Global Sadness, Global Hope: What Can We Do?

by Sarah Voss

During these days of "War on Terrorism," we are called upon to look inward with a global eye. Many of us adhere, internally and well-meaningly, to variations of pacifism. "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." It's a time-honored message, but it's wanting. It's wanting a cosmic perspective.

A place to begin searching for this broader view is Jonathon Glover's 1999 book, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. I read this book, and what I write here has been immensely impacted by it. It's a hard book to read. And hard not to read. Loren Eiseley, the scientific naturalist, once observed that "Man beats man." Nowhere is Eiseley's adage better documented than in Glover's 400+ pages describing the cruelties which humans have inflicted upon other humans during the last hundred years. Glover, an English ethicist, points out that, when averaged over the century, the number of people killed by war during the 1900s was more than one hundred per hour. Much of this killing was done in shocking ways.

We can easily deplore this "festival of cruelty," as Glover calls it, and all the more so because such a loss of moral integrity kindles our current fears of Islamic terrorism. Glover paints variations of this festival again and again throughout his book as he cites fact after fact, culture after culture, individual after individual who has participated in such heinous acts during the 20th century. Consider the Communists under Stalin, the Nazis under Hitler, Chairman Mao's 'Cultural Revolution,' Korean, Rawandan, Somalian, and Bosnian atrocities, to name only some. Nor are we Americans innocent of this festival of cruelty. Remember, for example, the March 16, 1968, slaughter at My Lai.

Why? Why do people do such heinous things to each other? The psychology of war offers some insight. People do cruel things to other people when their moral resources are eroded; when they lose respect for the dignity of others; when they are caught in a trap of political manipulation, or of a skewed belief system, or of fear; when their sympathy for others is selectively weakened through training or coercion; when the perceived need for tribal vendetta is historically ingrained and too powerful to allow for the reconstruction of the "other side's" story; when they simply "explode" in release of humiliation or resentment, or through the heightened ecstasy of pleasure. And, yes, cruelty can be pleasurable. Among the greatest global sadness we can experience is the truth that within our human nature lies the capacity to take pleasure in cruelty.

Getting to such a place of distorted power and excitement, however, is not something that just "happens." Rather, it "happens" by degrees. There is a slippery slide into committing acts of terror. You do one thing that seems innocent enough, rational even, and that something justifies something more, and then again something more. The invention of the atomic bomb was justified first as a deterrent against Hitler but it slid into an actual use against the Japanese people. Chairman Mao's belief in the energy and creativity of the young turned into teenaged Red Guards who humiliated and brutalized countless individuals in the name of cultural change. In wartime, a little lie about what you say about others slides into casualness about what you say to yourself;

the end-result is self-deception and an abandonment of truth that leads to a corresponding erosion of moral integrity.

While this slippery slide has always been true of humankind, it took on new dimensions in the twentieth century. Modern technology not only makes any war a threat to the survival of all life-forms, but it also puts us humans in something of an emotional double-bind. On the one hand, it allows us unprecedented emotional and physical distance from wartime decisions. Fighting happens on TV, as though it were a simple fiction, and our moral responses to it are shaped by the unrealness of it all. On the other hand, never before have we had the immediacy of awareness of wartime killing and cruelty which television permits us. We have an unparalleled choice here. With our new, fuller awareness of events taking place as they happen, we can either accept the atrocities we watch on our livingroom screens fatalistically, or we can vow to eliminate them. Global hope, of course, lies in the latter course of action.

The why-question has a sequel: Can we change? Can we humans, as a group, reclaim a moral humanity that is strong enough to resist letting more such atrocities happen?

Can we change? Possibly. What I believe – what I rest my ministry on – is that we must live our lives on the hope in that "possibly." We must find that hope, however slight it is, and nurture it into maturity, always bearing in mind it's delicate vulnerability to the darker side of humankind. We must cultivate that hope so that it grows strong enough to snuff out our festivals of cruelty before they get launched. We must do this because, as the answer to the "why?" question shows, once launched, such festivals do not stop until they are spent out.

