

COZY ON THE RAZOR'S EDGE

We can no longer afford fashionable cynicism in the face of the hopelessness of people's lives in so many places around the world, including in our own Canada.

Acceptance of others seems possible if three factors are present: The first one is a reasonable level of economic prosperity available to all. History demonstrates that in countries with a large stable middle class, diverse ethnic and ideological groups are likely to co-exist peacefully. However, if the economic conditions deteriorate, so does the level of the acceptance of differences. The second factor is respect for the rights of the individual, carved into the Law of the land. The laws are the embodiment of the social contract that binds us one to the other. A high level of citizen regard for the socio-political institutions instrumental in developing laws will strengthen the social fabric. If the citizenry has no trust in the body politic, the collective level of tolerance lessens. The third element is separation of church and state, so the truth of one may not become the yoke of others. To bring about such a caring society, can citizens do more than cast a vote at election time? Of what real use is social action?

Often imposed upon the many, political utopias have been the dream of a few. However, the Soviet Union did not evolve a better human. The Chinese Cultural Revolution failed to bring prosperity to the people. And the jury is still out on the "free" market economy. Political parties or interest groups serve to consolidate existing systems of governance. Mass demonstrations are seldom effective. The media massages news into entertainment. Well-meaning charities reinforce the very ill they try to alleviate. New technologies have so far served the interests of the haves much more than those of the have-nots. Current political and economic challenges are global, out of the reach of individual influence. Bringing the world's disenfranchised into the fold of better-fed nations to weaken violence as a recourse, is low on our governments' agendas.

Our societies are a reflection of how we view ourselves, our country and the world. The social myths that passed from one generation to the next as carriers of desirable social ethics are no longer adequate. The only myth

with any potential for bringing us one step back from the abyss ahead is a planetary one, a synergy of independent nodes united in embraced common behavioural and legal standards. How can it meet people's needs? We must develop new ways of interacting with others. Each of us must take responsibility for being who we are, while not oppressing others.

In less than ten years, the North American society turned itself around to become a predominantly non-smoking society. A habit portrayed for so long as sexy and romantic is now viewed as unhealthy and objectionable. Social pressure on smokers became unbearable for many. They chose change over rejection and fear of an ugly death. We can convince ourselves of the social unacceptability of poverty, ignorance, exclusion of the marginal and marginalized, individual and group violence.

I have painfully come to the following conclusion: external modes of action have mostly failed throughout human history. If we can't change ourselves, we can't expect the world to change. We must therefore become our own project. Fundamental changes come from within. Only by transforming the dangerous legacies of times gone by that lurk in our own shadows, can we hope to influence others to do the same.

Yet we live in times of upside down reality, when cartoons are cause for riots but genocidal menaces are taken in stride; when the extreme left has joined the extreme right in an unholy union, claiming they have found the culprits responsible for global warming, global pollution, hunger and disease, the collapse of world economies: yes, you guessed it, the Jews, be they dispersed in the wider world or gathered in Israel. In all facets of our lives, the bully is always with us. At every turn, without fail lest we be lost, we must push back against it. Even if gripped by the futility of action, the bully must be fought. Bullies are cowards. Give in to them and they advance. Resist and we gain one more day.

Those of us who have made our homes in the new world must not take along our old hatreds. We must become a force for the good. We must be part of the solution, not an arm of the problem. I want to start a movement, a movement in support of our common humanity. I want to see the faces of Muslims as outraged as I am at suicide bombers, beheaders and defilers of the dead. I want to go to any mosque, any church, any synagogue, any court

and ask for a signed commitment to one sentiment: "In the twenty-first century, terror violence is not an acceptable way to settle any dispute."

Like many of us, I like some and love very few. I dislike many and detest a few. I have reservations about some ethnic and ideological groups. I am haunted by memories of a war that succeeded the one that was to end all wars. Yet I know that such feelings lead to dead ends, to roads well travelled by history and documented in so many cemeteries. Where can we turn, where is our new road?

Perhaps humanity has always existed on the brink of disaster. I hear whispers of ancient voices murmuring: "Too many people, too few woolly mammoths around, and the chief is not doing anything about it..."

A wave of great evil is loose upon the world. What can each of us do about it? We can suspend cynicism and become resolutely optimistic in the face of devastation, violence, ugliness, despair and complex problems. And if all fails, I can still learn karate...

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