

FAITH FROM AN ODD CORNER (Have you ever heard an atheist preach?)

By Joe Carvalko

Recently I learned that the billions of double twisted sugar strands of DNA I call me come by way of people who hail from Jewish and Christian traditions. But in one essential detail, I am different from my forbearers: I do not share their beliefs. I am an atheist—, however, an atheist who has faith that logic leads to what is true and that humanity leads to compassion. I assume that those who do not share my beliefs, nonetheless share common values of reason and kindness, and yet I sense that more than a few of my brethren do not, for fear of rendering aid and comfort to society's "others," the enemies of the status quo, the ones not deserving of respect, prayer or generosity, because they may be different or live in different circumstances.

An email that slipped through my junk-mail today makes my point. My uninvited correspondent begins by explaining that he served five terms in some northeast state senate and still works, although he is in his seventies. He complains that he is tired of being told (apparently by some invisible lefty force) "to spread the wealth" to people who don't have *his* work ethic. He goes on to say that the government will take the money he earned, by force if necessary, and give it to people too lazy to earn it. He is tired of people with a sense of entitlement, who "blame the government, or discrimination or big-whatever for their problems." You get the picture— a tirade against the undeserving "they" who wallow in poverty, unaffordable excesses, or can't stay out of harm's way.

It's no secret that many pundits and politicians work hard to slice our differences, whether racial, religious, sexual, generational, sectional, or educational, and incidentally, not always to spew bigotry and hate, but to sell products, to beat their chests, and to wrest or retain power. If you or I were asked whether we respected life and human dignity, undoubtedly we would answer, "yes." Asked if we were driven by prejudice, undoubtedly we would answer, "no." But a majority of Americans, judging from the rhetoric, support policies that separate immigrant families, or allow the mentally ill to wander the streets or languish in prison, or neglect the chronically homeless, or oppose gun control, such as background checks that would mitigate escalating gun-related homicides. A fear-preaching few, some with an abundance of wealth, and others with a monopoly over the airwaves, influence a majority to cede the very American values that many claim fealty to, but that in their political soul turn away from the progress that has brought this country (kicking and screaming) out of the shadows of intolerance. And, the loudest voices, from the far right and Tea-party for example, sound bite by sound bite, coarsen our laws and institutions, removing any trace of humanity from immigration reform to voting rights, from women's rights to how we treat the mentally ill or the drug addicted.

Let's look at some statistics. The International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College London, reports that the U.S. has the largest documented prison population in the world, both in absolute and proportional terms: 2.03 million people behind bars, or 701 per 100,000. Communist China, which has 1.4 billion people, has the second-largest number of prisoners: a mere 1.51 million, for a rate of 117 per 100,000. In 2011, the U.S. had about 7 million adults under correctional supervision (probation, parole, jail, or prison). According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics non-Hispanic blacks accounted for about

40 percent of the total prison and a jail population in 2009 (841,000 black males and 64,800 black females) out of a total of 2.3 million incarcerated. In 2012, the U.S. ranked 5th in the world for sending convicts to their death, behind North Korea, China, Iran and Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

It is no accident what we have done: added three-strike laws that put people behind bars for the rest of their lives, without the possibility of parole, spawned a private prison industry (100 private prisons at last count; 37 states have legalized the contracting of prison labor at rates as low as \$.17 per hour by private corporations that mount their operations inside state prisons), with a panoply of lobbyists to insure profiteering from the largest prison system in the history of mankind, that have converted prisons into as warehouses for what has become criminalized illnesses, such as addiction and psychiatric disorders. In 2012, an estimated 356,000 mentally ill inmates were being held in state prison, compared to just 35,000 in state-run psychiatric hospitals. According to a 2011 study, New York's infamous Riker's Island incarcerated 12,200 inmates where one-third of the men and two-thirds of the women were diagnosed with mental illness. As a country with a rich Christian tradition and one willing to democratize the world at great expense and human loss, it all seems hypocritical for the U.S. to claim any high ground to human rights.

Who are these people getting snagged by the justice system? A fair number in the drug trade as peddlers or users, and then those who fall into a hundred different categories of robbers, the nonviolent who exercised poor judgment, the mentally ill who did not meet the legal definition of insanity. Let's look at two people who got jammed up in the system, just this past month.