How can we best ensure eradication of (rather than collaboration with) atrocities? After reading Glover's book, I have a few suggestions.

1. Read Glover's book. Then meet together and discuss it. Reading this book – or something similar – will go a long way toward stopping the kinds of self-deception which we are naturally inclined to adopt during this current period of crisis. As Glover put it, "The first step is not to look away."

2. Avoid name calling and the cold joke at the expense of others. Wartime despises softness of character. Leaders groom their people to be hard. During Stalin's terror regime, party members were told to "act without whimpering, without any rotten liberalism. Throw your bourgeois humanitarianism out of the window and act like Bolsheviks worthy of Comrade Stalin... Don't be afraid of taking extreme measures. The Party stands four-square behind you. Comrade Stalin expects it of you. It's a life and death struggle; better to do too much than not enough." (Humanity, 259) Where does such callousness start? Often it starts by mocking or humiliating others. Argentine torturers forced their victims to run naked shouting such things as "My mother's a whore." South Africaners, under apartheid, had "humorous" names for their forms of torture – "telephoning," "playing the radio," the submarine," "the aeroplane ride." Using a white noise generator, the British devised a torture chamber which they reportedly called the "House of Fun." Cattle cars were filled, not with political prisoners, but with "perishable goods." Such displays of lack of respect for the dignity of victims have civilian counterparts in dehumanizing

expressions such as “yellow-bellies,” “monkey meat,” “beasts in human form,” “bearded animals on two legs,” demons, devils, fiends, monsters, gooks, heinies, ragheads, camel jockies. The list goes on. Resist the urge to invoke tribal loyalty and ethnic racism through such name-calling. And challenge those who do, including our news reporters.

3. Fight passivity in your personal response. Most people experience the outbreak of war passively, like an outbreak of a thunderstorm. Only a relatively few individuals in the higher ranks of government normally participate in critical war discussions. Most of us turn on our TV sets and simply watch. After all, what do we peons know about such things? We feel disempowered. Sometimes we are disempowered. And if we aren’t disempowered at the outbreak, we certainly will be if we remain only passively involved. The mildest but most widespread betrayal one human can deliver to another is silence to the injustice being done.

4. Collaborate to resist fear rather than to give in to it. Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells the story of an audience afraid to stop applauding in support of Stalin. At the end of a party conference in Moscow, a tribute to Stalin was called for. The audience stood and broke into wild, if somewhat forced applause for their famous leader. This went on for three, four, and then five minutes. The clapping grew painful, but people were scared to quit. Nobody wanted to be the first to sit down. Finally, after eleven minutes of unremittingly enthusiastic applause, the director of a paper factory who was up on the central stage stopped clapping and sat down, and then everyone else sat down, too. Two days later, the factory director was arrested on some pretext and imprisoned for ten years. These people let fear rule them, and in so doing turned one individual into their scapegoat. What is the alternative? I heard of one only a few weeks ago when, in considering possible repeats of the September 11th hijackings, a pilot recommended a joint response. If someone tries to take over an airplane, the pilot suggested, immediately throw everything you can at him and then collectively overpower and subdue him. In other words, collaborate to resist fear rather than giving in to it.

5. Study and incorporate the lessons of moral math. What I mean by moral math is the kinds of behavior strategies that mathematical models indicate are most effective in various situations. For example, there’s a math game called the prisoner’s dilemma which shows that narrow selfishness can be self-defeating. Two prisoners are arrested for the same crime and, separately, are each told that they will get one year in jail if neither confesses, five years if both confess, twelve years if he confesses and you don’t, and freedom if you confess and he doesn’t. If the two prisoners have trust in each other and also are willing to consider what’s best for them both, then, paradoxically, altruism serves each of them better than selfishness. A second illustration of moral math can be found in the dollar auction. A dollar bill goes to the highest bidder, even if the bid is far less than a dollar. The catch: if you are second highest bidder, you pay what you bid and get nothing for it. Following the logic of this game will quickly show that it’s self-defeating for both bidders to try to escape with the smaller loss. Such mathematical games – and there are more and more of them coming to light these days – can be applied to events of greater consequence. When World War II soldiers, dug into trenches, chose to set aside their weapons in their mutual interest to escape a flood, they were acting out a simple version of the prisoner’s dilemma. Similarly, an arms race is an illustration of the dollar auction, where the only way to cooperate is to quit the game. The gift of game theory is that we can learn from it how to load the dice, so to

speak, in order to make cooperation easy and desirable.

