

Giving up life for the foolish notion of love

The deaths of three aid workers here are reminders of life's fleeting nature

SANA'A, Yemen

It didn't take long for what started out like a normal day in our household to turn into the day from hell.

My wife, Jean, was still in her pyjamas when the phone call came early Monday morning. Three American aid workers in a missionary hospital in Jibla were slain. We knew two of them, one very well.

Silence.

The jarring news of how an Islamic extremist burst into a hospital room to shoot these three felt like getting brushed by a truck. It was only the night before when my wife changed plans to be at the hospital for a morning meeting. Indeed, if life is a game of inches and seconds, we escaped personal tragedy by the thinnest of margins.

The victims were, by all accounts, remarkable people.

Hospital administrator Bill Koehn, 60, at Jibla for 28 years, was just days from retirement. He maintained he would rather stop work than be reassigned by his employer to America or England. His hobbies included carving little wooden figurines of the Yemeni people.

Victim Kathy Gariety, Jibla's purchasing agent, also loved the Yemeni community. "I've been so blessed by this hospital and I just want to bless this place," is what she told co-workers at a recent Christmas party.

It was Dr. Martha Myers, 57, whom we knew best as a friend and colleague. Martha would call regularly to consult with Jean about complicated obstetrical cases. We last saw her a few weeks ago with friends here in Sana'a, three hours north of Jibla.

"People in the community really loved her. She knew the language well and she was really out there," notes Jean. Martha's community involvement included helping the Yemeni with disease prevention and clean water projects.

For such uncommon commitment -- to their faith and to the people they served -- these three were thanked by bullets to the head from a Kalishnikov. Their killer reportedly

targeted them because of their key posts and good reputations in the community.

A couple of thoughts. First, it's tempting to judge aid workers in dangerous spots around the globe as a bit wonky. You know -- masochists or martyrs or just a bit dense for standing under bombs and bullets falling like rain.

Indeed, foreign embassies here issue advisories all the time. Westerners in Yemen, and there are a few thousand of us, are told to be alert, vary travel routes and keep clear from common western hangouts. So, in London, take the long way home and avoid the city's centre because people have been knifed downtown. How useless.

Yemen, despite its Wild West reputation, has far fewer murders than Toronto. The bigger danger around here is white-knuckle driving.

Another tendency is to think Islamic extremists run amok here like wide-eyed yahoos shooting their guns into the air. When Americans are killed, there must be dancing in the streets, no?

Actually, the number of Islamic extremists in Yemen, a country of 20 million, is likely closer to dozens than hundreds.

Several Yemeni have approached Jean and I personally with more collective embarrassment than anything over the Jibla slayings. They know their homeland is impoverished and backward. So they're thankful aid workers are improving standards in all kinds of ways.

"Who is go to heaven?" (sic) was the touching e-mail we received after the murders from a local businessman, a virtual stranger. Yes, the Yemeni also easily discuss questions of eternal life because, unlike in Canada, where bringing religion into the public square is an embarrassment, matters of faith, albeit in an Islamic context, are what people anguish about over here.

Yes, certain evils lurk in this part of the world, as they do in Canada. But it's the folks who keep their doors locked and curtains drawn who are truly menacing, is it not? That's the thinking that made Bill and Kathy and Martha tick.

They may have been killed for such foolish notions. But if love is stronger than death, and I believe it is, then their deaths, as is often true with martyrs, are actually the seeds of something new for many people. Something new from under the snow.

It's not a bad thought at New Year's. It's not a bad thought, really, for any time.

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