

Consider small actions, impact big concerns



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Viruses and viral nonsense. Vulnerable people; defenseless animals. Senseless destruction of the land, sea, air, the earth itself. Weapons, war, waste. Rational minds wasted by irrational beliefs.

These worrisome concerns can occupy and preoccupy my thoughts. Usually not losing sleep over them, I can be distracted to dwell on them, even when I would prefer not to.

Writing about religious faith, the topic of fear returns again and again. In a Pentecostal church I attended long ago, the pastor delivered a series of sermons on “this thing called fear.” At some point in his loud exhortations (and speaking in tongues) he quoted from the First Letter of John: “Perfect love casts out fear.” It was never entirely clear to my young mind how to do that, or what “perfect” love was and how to get that. I’m fairly confident the preacher told us to pray, praise and believe. I still felt vulnerable, fearful.

My personal phobias go way back, as I suppose they do for many of us. While in seminary I went to hear Dr. Helen Caldicott, the Australian doctor who was a leader of Physicians for Social Responsibility. She won a Nobel Peace prize in 1985. I had read one of her first books, “Missile Envy,” and heard her speak on the dangers of nuclear proliferation.

Dr. Caldicott has written about disciplinary problems in some of the nation’s missile silos. “In 2015,

ninety-two American missile officers were suspended because they had been cheating, taking drugs, or sleeping in the missile silos. These men are employed to guard and to operate 150 nuclear missiles ...”

Alright, that could keep me awake.

Political turmoil is on everyone’s mind. We seem to get contorted into pointing angry fingers at those we disagree with, while poking our fingers in our ears. Try that and you’ll see how silly it looks. There’s a certain madness in it.

Of particular concern to me these days is the treatment of wild creatures. Personally, I’m not much in favor of “domesticated” animals, but it’s really the untamed ones that I worry about. I was very protective of vulnerable humans for most of my life, but part of me gets very protective when it comes to the nonhuman world.

I jump up when I hear gunshots in our valley assuming someone is blasting away at a wild neighbor with fur or feathers. We see roadkill almost every day and lament “they didn’t have a chance” against our big metal machines with not-so-smart drivers on smartphones.

If I think about those humans or nonhumans who can’t protect themselves I feel helpless. When I consider mass migrations of wildlife or human beings, those who are naturally on the move and those forced to leave their homes, I sense a common history of uncertainty, instability. Who has the power to make a difference?

Reading or watching a story on poaching in Africa—rhinos, elephants, lions, giraffes, gorillas—and I almost feel incapacitated. You want to do something, anything, to protect them. Even a non-violent person like me imagines defending the innocent at all costs. Yet,

it’s hard not to feel defeated.

There’s no way to avoid the “bad thoughts” about the “bad things.” Unlike my grandfather, who hated network news so much he subscribed to a “good news” rag from some small town in Montana, putting my head in the sand isn’t an option. Besides, I’d start worrying about the fate of ostriches.

When it comes to the fearfulness that some faith can generate, perhaps a bit of psychology can help. “Facing our fears” (death, dangers, feelings of guilt) can certainly help, if we have sensitive companions or counselors. I can think of many times in my chaplaincy years when someone was pouring out things they didn’t want to think about let alone talk about, and I’d be left thinking, “Geez, not sure I want to think about that either, and I sure don’t know what to do or say about it.”

Maybe this hints at one response. Honestly facing facts, admitting (or accepting) we can’t do a damn thing about them. Except ... when we can.

It’s a guiding principle that we can only do so much, only help so much. Otherwise, it’s all so overwhelming. We may deeply desire world peace but we can only “do peace” here and now, day by day, one by one.

If we can assist another (human or nonhuman) today, that’s great. If I can stop and nudge a turtle across the road or give an energy bar to a person holding a sign, and add a smile, maybe that’s all I can do.

What is it you can’t think about, but might be able to do something, anything, about?

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