6. Exercise your moral imagination. Moral imagination is the ability to envision what the ethical results of some action might be. In 1914, it was lacking among the crowds in the capitals of Europe who cheered when war was declared, completely failing to imagine the utterly unprecedented slaughter that was to follow. It was present in 1962 when Khrushchev's personal memories of war rolling through his country's cities and villages, and Kennedy's traumatic briefing on the full effects of nuclear war allowed both men to exercise restraint during the Cuban crisis. When the moral imagination is stimulated, it makes vivid the tragic effects of distancing and of dehumanizing people and this vision can help to resist engaging in such actions. Now more than ever, we need to exercise such vision abundantly.

7. Support a global governing force to help ensure justice. More specifically, give moral authority to a world order which is broadly democratic. The United Nations has partial moral authority. It is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. It is too easily only a camouflage for the controlling power of one nation – our nation. In order for such a global authority to be effective, it must answer fairly to all those who give it life. And it must be motivated by a sober understanding of our common future on this planet.

8. Recite instances where kindness and moral courage have prevailed. In order to avert widespread tragedy during the Cuban crisis, Khrushchev made what many perceived as a humiliating backdown, and Kennedy deceived the public about having made a deal. After the crisis, Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy that "we both had to step over our pride, both you and me, in order to reach this agreement." The willingness of these two leaders to step over their pride, regardless of public reaction, is a main cause of the peace which followed. At My Lai, a 25 year-old helicopter pilot named Hugh Thompson spotted and subsequently rescued civilians, ordering his crew to machine-gun American troops if they fired on them. He displayed sympathy when most could not. During World War II, Catholic nuns all over Europe sheltered Jewish children in their convents, individual Protestant and Catholic religious leaders spoke out publically against the practice of euthanasia even at the cost of later imprisonment, the Dutch people hid some 25,000 Jews in their homes, and thousands of resistance workers world-wide supported the Jewish people with hiding places, paper, food coupons, and money. None of this, as we know, was enough to prevent the atrocities from happening. But, as Glover points out, "There is terrible danger in taking the first small step in collaboration [with cruelty] and there is great value in early protest or refusal.... The self-respect maintained by... early [supportive] responses must have helped the many... people who kept up resistance and gave shelter." (Humanity, 385) Under the hostile climate of war, even the smallest gestures of support can require immense courage. Yet people keep making them. We need to lift up such acts, large and small, and applaud them, for they are the makings of salvation.

9. And finally, I suggest that we actively seek out and develop our internal spiritual resources. Whatever your faith, kindle it. If it flounders, as it likely will, restore it through reading, social action, discussion, prayer – whatever it takes to keep that inner light of hope lit. If your faith is rooted in a belief in God, turn to God and ask for guidance, strength, courage, wisdom. If your faith is based in a largely secular trust in humanity, use this trust to develop a more authoritative

moral law. Or, better yet, do both. How we do this can vary from spending extra time shoring up the moral integrity of our children (who, after all, are the holders of our moral future), to finding a prayer pal to help support us as we walk through an airport and get on an airplane. In general, we must familiarize ourselves with the ways in which ethical human responses are overwhelmed, weakened, narrowed, or eliminated. Then we must guard against letting this happen.

True peace begins internally, but it is easily corrupted by lack of a larger perspective. Mark Twain once said something to the effect that he had lived through many, many horrible things as he walked through his life, about 10% of which had actually occurred. Our human imagination is possibly our greatest asset – and also our biggest stumbling block. May we all learn to use it well.

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This essay is extracted from a sermon delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Sioux City on October 21, 2001 by the Rev. Dr. Sarah Voss.