

Sunday November 17, 2013

Complex ethics in a crisis

By Jim Taylor

Sometimes a small detail opens up more vistas than a panoramic view. So it was, for me, in the coverage of the enormous devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippine islands.

Winds over 300 km/hr, too strong to record accurately. Rainfall like water cannon. Eleven million people affected. Cities reduced to rubble. Between 3,500 and 10,000 dead – depending on who issues the estimate – and around 20,000 still missing, according to the Red Cross. Children holding up signs pleading for food and water.

Governments all over the world leaped onto the humanitarian bandwagon with cash, food, and medical aid. Even as the shattered infrastructure – roads, bridges, storage – made it impossible to get that aid to the people most in need.

And increasingly, stories about people taking matters into their own hands. Looting stores and warehouses. Digging up underground water pipes. The very word “looting” has a negative implication -- as if people should be waiting passively for handouts while they starve.

“This is not criminality,” said Tecson John Lim, administrator of the worst hit city, Tacloban. “This is self-preservation.”

Unnecessary deaths

And in the middle of this chaos, a troubling incident. Reuters reported that eight people died when a wall fell on them. The actions of looters had weakened the wall. The looters were stealing 33,000 sacks of rice, each weighing 50 kg, 110 pounds.

They got away with 1,800 tons – yes, tons! – of rice.

The situation creates a real-life laboratory experiment in ethics.

The recognized guru in ethics is a psychologist named Lawrence Kohlberg. In the 1970s, Kohlberg developed a theory that moral decisions can be grouped into six stages or levels.

These levels range from an essentially amoral desire to avoid punishment, through social conformity and rigid adherence to the rule of law, all the way up to acting purely on universal principles.

Kohlberg evaluated people on their responses to abstract questions. The questions themselves had no right or wrong answers. Kohlberg wanted to probe the reasoning behind the answers.

So a classic question asked, supposing your wife was dying and you couldn't afford the overpriced drug that might save her, would you steal it?

A level one person might answer yes, because I can get away with it. Or no, because I might get punished.

A level four might answer no, stealing is against the law. A level six might answer yes, because human life matters more than property ownership. Or no, because if everyone stole what they needed, the world would degenerate into chaos.

Practical consequences

Kohlberg's questions were theoretical. In the Philippines, they become a matter of life and death.

Would someone loot a grocery store smashed open by wind and falling trees? Okay, how about deliberately breaking into a store that had survived the typhoon intact?

Would a starving mother refrain from looting a store because it's wrong, because it's against the law? Would she rather watch her infant die?

Why was 1800 tons of rice locked inside a warehouse while people starved outside?

Were the looters stealing those sacks of rice to sell them to desperate people? Does that imply belief in the principle of freedom to make a profit? Or might they have intended to distribute the rice to people in villages not yet reached by international aid?

And if they knew their theft would cause eight deaths, would they have acted differently? Or do the deaths of eight people just become what military strategists call collateral damage, in a larger picture?

Is stealing food -- whether a bottle of water from a store or tons of rice from a warehouse -- acceptable as long as nobody gets hurt?

Dozens of other questions could be asked. Unfortunately, no psychologist will ever ask them, or explore the reasoning behind the answers. Those who stole will melt away into invisibility. Those who refused to steal food and water may not survive to answer questions anyway.

Invisible moral codes

But it's important to recognize that whatever people do in a crisis, or won't do, reflects their ethical values -- even if they don't know they have those values. Some will share what little they have; some will steal from a baby.

Kohlberg argued, from a theoretical perspective, that people can rarely recognize the rationale for an ethical position one level above or below their own. I suspect that in the real-life laboratory caused by Typhoon Haiyan, even people who normally act at higher philosophical levels will revert to levels they thought they had long left behind.

They will not apply Kant's "Categorical Imperative": "What would the world be like if everyone acted as I propose to do?" They won't consider law and order. Or the possibility of punishment. Or what other people might think of them.

In the crucible of crisis, rigid moral codes often become fluid.

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YOUR TURN

Most of the comments on last week's column, about saving a forest, were positive.

Ralph Milton simply said, "Fine column. Well told."

Sterling Haynes noted that he had contributed a poem to Sue McCaslin's struggles to save the McLellan Forest.

And Isobel McGregor wrote, "Thanks for this! Inspiring!"

Although Steve Roney objected to my description of Chinese poet Han Shan as "obscure": "He is certainly not obscure within Chinese literature, or Buddhism. He is about as obscure, shall we say, as Cervantes or Goethe."

