

MAKE PEACE NOT WAR

Peace has its victories, as many as war.

John Milton

As a 12-year-old schoolboy I witnessed a small aeroplane tracing a wavy fluffy question mark – probably more by coincidence than by design – with its tail smoke in the clear twilight sky; the mark hovered for a period and slowly broke apart and dissipated away like frost in the morning sun. Our astute schoolmaster grasped the opportunity to exercise our ‘little grey cells’ and made our class debate the perceived question marks in our lives and over our country – in those days not more weighty than the choice of subjects for Higher Certificates. At that time the country (Malta) was teetering between independence and complete political integration – both political issues were of little personal interest to me. The world was still pondering the implications of the Treaty of Rome, which set up the rudimentary European Economic Community and EAEC [Euratom] in the aftermath of the Suez Canal crisis.

If the same theme were to be mooted today, the numb, unflustered responses our teacher received would be replaced by a number of incisive questions and imponderable answers about many themes that face our profession, our country and the world. Perhaps, as a Capricorn, it is of little surprise that a certain whiff of pessimism and futility rises to the surface and leavens my thoughts in surveying what lies around us, but some would argue that that is realism rather than doom-mongering. In this vein, to borrow the words of Seamus Heaney, ‘between my finger and my thumb, the squat pen rests. I’ll dig with it’.¹

Less than two months ago the repetitive chords of merry carols blurred through the shops, arcades and malls, and mingled with the tingling of cash registers and the buoyant chatter and boisterous laughter of Christmas shoppers; then, and even more so now, the matter of global terrorism and the potential involvement of this country (Scotland), must surely loom wearily in all our minds, as it now does in many other places worldwide. The same questions are posed again and again: how safe is it to fly overseas? How safe is it to go on business and on holiday, more so to ‘exotic’ locations? How wise is it to congregate in spaces and sites where crowds of people are present? In a world where more than half of its citizens, of all walks of life and socio-economic status, regularly and repeatedly greet each other with the word Peace – not only in their

churches and places of religious worship, but also in their homes, offices and marketplaces – where has the collective equanimity and peace of the world’s citizens disappeared to? Why is the prospect of war and hostility so much to the fore in countries across the world? We elect our politicians and they should be speaking for us, but do they? We are all told to be vigilant and to look over our shoulders; mistrust has replaced a feeling of security and bonhomie once enjoyed more commonly. A truly apocalyptic undercurrent pervades the existence of young and old alike; a sense of threat sours our individual, and collective, lives.

The suicide bomber with explosives weighing down cars or strapped to his or her body may be stalking the same streets and entering in the same shops as we are. This ultimate self-immolation reverberates of the horrible fate of Buddhist monks many years ago who doused themselves with fire accelerants, and stoically and most painfully died in an attempt at publicising their cause. But in this instance, many other totally innocent lives are being sacrificed in the same act of defiance. Given that just as the monks, these persons are usually intelligent, thinking and active members of their society, often with doting families, and almost invariably not psychotics or simpletons – it must certainly be the strongest of convictions to lay down one’s life for a cause, whatever that may be, and proceed with the intent thus formed with a reward in the hereafter. Faith and hope cannot be expressed more poignantly. In contrast to the Buddhist monks, the modern suicide bomber, whether in Sri Lanka, Israel or Bali, is also intent on the destruction of property, disapproval of alien cultural proclivities, indiscriminate maiming and wholesale murdering; the expression of the highest virtues is surely being tainted with horrible thoughts of base revenge and ill-feeling, and the palm of martyrdom is intrinsically blighted and corrupted.

In the same sphere, the potential threat from bioterrorism features among the other more indiscriminate or retaliatory and offensive threats to humankind. This has been brought more poignantly home to us recently through the instant medium of television with the ‘leaked’ plans of our government in terms of forward planning for such events.^{2, 3} Mobile decontamination centres strategically located, specifically trained medical and paramedic personnel, equipped ambulances, vaccination for smallpox of the key medical administrators and so on are headline news items. Biological weapons of mass destruction are unfortunately characterised by invisibility, high potency, substantial accessibility and relatively easy

delivery and dissemination.⁴ They can be targeted very easily and destroy the non-combatant civilian indiscriminately.

