

Sunday October 26, 2014

Don't feel helpless; do something good

By Jim Taylor

"You're probably wondering why the Canadian Parliament was shot up..."

So began an essay by William Rivers Pitt about the current ills of the world. He went on in a single sentence of 1255 words, "...and your friendly neighborhood police officer is driving a tank and your savings account is a sad joke and your road is littered with potholes and you can't find a job, and your tap water is flammable and the ocean is coming for your home..."

Pitt's thesis was the negative effect of the American military-industrial complex on every aspect of life on this planet. His focus was a sense of despair.

It's certainly easy to feel bleak about the state of the world these days – and it's not just a side-effect of shortening days in the northern hemisphere. Volcanoes in Hawaii and Japan, hurricanes in the Atlantic, ebola in Africa, stock market "corrections" in Toronto and New York, lone-wolf shootings in Ottawa, Quebec, and New Brunswick – the list of extremes goes on and on.

"I come home from my job," a woman in a study group said. "And it just doesn't seem like I can make any difference. So I go out and work in my garden instead."

Running into danger

But it is not true that we can't make a difference. When Michael Zehaf Bibeau started shooting last Wednesday in Ottawa, most people ran for cover. But five people didn't. They ran into danger. So that they could do whatever they could to help a mortally wounded Corporal Nathan Cirillo.

Lawyer Barbara Winters was going to a meeting near her office at the Canada Revenue Agency. Margaret Lerhe, a nurse, was on her way to work at the Elizabeth Bruyere Hospital. Two soldiers, part of the morning's honour guard, were already at the War Memorial. A fifth man, identified in news reports only as Martin, joined them.

Although they were strangers, they instantly began working as a team. They applied pressure to Cirillo's gunshot wounds to reduce bleeding. The

soldier near Cirillo's head gave mouth-to-mouth respiration. Barbara Winters started chest compression, giving CPR, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation

They didn't know, and didn't care, if the gunman was still around, if he might turn his gun on them. They simply saw someone in need, and they responded.

The acid test

They showed us that there is always something we can do. It may not involve running into the line of fire of a fanatic with a gun. But there is always something we can do.

Even if it's just working in a garden. Making a small part of the world more beautiful is not escapism. Growing one's own vegetables is not a waste of time. Visiting a friend, phoning someone you haven't seen for a while, writing a thank you note – all these make the world a better place for someone.

Granted, Michael Zehaf Bibeau in Ottawa, Martin Couture-Rouleau in St-Jean-Sur-Richelieu, and Justin Bourque in Moncton might also argue that they were doing what they felt impelled to do.

I suggest two things that should have told them not to do it.

First, if you have to cover your face with a scarf or a balaclava, you know you're doing something wrong. Same if you feel you have to hide that hate letter behind the mask of anonymity. Of you want someone else to do your dirty work for you. Just don't do it.

The First Law of Holes, as cited by William Rivers Pitt: "When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!"

Second, if you're going to harm someone or something, stop! Stop digging deeper! Even if you have a larger goal in mind, sacrificing innocent victims is not the way to get there.

Forget those grand theories about the greatest good for the greatest number. That's an excuse, not a justification. It may work for nation states, but it doesn't work for individuals. At his trial, Justin Bourque in New Brunswick claimed he wanted to provoke a rebellion against big corporations. That goal, I might endorse. But not by killing three RCMP officers and wounding two more.

Small inputs, big effects

Justice that penalizes one group so that another can benefit is not

justice at all. Indeed, an author I edited years ago insisted that true justice must consider the welfare not just of individuals but of the whole planet.

Chaos theory is often cited to show that tiny inputs can have huge consequences -- usually negative. The beating of a butterfly's wings in Peru may precipitate a typhoon in the Philippines. But if it works one way, it can also work the other way. A spontaneous good deed, a tiny act of kindness, may have ripple effects that you cannot anticipate.

We are never helpless. There is always something we can do.

The only absolutely sure thing is that not doing anything will not benefit anyone.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column about the shooting in Ottawa provoked quite a flood of mail, perhaps because it brings the conflicts of the world close to home. Several letters just said "Thank you" o a variety of ways. A couple asked for permission to reprint, or re-use, some parts of the column. I'm only printing here comments from those who amplified, in some way, the thoughts in the column.

Jean Hamilton commented, "One of the most distressing features of the last week was the careless use of words, both by politicians and by commentators. For example, Stephen Harper was saying 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' long before the facts were in, and news coverage was sprinkled with 'jihadist' and 'Islamist.' Which brings me to your sentence, '80% of all US murders are committed by Christians.' Please define 'Christian.'"

In this case, at least, I let people define themselves. If they call themselves Christian, I'll grant them that label.

Several writers pointed fingers at Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Dale Perkins fired off a letter to the *Globe and Mail*: "The tragic shooting Wednesday in Ottawa has put the country into a fear-frenzy. On cue, the political leaders and security personnel step up to a mic and deliver either an homage in praise of heroic service and greater security vigilance or rage at

Islamic fundamentalists who dared to attack our national shrines and honor guards. Where can we re-locate a voice of peace and compassion in the cacophony of hatred and vitriol rolling off our collective tongue? Why did this happen? Who is responsible? What has become of us?

“I lay a large finger of blame on our Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his obedient servants, who rammed through legislation to send military equipment and personnel into the Middle East to wage war against the illusive ISIL and their disciples At the time of that vote I predicted that PM Harper really wanted to provoke a 9/11 attack on Canadian soil to justify his military misadventures. Perhaps he's succeeded.”

Jorgen Hansen saw implications of U.S. influence on Canadian politics: “The USA is in turmoil with the Homeland Security, and related new laws that allow police to keep you locked up for a long time without any rights. We don't need this to spread to Canada.

“In Iraq, there are about four Muslim religions and several Christian types, and none of them can stand to see each other. One religious group takes control of the government and heaven help the others.

“Does Mr. Harper need to send our troops to the Middle East to stir up their problems and pick sides? Did 12 years in Afghanistan (\$30 billion wasted) change anything for the better? I am not sure our meddling in their politics makes for good neighbors. Most of the problems in the Middle East stems from lack of education which leads to radical Muslim leaders being able to take control.”

Cliff Boldt found an appropriate quotation, by Ben Franklin: “They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.”

Audrey Frisken wrote, “I, too, fear that there may well be an unfortunate knee-jerk reaction, resulting in a loss of freedoms. Thank goodness for individuals such as yourself and Elizabeth May, who are able to see the bigger picture.”

Laurna Tallman added, “Thank you for mentioning Elizabeth May's measured response to the violence on Parliament Hill from her locked office. She would have my vote in an instant if it did not mean extending Harper's reign. Compare her to Stephen Harper hiding in a closet while his caucus sharpened flag poles into lances. It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry or scream.”

Jon Shaffer wanted to follow-up further about the previous week's column, on reactions to the Ebola virus : "This essay hits close to home, as my wife and I just returned from a trip to South Africa. We have returned to a nation with paranoia about Ebola. My sister-in-law had been asked to make a presentation to the Sunday School and parents were afraid of their children being in contact with her because she has been to Africa.

"All of us were thousands of miles from the Ebola outbreak. Tonight I learned that some people are nervous about having contact with us in church for the same reason. Such is life. If I knew who is nervous, I could make a point of giving them a big hug, but I will not."

JT: When I checked on a globe, I found that Liberia is about as far from South Africa as Alaska is from Florida. I can't imagine a Florida resident caring much if people in Alaska had a flu epidemic. Such is the ignorance about the sheer size of Africa.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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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.

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 "SeemslieGod" page, www.seemsliegod.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.
