

Violence is not our necessary destiny

A Voyageur

By Pioneer Press | news@pioneerpress.com
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I'm in Beirut this month serving as a consultant for the World Health Organization. No strangers to Lebanon, my wife and I have taught at the American University of Beirut, and we keep connected to friends and colleagues.

I love walking on the "Corniche," the promenade along the Mediterranean Sea, watching the men with long fishing poles, the all-season swimmers, women in cut-off jeans and tank tops beside others with veils and long gowns (some even jogging), men with beards cuddling infant sons and daughters, serious runners and in-line skaters (a sport invented in Minnesota). Some days the sea is tumultuous, waves crashing over the railing and dousing the walkers; at other times it is placid, untroubled – extremes one sees in the country itself.

Lebanon is a nation of 4 million holding to 17 different religious persuasions in a land smaller than Connecticut. Many of its people are also American or Canadian. Over the past three decades Lebanon has passed through a bitter 16-year civil war, several invasions by Israel (including last summer's countrywide bombing campaign), and occupation by both Syrian and Israeli troops. Some 150,000 persons were killed, the equivalent of four Sept. 11s each year. And yet its people, like its climate, food and music, are sweet, funny, generous, full of the love of life, but also passionate and emotional, a little bit chaotic. Lebanon is a country I call "dangerously endearing." Fayrouz, Lebanon's Kate Smith, cries out, "From the soul of her people she makes wine. From their sweat she makes bread and jasmine. So how did it come to taste of smoke and fire?"

As I speak with friends, read Lebanese literature, listen to the music, I learn how ordinary people attend to ordinary life: worry about their children and their education, how to make an honest living, go shopping, care for an extended family, stay close to the world through the Internet, television and mobile phones, go to movies, and fall in love in the time of war. People want nothing more than peace, and yearn for normalcy.

But their leaders seem to come out of "The Godfather," and assassinations are just another form of politics – Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, a prominent young minister this year, several journalists – bringing the country once again to the brink of civil war, like the children's game of "who can lean out the window the furthest." So far, fortunately, everyone has stepped back from the edge, but the machinations breed a deep sense of cynicism, the most corrosive force of all.

The Lebanese-American poet Khalil Gibran once declared, "Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion.... Pity the nation that despises a passion in its dream, yet submits in its awakening.... Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation."

Someone once described human society as either Shakespearean or Chekhovian. At the end of a Shakespeare play everyone is either happy or dead. At the end of a Chekhov drama everyone is miserable, but resigned to go on to the next day. Lebanon's leaders are Shakespearean, its people Chekhovian. But come to think of it, it's not just Lebanon. Here I draw on Bradley Burston, a columnist for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, who said Hamas, Hezbollah and Israeli leaders promised their peoples that "war would do the trick, turn the tide, eliminate the enemy, pave the path to a golden tomorrow." It didn't.

Violence simply begets more violence: Katyusha rockets rain on civilians, spawning cluster bombs in retaliation that kill children, suicide bombs and smart bombs, IEDs against humvees. Walid

Sadek, a Lebanese artist and writer, describes the dreary passage from one war to the next as “mourning in the presence of a corpse.” That is, the body refuses to be buried, and no time is given over to grief, healing, or reconciliation.

The mortar- and bullet-pocked ruins standing here are like corpses on the external landscape, but there are many more corpses within: We all embrace our own sufferings and victimhood, not recognizing the “Other” feels the same. It need not be this way. Humans have always been capable of violence, but it isn’t our necessary destiny. We have at least as much capacity for goodness and empathy for shared suffering. How we make ourselves and our leaders pay attention is our main task.

David Grossman, the Israeli novelist whose son was killed in the war last summer, has just written in the *New York Times Magazine* (May 13) the most compelling and poignant testimony to the power of literature to move us to goodness:

“I write. I relieve myself of one of the dubious and distinctive capacities created by the state of war in which I live – the capacity to be an enemy and an enemy only. I do my best not to shield myself from the just claims and sufferings of my enemy. Nor from the tragedy and entanglement of his own life. Nor from his errors or crimes or from the knowledge of what I myself am doing to him. Nor, finally, from the surprising similarities I find between him and me. All of a sudden I am not condemned to this absolute, fallacious and suffocating dichotomy – this inhumane choice to ‘be victim or aggressor,’ without having any third, more humane alternative. When I write, I can be a human being whose parts have natural and vital passages between them; a human who is able to feel close to his enemies’ sufferings and to acknowledge his just claims without relinquishing a grain of his own identity.”

Norbert Hirschhorn, a poet and retired physician, was adopted by marriage into a Minnesota family but now lives in London. He taught at the University of Minnesota and headed the Division of Family Health in the Minnesota Department of Health. His column appears in the *Pioneer Press* monthly. He can be reached by e-mail at bertzpoet@gmail.com.