

THEY'RE KILLING THE GOOD SAMARITANS!

*Moira Fordyce, * 239 Harding Avenue, Los Gatos, California 95032, USA*

A deadly plague has taken lives in Zaire. One infected person boarding an airliner could carry it anywhere in the world. This modern specter of the Ring o' Roses Black Death—the sneeze followed by falling down never to rise up again—is rightly regarded with dread. How strange that an even more deadly plague can be ignored, right here in twentieth century America, a plague which is growing and spreading, responsible for close to 40,000 deaths in 1993, and increasing each year.

We physicians like to think of ourselves as responsible citizens and most of us are, but, responsible to whom? Surely not just to ourselves, family, friends and patients? If this is all, it falls short of the ideal. Because of our special position of trust and influence we are responsible to the whole of society. Responsible for what? To care for ourselves, our family and our patients as well as we can? Yes, but if we stop at that, it is not enough. We must make our voices heard when there is danger. We have a duty to try to change our society for the better, whether this is advising against smoking, washing hands after visiting the toilet, or speaking out loud, clear and often when all we hold dear is threatened.

Let me tell you a true story about Sue, a pleasant young woman who was on a crowded bus in the middle of the afternoon in San Francisco. She had finished work early and was looking forward to relaxing at home. Five large young people swaggered onto the bus, cursing, laughing and spitting. They looked around and at random chose a victim, Sue. One of the gang stormed up to her and to shouts, cheers, and obscenities shrieked out by the other four, proceeded to jostle her, hit her, then knock her to the floor of the bus. This all happened much faster than I can tell it and Sue was stunned, not just by the blows, but by the horror of her situation—we cannot believe it is happening to us, when it does, can we? When she screamed and pleaded for help, no-one on the bus, including the driver, did anything. She fought back as hard as she could, managed to break away and get off the bus. She fled to the forecourt of a garage but was hotly pursued by the gang. The one who commenced the assault continued to rain blows on her, and when she fell, grabbed her by the hair and beat her head against the cement pavement to the accompaniment of laughter and cheers from the gang. When they left she was severely injured, but alive. Although it was a busy street and the attack was in full view, throughout the beating no-one lifted a finger to help her. An anonymous witness did have the sense and decency to call an ambulance and the gang ran off when it arrived.

This sad, chilling story, is not uncommon in every city in the brave new world of this country. When I told my friends and colleagues about the incident they shook their heads sadly and matched it with tales of their own, especially those who worked in hospital emergency rooms. The fact of everyday violence is bad enough, but much worse were the implications of a discussion I had with one of my sons (a kind, idealistic, philosophical 23 year old). I was raging on in

*Clinical Professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, California.

indignation about nobody caring, nobody doing anything to help Sue and stop the savage attack. He looked calmly and a little sadly at me and said:

'Mom, think for a minute. If you or I had been on that bus what *could* we have done? The likelihood of one or more of the gang members being strapped is almost certain. Anyone who challenged them would have been blown away.'

"Strapped? Oh . . . you mean carrying a gun? But . . . but, surely someone could have called the police?"

'Mom, how many calls like this do you suppose they get in San Francisco? Have you seen the traffic there? Even if they did respond immediately (Ha! Ha!), how long do you think it would have taken them to get there to rescue Sue? So nobody did anything. Do you know what happens to 'Good Samaritans' in San Francisco who try to help assault victims? Two I knew personally are dead. How about instant death as your 'Good Citizen Award', Mom?"

I was left without a word. His acceptance of the inevitability of crime and violent death as part of life without realistic hope of retribution, made me feel tired and sad, sad for his generation. Sad for this rich, powerful, morally destitute nation, which still worships the smoking gun. When I reviewed the statistics about violence in America, my sadness became bleak despair: Every 2 hours an American child is killed with a loaded gun, every 6 hours a youth uses a gun to commit suicide, nearly every 30 minutes someone is murdered with a firearm, more teenagers die of gunshot wounds than of all natural diseases combined, for every teenage gun death there are 5 who survive with serious morbidity and 50 per cent of US homes contain firearms.

Need I continue? These horrifying facts are available to all of us. Worst of all is that this plague is preventable. Contrast the position in the USA with that in those countries which the gun is not a feature of daily life.

In 1992 handguns were used to murder: 13 in Australia, 33 in Great Britain, 36 in Sweden, 60 in Japan, 128 in Canada and 13,220 in USA.

