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The winter of our discontent

Terrorism is a word of the 20th Century and stems from discontent leading to disruption in the behaviour of those who create, fuel, perpetrate and nurture it. What we need now is hope to save the world, faith in our "humanism" that it is possible and the charity to let every human share in this future, writes Dr. PRITIKA CHARY.

MURDER, mayhem, terrorism, revenge, affirmation of war, gunfights on the high seas, air strikes and bombings seem the vocabulary of today's world. Yet we talk of family values, bonding, friends and strangers helping those in need, missing people, the dead and the grief of their loved ones, patriotism, fair play and human rights. Can we not see the contradictions between our statements, values and beliefs? Are we blind to our own behaviour or is this our norm to lead our children into the future? This intense dehumanisation of "humanity" seems to pervade every aspect of our lives and we tell each other to be "human" and talk about issues and rights.

What is wrong and why are we so callous and uncaring about hurting one another? Why do we find it so difficult to demonstrate love and caring as aggressively and openly as we do hate, rage and cruelty? Why do we use words like "barbaric" to describe such behaviour, when we, the "civilised", perpetrate it? Why do we say violence is "inhuman" and do things to each other that animals do not? Why is the cry of an innocent child and the ordinary, "human" human being not heard loud enough?

The origins of terrorism lie in our daily behaviour. How can it fail to thrive if we as humans have inflated egos that fulfill our selfish needs for power, notoriety, and fundamentalism? There have been wars, spies, crooks, burglars and murderers in the past but most of these were fought or committed under duress, and when performed, it was an impulsive act, associated with insanity or a brief burst of rage. Today, not only is violence fashionable, but we are proud of the intellectual prowess we exhibit in planning and the creativity with which we devise it. We boast of our successes in destroying entire communities of innocent people, and we justify our behaviour in the name of religion and "humanism." This premeditated exposition of destruction forms an important part of the national agenda for "development" in many countries.

We live with violence all around us. In daily life, we witness violence by those who are trusted with upholding the law — police, the judiciary and politicians. In our entertainment — no movie succeeds commercially if there are no violent gory fights, which are dubbed as "Action" movies. The media screams messages of violence in the papers, on the news channels and when we meet, we discuss who hurt whom and how in all its vivid, explicit details.

If our children see, hear, smell, feel and taste the violence in the air, they grow up thinking that violence is a normal emotion like any other.

Relatively mild stressors, if not controllable by the individual, can lead to suppression of the immune system. The harmful aspects of aversive stimuli are not in the stimuli but in the lack of an appropriate coping response. The ability to predict when an aversive stimulus occurs is good; the ability to actually control it is better; the ability to predict and control is even better. The different responses that occur when the opportunity for coping versus no coping determines the degree of impact. In the absence of the ability to predict or control an adverse stimulus, the organism can suffer a variety of consequences including ulcers, the release of endorphins, the suppression of the immune system or even sudden death.

We have learnt to live in an environment of fear, unpredictability, among events and happenings beyond our control. We have learnt to live in a world of constant stress of varying degrees. Is this of our own making?

Exposure to violence changes brain chemistry leading to an immature, angry and easily provoked individual who can express himself/herself only through anger, frustration and terror. Add to this starvation of the body due to poverty, starvation of the soul due to neglect, marginalisation or isolation, and emotional starvation due to lack of values, human interaction with "normal" people and brainwashing to make fundamentalism the driving spirit and we have the terrorists of the day. They see no meaning in their lives and hence become suicide bombers.

Terrorism is a word of the 20th Century and stems from discontent, leading to disruption in the behaviour of those who create, fuel, perpetrate and nurture it as well as disenchantment and disgust in those who face it and have to live with it. Exposure to violence since birth, with daily reinforcement in every direction is rich soil for sowing the seeds of rage. Man, who talks so much about behaving in a "human" manner, has become dehumanised, because commercialism, capitalism, communism, religious fundamentalism, politics, the media, all tell us that what we have is "not enough". We want more power, money, recognition and land. This all-consuming greed pervades our every fibre and is the spring and summer of our discontent. But seasons change, greed gives way to disappointment and anger and we now have reached the winter of our discontent. When innocent people die, it is unfair, whether it is in Kashmir, Vietnam, West Asia, in Sarajevo, Palestine or in New York. Why did the world not take notice and express solidarity to wipe out terrorism before September 11, 2001? Perhaps the lives of people in other parts of the world are less precious or perhaps we needed the leader of a superpower to stimulate our "humanism". Why do we always bring religion to justify our wars? Infinite justice, Crusades, jihad, Ayodhya, Kurukshetra, what difference does it make? Every war results in the death and destruction of humanity, but those who initiate and wage these wars claim it is to save and perpetuate humanity. No religion condones cruelty, violence and intolerance. Women and children suffer the most. Widows, orphans, rapes, disabled children, poverty, refugees, homelessness, marginalisation and discontent!

The seeds are sown once more for the next terrorist or warmonger. The vicious cycle goes on and on.

A sense of helplessness overtakes us, yet if some of us mature, "human" few want to change, we can. If we do not, we are spiralling towards the destruction of the world. The way to "fight" terrorism is to pull it out by its roots, not by waging more wars. Let us remove violence from our lives — at home, from our TV screens, from our movies. Let the good things that happen around us engulf us through our front pages and news headlines. Let the disaster and death news take the last pages. Let us change our attitude to what is newsworthy. The media and the movie moghuls claim that they are only satisfying our lust for violence, all the time lining their pockets by our foolishness. Our leaders tell us violence and war is self- defence, protection of our borders and our rights. Let us not switch on our TV sets to see violence but instead see the gentler, nobler, kinder side of life — art, music and dance. Let the media fill their front pages and breaking news columns with things that are right with the world around us. Let moviemakers give us a chance for joy and happiness through their films. Real life has enough sorrow, desperation and disaster. Let each one of us start being good for at least one hour a day, let each one of us be kind to someone in thought, word or deed every day, let us go back to the roots of every religion in the world, the messages of compassion and tolerance. We have reached the winter of our discontent, what we need now is hope to save the world, faith in our "humanism" that it is possible, and the charity to let every human share in this future, so that there is spring again in this millennium. Maybe we can trick our brains into believing that all is not lost. Are Bush, Musharraf, and Bin Laden listening? Osama Bin Laden has taken his three wives and several children into hiding, Bush wants to avenge his people, and Musharraf and Saddam Hussain want to protect Islam. We, the rest of the world, also want our families, friends and our freedom to live on this earth. This is not a lone voice; it is just a single voice. If all the lone voices join together, the cacophony will be deafening and perhaps the world will listen and be saved.