Perhaps to the fore in this list of biological agents is smallpox, declared eradicated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 1980.⁵ There are two approved repositories for the virus, at the Centre for Disease Control Prevention (CDCP) in Atlanta, and at NPO (Scientific Centre) in the Novosibirsk region of Russia. The number of clandestine stockpiles is unknown. The further problem with this disease and vaccination for it concerns the number of immune-compromised persons that there are in the community at present due to medication and specific viral infections. The infective aerosol dose is calculated at ten to 100 organisms, with an incubation period of one to two weeks and no known efficacious antiviral agents with the exception of *cidofovir*. This is indeed a sobering thought and the ethical values of those microbiologists and scientists that are putting their knowledge and expertise to such military use must surely be questioned.

It is said that an intricately related manifestation of this feeling of hopelessness is the escalating suicide rate worldwide in the developing countries, and more so in the so-called developed countries. It was (what the tabloids would call) a 'shock to the system' when the figures for suicides in Scotland were collated: the number of self-inflicted deaths in 2001 was 887, more than the sum total of deaths on our roads. This amounts to a 22% rise in the suicide rate since 1982. The general figure for Scotland is 17.36 per 100,000 population, and this is twice as elevated as it is in the rest of Great Britain, where 4,922 people killed themselves last year. This should perhaps take into account the fact that in Scotland there is no official *ad hominem* declaration of suicide as happens in HM Coroners' verdicts elsewhere in the UK, and for suicide to be decided on there has to be ample proof of intentional self-destruction; as it is often impossible to prove to this high standard of legal proof, the figures may perhaps be slightly lower than in fact they are. Suicide is now the most significant cause of death in young adult males. Women are catching up fast, and quite alarmingly the incidence of suicide by hanging among women has risen inexorably over the last five years almost to male levels. The suicide rate among the over-60s, in both men and women, has also risen in Britain and worldwide.

Ministries of Health, the WHO and many other institutions have been alerting medical and social welfare professions to this major increase, and yet little of what has been done to date appears to have been successful in halting this trend. There certainly cannot be any more denouncing statement of hopelessness and despair than an attempt on one's life, particularly in the young, and perhaps even more so in the elderly. In the latter context

it is more often the case that physical illness and disability may be concurrent. Many of these patients are not suffering from severe psychotic illnesses, but they are suffering from depression brought about by life's acute and chronic adverse events. Therefore, at least in principle, something could be done for them that would require their depressive state to be diagnosed, treated effectively and followed-up regularly – a call if ever there was one for joined-up, integrated primary care, community care and secondary psychiatric services, on the medical, nursing and social welfare fronts (with due acknowledgement of the most valuable contribution provided by the voluntary organisations). Is there perhaps not scope for a review of each completed suicide, in a fully confidential but searching, non-blame-seeking manner, to identify remedial flaws in the system that should not be repeated? The numbers are surely manageable and the benefits will be reaped in a population cohort that should be the backbone of the next generation.

Another depressing visitation also scything its way through the world inexorably is the AIDS epidemic – a global health phenomenon that we have been specifically asked to remember recently. In spite of many innovative and imaginative techniques employed by different countries and different cultures to put the public health message about safe sexual practices across to all concerned – and in spite of increasing literacy and educational levels – HIV still carves its way through the adolescent and young adult populations of all five continents.⁶ The severest mutilation of its youth is still being borne by sub-Saharan Africa, where a major impact has been acknowledged on the economical viability of these countries given that the potential working population is being lost forever. At least there has been a more liberal and financial accessibility to the effective retroviral medication, but the incidence of HIV still keeps on soaring. More needs to be done; fresh strategies have to be thought of. The promise of effective inoculation still has not materialised.

Amid all this chaos and disease, another calendar year has drawn to a close and, as one attempts a tally of 2002, a major feeling of uncertainty and of gloom pervades the future. As it has always been from time immemorial, whatever is taking place in the big wide world, families will come together to reminisce, to celebrate life, to renew acquaintances. They remember those who have passed on, marvel yet again at the spurts of growth and intelligence in the younger members of the family, break bread and drink together, and perhaps allow themselves glimpses of what is yet to come by visits to churches, mosques, chapels and temples, also in an exultatory mood about the turn of the year. Would that these sentiments spread out into the global village and tame the human zoo, demolishing boundaries and restrictions imposed by ethnicity, religion and culture, and we could all live together in one peaceful, harmonious, healthy and tolerant

community.

Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he heard o; many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions. Even so he could not save his companions, hard though he strove to; they were destroyed by their own wild recklessness.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Book I: Lines 1–7.

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