To contain and eradicate plague certain steps must be followed: the source of infection found, the reasons for it, the mode of spread and the vectors identified and removed. The burden of responsibility to control it must be shared by all. The American plague of violence is real, and unchecked will destroy American society. Not only by killing and maiming people. Surely the death of hope and idealism matters? To accept that we dare not help because we fear being shot is to accept death of our caring for each other, the best part of our humanity. A society made up of initially fearful, then indifferent individuals is a doomed society, and deserves to be. Many of the factors contributing to violence have been identified and could be changed—stress, lack of opportunities and jobs, gang membership, alcohol and drug abuse, poor housing, breakdown of the family, easy access to firearms. Rational decisions need to be made regarding the last one, and the truth of the deadly results of this perceived 'right', the gun in every pocket and purse, recognized. As sure as death and taxes, if Americans do nothing about this, the situation will worsen. Doctors who care are already trying to fight this plague by joining organizations such as Physicians for Social Responsibility, forming groups such as Physicians for a Violence Free Society (a group of emergency room MDs in San Francisco sickened by their daily diet of violence victims), and contributing to the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence.

The National Rifle Association, one of the most powerful political forces in the country, claims it has the answers. It is running a mammoth campaign to

recruit women to its ranks and encourage them to carry concealed handguns for protection. They have even produced deadly dinkies in designer colors—one to match every outfit! They seriously propose that the solution to this horror is to arm EVERYONE! If everyone in the whole country carries a gun, to school, work, play, worship, we shall all be safer!! The arms manufacturers are rubbing their hands in glee and dreaming about their profits.

Edmund Burke's words in 1795 are like a bell tolling for all of us now, 200 years later:

'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men TO DO NOTHING.'

Unfortunately in America many citizens who would call themselves good people are blind to this deadly weapons worship. They don't seem to care that when Good Samaritans die violently, a populace that fears instant death does not replace them. My relatives and friends in Britain shake their heads sadly and tell me about the increase in crime there. I know this is happening, but thank goodness the gun does not rule in Britain the way it does here. I hope British cool headedness and clear common sense will prevent daily life being invaded by this deadly plague of violence. I hope British physicians from their position of trust and respect will work against the American nightmare ever becoming a reality in Britain.

A shorter version of this article was published in: *The Santa Clara Valley Medical Association Journal* in December 1994, and *The Los Gatos Weekly News* in February 1995.

Mission Woman

'A Mission woman was beaten ...

On a crowded bus, 3.30 in the afternoon
rumbling 19th near the Conservatory.

Chosen for the words 'Excuse me'
by five teens on a San Francisco MUNI bus ...
the assault came like tornado hail.

I want to know where the others' eyes were.

The last two City Good Sams, dead.
in the Sunset district, an apparent racial attack.

She fought her way off the bus
when it did its routine, followed.

'F*** you white bitch!!'

Questions remain as to why the driver ...

One shoved her down onto stained
gas-station cement, thrashed her head
on the pump island.

failed to push the police alert button.'

This pain lasts past fists and boots.

I want to know where the others' eyes were.

I know her name.

Graeme Fordyce

TALKING AND WRITING: HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE?*

Ronald Mavor,† 19 Falkland Street, Glasgow G12 9PY

Last year having been the centenary of his death, and this being his city, it seems appropriate that I should take my text from Robert Louis Stevenson; from his *Virginibus Puerisque*, written in about 1879 and subtitled *The Truth of Intercourse*.

The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish ... the business of life is mainly carried on by means of this difficult art of literature. Anybody, it is supposed, can say what he means; and in spite of their notorious experience to the contrary, people so continue to suppose.
R.L.S.

And then he rather contradicts himself:

Life, though largely, is not entirely carried on by literature. We are subject to physical passions and contortions; the voice breaks and changes, and speaks by unconscious and winning inflections ...

To explain in words takes time and a just and patient hearing ... but the look or the gesture explains things in a breath ...

Not long ago I wrote a letter to a friend which came near involving us in a quarrel; but we met, and in personal talk I repeated the worst of what I had written, and added worse to that; and with the commentary of the body it seemed not unfriendly either to hear or say.

When I began to write and then to administer and teach, I fell on a remarkable essay on *Utterance and Text* by a Canadian academic, David R. Olson.¹ It has influenced much that I have done, and thought about since. A number of unattributed references to Chomsky, Paiget and Popper in what follows are shamelessly lifted from Olson's paper. I am not an expert on linguistics, education or philosophy and I will not plunge into these deep waters beyond the point at which I think I can swim.

In beginning to adumbrate the difference between utterance and text, Olson starts with Martin Luther's passionate statement, at the beginning of the 16th century, that the Bible was *Sui ipsius interpres*. The written word was its own interpreter. It **meant** what it **said**. And let us throw a tiny spanner in the works by observing that the good bishop Usher was able to deduce from the **truth** of the written Bible that the world, as calculated from Old Testament genealogies, must have been created in 4,001 BC.

Why was Luther's an important statement? We had had for almost 2,000 years the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. These, however, because plays have to be 'taken off the page' by actors, were, in Olson's terms **utterances** transcribed into **text**. They were not written as **Text**.

Such writings, as there had been long before 400 BC and thereafter, were essentially guides to memory. Aristotle's *Poetics* were simple rough lecture notes. Writings began as ideograms, then became almost words—but lacking vowels—

*Based upon a talk given at a meeting of the Senior Fellow's Club in the College on 23rd March 1995.

†Physician and Playwright.