When the Good Guys Don’t Win

Pop! Pow! Gunfire crackled from the house next door. My neighbor John, high on marijuana, was shooting at his friend who crouched in fear behind a corner of the building. No one was injured and the arrival of police calmed John down.

That’s strange, I thought to myself another sunny morning as I left my home to jog. *Why would my car windshield be covered with ice crystals? It’s July.* As I drew nearer, I realized the “ice crystals” were broken glass, courtesy of some Fourth-of-July vandals.

Fear, confusion, anger, helplessness. Life can seem out of control when we are violated. Each nighttime creak could be an intruder. Were the walls thick enough to stop bullets should John’s cannabis exploits resume? What did I do to deserve this?

An alleged rape victim feels cheated when the DA refuses to prosecute the accused perpetrators. A medical exam showed rape trauma; two reliable eyewitnesses saw her pushed partially clad down some stairs and heard her screams for help. “It seems to me that I am the one on trial,” she complains in frustration. A rape is the only crime where the victims are treated with disrespect.”{1} An African-American mother says she’s paranoid that her well-behaved teenage son will be falsely suspected of being a criminal because of his race. Fear and fury drive her to nag him before he goes to the store: “Keep your hands out of your pockets. Don’t reach under your shirt. If there’s an itch, just live with it. In winter, keep your jacket open.”{2}

Terrorist Massacre

Members of a multi-racial Cape Town, South Africa, church were enjoying a beautiful duet when the front door burst open.

Terrorists sprayed the congregation with automatic rifle fire and tossed in two grenades, leaving 11 dead and 53 wounded. Lorenzo Smith pulled his wife, Myrtle, to the floor and lay on top of her to protect her. The second grenade exploded 6 feet away, sending a piece of shrapnel into her left side near her heart but missing him entirely. She died en route to a hospital.

"You're no longer working here," the personnel chief informs the career employee. The stellar worker had ruffled feathers by challenging ethical and financial misconduct of several company officers. Instead of applauding his integrity, the company showed him the door. Whistle blowing can be lonely.

Palestinians find their homes bulldozed. Israeli shoppers are massacred by suicide bombers in a crowded marketplace. Rwandans are maimed and slaughtered in tribal violence.

Bad things sometimes (often?) happen to good or seemingly innocent people. What should be done? How can the victims cope?

First, recognize where the problem stems from.

Why Suffering?

"Why is there suffering in the world?" ranked first in a national survey to determine the top 40 questions of life.{3} Many human efforts to alleviate suffering and achieve happiness have borne some fruit, but each also contains examples of failure. Consider a few:

Psychology. Many psychologists offer hope based purely on human resources. Still, sometimes even the best and brightest give up in despair. Legendary psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, who used his own survival of Nazi horrors to help heal others, eventually took his own life. Upon learning of his suicide, one colleague remarked, "It was as if the [psychological] profession itself had failed."{4}

Marxism. Pointing at class antagonism as the culprit, Marxism aimed to create a "New Man" in a harmonious society devoid of such antagonism. Instead, it created an elite "Rich Man" as party chiefs lived in luxury while the masses remained disillusioned. "Workers of the World, We Apologize," read the Moscow demonstrators' banner as the Soviet Union crumbled.{5} Today's Cubans eat lots of bananas and ride bicycles. North Koreans starve.

Capitalism. Is this political theory the answer? The market economy has raised standards of living, yet even nations like the United States boil with crime, racism, sexual discrimination and homelessness

Could we be missing the root of the problem? Could much human suffering be rooted in something deeper than flawed political systems or philosophical constructs? Could there be something wrong with the human heart?

Heart Disease?

History is replete with confirming evidence A United Nations conference on the role of the university in the search for world peace ended early because "the delegates began quarreling too vociferously."{6} Various attempts to establish utopian societies with uniform equality have crumbled due to internal strife.

"Everybody thinks of changing humanity," noted Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, "but nobody thinks of changing himself."{7} Simon Bolivar, the great liberator of Latin America, admitted in his later years, "I was all my life a slave to my passions. The essence of liberty is precisely that one can liberate oneself "{8}

"We have met the enemy," announced the comic strip character Pogo, "and he is us."

If, then, we live in a flawed world with people determined to

live out their own inner sicknesses, what can we do? How do we cope with the resulting, unjust suffering? “Seek justice” was a North Carolina woman’s strategy as she recently sued her husband’s lover for destroying her marriage, winning a million-dollar settlement. Sometimes the right cause prevails in court. Often, though, both sides end up bitter and poorer.

Are there any other solutions? Anything that works?

- ***Choose to look out for others.*** *In a commencement address at Duke University, ABC News commentator Ted Koppel said: “Maimonedes and Jesus summed it up in almost identical words: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.‘”{9} After Hurricane Andrew devastated parts of Miami, I returned to my hometown to help rebuild. I was amazed to discover that thousands of volunteers from around North America had come at their own expense to help the poor reconstruct their homes. Most were with Christian mission organizations, motivated as Good Samaritans by their love of God and love of people.*
- ***Lessen the pain by sharing it.*** *During a particularly trying episode in my own life, my best friend deserted me, some trusted co-workers betrayed me, and my health and finances suffered. Close friends and my faith helped me emerge wounded but growing. Building friendships takes time and effort. Initiating communication, offering to help another move or to carpool, listening to hurts, offering a compliment or word of encouragement . . . all can help build strong bonds. Giving often motivates others to respond in kind. “Bearing one another’s burdens” can make them lighter for both of you when you each need it.*
- ***Eliminate bitter roots.*** *Asking and/or granting forgiveness can help heal hearts. As Alabama governor, George Wallace preached “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!” Two decades in a*

> *wheelchair gave him time to reflect on life, suffering and God. He eventually confessed his wrongs and asked forgiveness of his former racial and political enemies. South African Lorenzo Smith, who lost his wife to the grenade in church, turned and forgave his wife's murderers. "Bearing a grudge can corrode your soul," affirmed one wounded warrior. "If you nurse bitterness and refuse to forgive, it can keep you in bondage to your enemies. If you let it go and forgiveregardless of your opponent's responseyou're free."*

When the good guys don't win, you can curse the darkness. Or you can recognize the root problem and light a candle. May yours shine brightly.

Notes

1. "Was it rape? Woman in G.T. case speaks out," *The Sun* (San Bernardino, CA), August 28,1997, A12.

2. Deborah Mathis, "Stereotypes can leave Black mothers paranoid for sons," *The Sun* (San Bernardino, CA), August 27,1997, A9.

3. What are the Top 40 Questions of Life?" advertisement by Thomas Nelson Publishers in *USA Today*, ca. late 1980s or 1990.

4. Celeste Fremon, "Love and Death," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, January 27, 1991, pp. 17-21,35.

5. *Newsweek.* November 20,1989, p. 11.

6. *Miami News.* September 4, 1969.

7. *World Christian/U* February 1989, p. U8.

8. Selden Rodman, "The Conqueror's Descent," *National Review*. October 15, 1990, p. 88.

9. Ted Koppel, “The Vannatizing of America,” *DUKE Magazine*, July/August 1987, p 36 (with biblical references from Matthew 19:19 and Luke 6:31).

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