Diane Robinson wrote, "I feel frustrated -- even angry -- that individuals and groups (prophets, perhaps?) have to struggle so mightily with governments and businesses to preserve the world's wilderness areas....both urban and rural. What happens when there is no wilderness left? What will be the state of our souls when the world has been finally reduced to asphalt, concrete, and steel? Will it take no-wilderness for us humans to realize that we have not only killed the wild places outside of us, but within us as well? It seems to me that the more divorced we humans become from the earth that sustains us, the poorer in spirit we become. I believe it was Henry David Thoreau who wrote: 'In wilderness is the preservation of the world.' I would add this to Thoreau's thoughts: 'In wilderness is the preservation of humanity'."

Elwin Hunt noted that the struggle to preserve some wilderness is universal: "Here in New Zealand there have been historical problems and 'land wars' between the tangata whenua (i.e., people of the land -- Maori, indigenous population) and the colonialists. These problems were *sort of* dealt with, with the signing of the Treaty Of Waitangi in 1840, but there have been continuing injustices right up until recent times, and some would argue that injustices still continue.

"Part of the problem is, as in the story that you tell, the difference in what we see as valuable. A farmer may see a rough area of land as a loss of income (or as potential for more income) whereas an environmentalist, or *community-ist*, may see the same area as a habitat for all sorts of different creatures, different plants, even just as a 'resting area' for the land, or as recreational area for the community -- somewhere where nature can take its own course without direction from the money makers."

Isabel Gibson commented, "I do like creative people. We can stamp our feet all we want to, but a little sideways thinking is usually more effective.

"As for finding it ironic that 'land owned by the people has to pass into private hands to be preserved for the people's use' -- well, 'the people' don't always speak with one voice. I'm a fan of private-sector investment in land banks and conservation areas. It doesn't replace things that only governments can do, like setting aside national parks, but it's a great mechanism for protecting specific tracts."

John Cameron connected the column to his experience as a child in England, during the Blitz of London, when he and thousands of other children were evacuated to the presumed safety of rural areas far from their homes and families. "My love of forests and countryside started in 1939 when I was evacuated to a farm in England, and has never left me. When I came to B.C. seven years ago, it was because of its natural beauty, not for endless buildings and 'development'. They are the very reasons why I left Mississauga."

Rather as I suspected, the letter from Joan Janzen last week generated some controversy.

Alison Playfair supported Joan: "I appreciated particularly her comment that, 'Even non-rapists still think they have the right to approach women alone on the street and in public transit, treating them as though they were objects.' That hit home in a personal way. It is not only when alone in public areas, but also on the job, surrounded by people. My 17-yr-old daughter has just started a part-time job in retail. Every day she has stories about men of all ages making inappropriate comments about her looks or about their desire to 'use,' 'have,' or 'do things to or with' her as she tries to be a good employee. It astounds me that a 40-something year old man thinks it is in any way all right to approach a young woman of 17 working in a retail store and say, 'I want you to help me because you have the best bedroom eyes.' That is the cleanest comment; the other encounters are too graphic to repeat. Much more energy is used to deflect these advances in ways that will not jeopardize her job than all the other skills development required in learning a new job. One reality she is learning is how to use those inappropriate behaviours to her advantage -- upselling, which in turn leads her to objectify men. I have heard many men complain that women use their 'sex' as a tool or weapon -- is it any wonder when it is so often the way we have been taught to view ourselves by those same men.

"It saddens me deeply that in the time that has passed since I was a young girl entering the job market things have changed so little and may even have gotten worse. I am thankful for the many women who reject that path and the not-so-many men who value women as equal members of creation and so offer a different way of relating to each other as whole, wonderful, complex persons! I pray for a world where we treat each other and ALL Creation with love and kindness."

On the other hand, Margaret Carr wrote, "I am truly sorry that Joan Janzen feels the way she does about men. Her words make me feel she may have been mistreated. I believe that the vast majority of men are neither 'selfish, unreasonable, or unwilling to take full partnership or keep promises.' Just because a few men act like that is not a reason to paint all men with the same brush."

Margaret described some of the ways in which her late husband Alan took care of things around the house, without being asked. "I regret not having told him how much I depended on him, and all the men I know are much the same. Please tell Joan there are many more good men than bad. If I needed help all I would have to do is call a neighbor."

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

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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

- 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.
