

The Golden Rule

by John K. Nixon

In the final scene of the 1984 film “The Killing Fields,” the camera slowly pans over a scene of devastation, the aftermath of the appalling slaughter committed by the Khmer Rouge regime under the murderous despot, Pol Pot. Corpses are strewn on the ground while bewildered survivors search for relatives among the dead. The air is filled with flies and the incessant buzz of insects in the sweltering tropical heat. In incongruous counterpoint, in the background, as if coming from a portable radio, are the haunting strains of the John Lennon song “Imagine,” an anthem to a Utopian view of life and society, far removed from the horror captured through the camera’s lens.

Estimates of the number of victims of the slaughter carried out by the Pol Pot regime between 1975 and 1979 range up to 2 million, or about 25% of the Cambodian population. In a misguided attempt to turn Cambodia back to a primitive agrarian society, cities were emptied and anyone suspected of being an intellectual, including those who wore glasses or knew a foreign language, was imprisoned, tortured and killed, or forced to work as slave labour in the fields. Cambodia ranks among the worst examples of genocide in the twentieth century.

In the last one hundred years, we have seen repeated evidence of man’s inhumanity to man. Two world wars have established new benchmarks for killing and destruction on a scale never before seen. Over eight million died in the First World War alone. Since then, in addition to the Second World War, there have been numerous examples of genocidal slaughter, including the ruthless killings perpetrated by Stalin in the Soviet Union and by Mao’s Red Guards during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Armenian

massacres and more recently the horrors of Rwanda, Congo and Darfur. Today the newspapers are full of accounts of barbaric atrocities committed almost daily between Sunni and Shia Muslims as Syria and Iraq sink rapidly into chaos. Recent estimates have put the total worldwide death toll in more than 100 wars and civil conflicts at approximately 160 million people since the end of the First World War, the war that was supposed to end all wars!

In virtually all of these conflicts, the root cause has been differences in ideology, nationalism, ethnic origin or religion, often in combination. Today the potential for destruction has been increased dramatically by the recent emergence of fanatics who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for their cause, and by the spreading availability of weapons capable of massive destruction, be they chemical, biological or nuclear. In addition there is mounting concern for the adverse effects of human activities on the environment. Between 1959 and 1999 (a mere forty years), the world’s population doubled, from 3 billion to 6 billion. Consumption of non-renewable resources, especially fossil fuels, continues unabated with the very real prospect that, within the lives of our children, some of these will be exhausted. Thus future conflicts will likely be fought over control of increasingly scarce resources. Add to this the unknown but potentially devastating effects of accelerated global warming, for which there is mounting evidence that human activities (e.g., production of greenhouse gases) are partially responsible.

All of this paints a sombre picture that does not bode well for the future of civilization as we know it. The problems are as numerous as they are complex, and there are no easy solu-

tions. It can be argued that conflict between humans is as old as humanity itself. At the same time it can be demonstrated that many disagreements can be resolved and bloodshed averted if the protagonists are willing to discuss the issues in a logical and reasoned manner. The use of force then becomes the ultimate fall-back strategy when all else fails, and then only in self-defence. As Mahatma Ghandi famously remarked: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

Historically mankind has tended to seek solace in organized religion, which can provide a moral compass to negotiate the temptations and perils of life. Unfortunately, all too often religious belief has been accompanied by a sense of moral superiority which has bred intolerance of the ideas of others. When such beliefs are acquired by fanatics, it becomes easy to justify the use of violence in the name of a particular religion, a phenomenon that is all too evident in the world today.

All of this gives rise to several important questions. What can we as individuals do to reverse these disturbing trends? Is the situation really as bad as it often appears to be? What kind of a life are we bequeathing to our children and grandchildren?

It seems to me that what is widely lacking is an acceptance that we are all without exception human beings. Although appearances, skin colour, physical features, etc., as well as cultural mores, choice of dress and diet may vary widely, we are all subject to the same human needs and frailties and deserving of respect as human beings. This should be the starting point in all our relationships with our fellow citizens. Anyone who has observed small children at play in an ethnically mixed neighbourhood cannot but be struck by the utter lack of judgmentalism and open acceptance of other children from differing ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds.

...all too often
religious belief
has been
accompanied
by a sense of
moral superiority
which has bred
intolerance of the
ideas of others.

Ideally that unquestioning acceptance of others, in spite of outward differences, should be carried through to adulthood as a starting point in establishing relationships. From that point on we can build relationships, form friendships and evaluate people on a merit basis, using criteria such as honesty, integrity, compassion, loyalty, etc.

In this context I suggest that, as a guide to developing and maintaining our relationships with others, the time-honoured Golden Rule can best serve as our moral compass. In essence, "we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us." This fundamental moral principle is embedded, in some form or other, in all the world's major religions, and arguably lies at the core of the concept of human rights.

Some may point out that this ethic of reciprocity cannot apply to every situation (for example, when we are threatened by someone with criminal intent). Others may say it is naïve to think that others will always respond as we would wish them to when we use this approach. All of this may well be true.

Nevertheless, if we can all instill this concept in our children and teach them the basic sanctity of Life and respect for Humanity, I believe that over time this can make a difference in forging more harmony and cooperation between peoples, and in reducing the innate mistrust and lack of understanding that can spawn intolerance and, ultimately, violence between nations.

Some, in reading this, may well say I'm a dreamer. Fair comment. But then, hopefully, as John Lennon would have said, "I am not the only one."•

John Nixon is a professional engineer living in West Vancouver. Most of his career has been devoted to consulting engineering in mining and metallurgy. He holds a B. Eng. degree from McGill University and an MBA from York University.