering

In case there's any doubt, my sympathies generally lie with David rather than Goliath. Syrian President Bashar al Assad strikes me as a cold-blooded tyrant who treats his country's people as a minor speed-bump on his highway of power. If he wins the current conflict, I expect he will ruthlessly purge his opponents.

At the same time, I strongly suspect that the rebels are funded, encouraged, perhaps even coordinated, by external forces – anything from Israel's Mossad to Washington's CIA – who anticipate some national benefit from regime change. And I doubt that the rebels, should they succeed in ousting Assad, would be any less ruthless in rooting out anyone suspected of sympathizing with the ex-president.

Regardless of who wins, the wounds will take at least a generation to heal.

We're learning more about the long-term effects of war on those who live through it. Until recently, psychological damage was dismissed as "shell shock." Soldiers were expected to return to active duty as soon as they showed signs of recovery – rather like sending Sidney Crosby back onto the ice as soon as he stops seeing double.

Now we have a scientific name for the disability -- post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Few come through unscathed

In Canada, official statistics claim a PTSD rate of under five per cent among soldiers returning from Afghanistan. But a study of 792 personnel at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown in New Brunswick put the figure much higher -- 23 per cent, nearly one in four. Almost half the Gagetown soldiers – 44 per cent -- were referred for treatment or diagnosis within the first year after their return.

PTSD symptoms include depression, social disorientation, nightmares, emotional numbing, recurring anger....

According to the New York Times, 300,000 soldiers have returned to the U.S. with PTSD or brain injury.

But that's only half the story. Although the U.S. media have studiously avoided the subject, U.S. military forces lost more personnel in some years to suicide than to battle. According to a recent report, an Iraq or Afghanistan

veteran attempts suicide every 80 minutes. Every day, 18 succeed. I've read claims that distraught veterans account for 20 per cent of all suicides in the country.

No help available

There are, of course, no statistics on the incidence of PTSD, let alone suicide, among the people who live, and who must continue to live, in countries ripped apart by war. But it must be at least as high as the rate among soldiers. After all, soldiers can count on eventually escaping to a safer, saner environment -- if they don't die first. Civilians have no safer, saner world to escape to.

Children especially are victims, prevented from fleeing by their dependency on adults. Although adults expect them to rebound from their experiences, children also suffer PTSD. Since the attack on Gaza three years ago, the Gaza Community Mental Health Program has trained parents and teachers to recognize symptoms of childhood PTSD -- hyperactivity, regressive behavior, stuttering, lying, bed wetting, and poor academic performance.

It took our grandson four years to overcome withdrawal symptoms I attribute to physical abuse he may have suffered during his first year of life, before our daughter adopted him. Some effects will probably always linger just under the surface.

Until he was 20, one of my friends never heard his father laugh. My friend was seven when his father came home from World War II; his father didn't laugh for the next 13 years.

My uncle served as a medical doctor in the British retreat from Burma in WWII. He died at 94 without ever talking publicly about that experiences.

If trauma can have such lasting effect on people who have professional medical and psychiatric care available, I wonder how long it will take before ordinary Syrians will start to feel normal again.

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YOUR TURN

I still don't know what kind of gremlins got into last Sunday's column, which substituted some weird coding for every apostrophe and quotation mark. But the mail poured in to tell me about it. I'll simply acknowledge those letters: Jean Hamilton, Jim McKean, Chris Duxbury, James Russell, Vic Sedo, Hugh Henderson, Jean McCord, Bill Peterson, and maybe some more whom I've missed.

However, a few of you made the effort to decipher all the – codings, and sent thoughtful letters.

Lyle Phillips defended teachers: "As a retired teacher (and still a TOC - Teacher on Call) I take exception to the reference so often made that children/students are being 'held hostage' by the teachers' job action. So far in this 'negotiation' the teachers' actions have had no effect on the students. The students have not received report cards but the teachers have kept records of their students' progress as they always do. The parents are always able to find out how their children are progressing by contacting the teacher -- although most 'don't have the time'. The teachers have been arriving at school just 15 minutes before classes start and leaving 15 minutes after dismissal [which means they] have to take all their marking and much of their preparation home to complete, but it does not put any hardship on the students. The teachers have not been doing supervision before and after school and at recess, but

again this should have no effect on the students as supervision is being provided by administrators or paid supervisors.

“Before I retired the teachers agreed to a contract with no wage increase in order to achieve some class size limits. Two years later the government passed legislation which removed those class size limits which means that the teachers gave up a pay increase for nothing. It is really hard to negotiate when the government holds all the trump cards. As far as I understand it, the teachers are trying to put some pressure on the government while disrupting the students' learning as little as possible. I hope this can be settled without any further disruption.”

Lyle finished, “Thank you for giving me the opportunity to vent.”

Steve Roney, on the other hand, defended the bargaining process: “The point of the free market is that it is a fair and objective way to establish values for goods and services. A worker’s labour is then worth whatever he or she can get for it in the market. By this measure, public school teachers are overpaid. They are paid more than their colleagues in private schools, who operate in a freer market. {But} so long as private schools must hire teachers formally accredited as such, though, even the private schools are not really a free market...”

“Teaching is and always had been a calling, a vocation, like the clergy. If you are called to it, you will love it; if you are not, you will probably hate it. In both cases, paying more is not likely to produce better results. Those who should teach need to teach; those who do not need to teach should not teach. The same holds true for medicine, or journalism. That means raising pay will not improve the product. Instead, it is likely to attract people who should not be in a classroom: people who hate the students, hate their time in a classroom, but do it for the money.”

And Ted Wilson offered an alternative process: “I like the solution Teddy Roosevelt imposed on the US Steel industry over 100 years ago. Final Offer binding arbitration brought peace to a vital industry that was locked in what seemed like terminal labor strife at the time.

“The way it works is the thus. All work stoppages of any kind are banned! The first step in the bargaining process is to select an arbitrator. This is done by each party submitting a list of potential candidates to the other party. If there is no name common to both lists they do it again with new names. If they have not selected an arbitrator after three tries each party selects a list of names from the other party’s previous lists; [that name] is submitted to the governing authority, Labor Relations Board or what have you, who then selects the arbitrator.

“Then the bargaining begins. When either party declares that this is their Final Offer the other party can make one more offer. Then, if neither is accepted the arbitrator selects the Offer that is, in their opinion, the fairest one. The arbitrator does not mediate and cannot deviate from the two Final Offers. The US Steel Industry never had a major work stoppage after this process was instituted.

“I would add two things:

- 1) Previously arbitrated settlements are not to be used by the Arbitrator in making their decision, only negotiated ones.
- 2) In making the argument for why their Final Offer is the fairest one the parties cannot make any derogatory or negative comments about the other party or its Final Offer. If they do the justification of their Offer is thrown out and the Offer must stand on only the merits contained in it.

“If this negotiating process were to be part of all in ‘Essential Services’ negotiations something closer to fairness and politeness would ensue. Government would stop using imposed settlements as a financial tool and unions would not be able to hold the rest of us hostage.”

Later in the week, I was able to send the flawed column out without glitches. Leslie Wilson thanked me; she thought it had been her computer acting up. Mary Elford gave up part way through the original (mixed up) version, and never did finish it until the second version came through.

I can’t guarantee it won’t happen again, but I’ll take a few more precautions before pushing the “Send” button in future.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

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...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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.