Headline: "Ebony Wilkerson, 32 - who is nearly seven months pregnant - was booked on a litany of charges that included attempted murder for wildly driving into the surf with her three children. Police said she told the children, ages 10, 9 and 3, that she was 'taking them to a better place.'" Police had earlier received a 911 call from her sister reporting that she was acting erratically. Police followed up, interviewed her, but took no action. Following the incident where she had driven into the Atlantic, she was arrested, psychiatrically evaluated, and returned to the jail's solitary confinement. Finally a judge intervened and ordered her to a psychiatric hospital. The woman is mentally ill. Query: why is she charged with murder? Headline: "Cops shoot to death homeless man for camping." Authorities said James Boyd, 38, died after officers fired stun guns, bean bags and live rounds. The police said Mr. Boyd had threatened to kill them and held knives as an unarmed K-9 officer approached him. A helmet-camera video showed the homeless man surrounded by several police officers standing 20 to 30 feet away, hand guns and automatic rifles cocked. After the victim agreed to walk down the mountain with the officers, he gathered his belongings and took a step toward officers, just before they shot him six times. While he lay on the ground dying, the police sic'd their dog on him. Query: why the gun battle against an unarmed man?

Here are the current stats on guns. Over 35,000 people were killed by gunfire last year, 500 of them were innocent people murdered by police, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. A study by two cardiologists found that the U.S. has 88 guns per 100 people and 10 gun-related deaths per 100,000 people—more than any of the other 27 developed countries they studied. Japan, for example, had 0.6 guns per 100 people. In the wake of the Newtown shootings, neither logical nor moral argument nor

common decency stopped many self-appointed wardens of the second amendment from stocking up on automatic rifles with 15 round clips. Leading the charge was the NRA, which promoted fear of the “others” and threatened with extinction, any politician who even breathed a word of gun control. So, feckless politicians refuse to pass background checks—which it seems we need not only for us civilians, but for the police—at least to determine if they are fit to carry a weapon (on a number of psycho scales, not the least of which is common sense, but empathy and emotion would do for starters). Background checks are not going to happen—because the true believers claim they have a constitutional right to bear arms—presumably against the government. And, if you think about poor Mr. Boyd's encounter and the 500 innocents killed by the police last year, one wonders if there isn't some dark logic here. If the government can't police itself is anyone safe?

People want guns because they are afraid of something. Survival depends on fear. I got that—, for actual threats. On the savannah 50,000 years ago, our ancestors ran from predators, and for things that they could not see they took counsel from the shaman of the day. We no longer live unprotected in the wild, but we do have the modern equivalent of shamans, the commentators and special interest spokespersons who keep us posted on the dangers of a changing demographic. Under the pressure of incessant evangelizing, against those who lately are coined as “takers,” their disciples try to marginalize the less affluent. Thus, they target the one refuge people have to self-actualize—the voting booth, the heart of our democracy. Since the beginning of 2013, nine states have passed measures making it harder to vote, most with stricter ID laws, such as mandating proof of citizenship through a birth certificate or a passport. This helps keep the “others” in their place, exactly where the shamans wants them, further removing the hope that one day we might all live in a classless society.

Our faith in moral leadership, silent for too long, can be restored though small gestures. Last week the news reported that Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley from Boston and eight other American Catholic bishops held mass on the border between Nogales, New Mexico and Mexico to honor the immigrants who have lost their lives crossing the border, because they loved their families enough to give their lives in hopes of a better life. The altar was set against the 20-foot high border fence, where the clergy offered communion to hands reaching through the slats to accept the Holy Eucharist. Hands reaching across a border—a powerful image. Yes we need leadership that demonstrates the courage to be, especially as it's grounded in logic and humanity—principles and morality that have moved the western world for over 3,000 years.

The antidote to fear is, in the words of Addison, “Unbounded courage and compassion join'd,” such as demonstrated at Nogales. Many religions teach that answers to the most vexing questions about life are shrouded in mystery, but in the real world, truth is not a mystery; it lives openly and objectively; its logic leads to “the true,” its art to beauty, science to facts, morality to goodness, and humanity to empathy. If we honor these verities, we can lift ourselves above our social and political malaise; that from 20,000 feet sure looks ugly—what indifference smells like, and in some cases what bigotry looks like close up.

The calendar reminds me that my Judeo-Christian friends will be soon celebrating their annual rite of humility and humanity. I wish it were more than a transient celebration, but one we could fall back on when we hear the not so veiled appeal to bigotry or we feel a lazy indifference to the suffering that

surrounds us. I wish it were a celebration that would remind us that logic and fact leads to facing the truth about ourselves. During Passover and Easter, we should seriously ponder how to restore some sense of communal compassion for immigrants, for the mentally ill, the homeless, or prisoners undeserving of severe incarceration who work for multinational corporations on the cheap. No, what we are doing does not square with what these holidays were meant to symbolize by people who profess faith, whether a theist or an atheist.