



Demonizing youth can be a self-fulfilling prophecy



EVELYN MYRIE

Violence among youth has been the focus of much media coverage over the past several weeks. This was triggered by the gang-related shootings in a Quigley Road apartment building in East Hamilton. The uproar over recent shootings has led some politicians to wonder out loud if a task force should be established to look at the problems of youth and the social problems associated with young people. Yes there are youth who cause

trouble — today, yesterday and generations past. But they are in the minority. Exaggerating the problem and “demonizing” youth will not bring about a solution.

When good news stories are reported they tend to get lost — or easily forgotten. Past research on youth and the media notes that youth success stories have little impact in the face of relentless crime stories that demonize teenagers.

The U.S.-based Benton Foundation, in a 1999 publication titled *Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues*, said, “The consequence of this type of coverage, according to media effects research, is that exposure to teen crime (particularly minority crime) increases public support for the most punitive public policies.”

Last Saturday, I attended a youth conference — called *Lifting as We Climb ... Youth Empowering Youth* — with about 100 young black and

aboriginal youth talking about developing ways to empower themselves to make social change.

They discussed ways to improve their lives through education, joining unions and becoming involved in community work. These were young people who wanted to make a difference and gave up their prized Saturday-morning sleep to share ideas about making their life better.

The media coverage was minimal and many of the youth were concerned about the negative coverage of their event.

Later in the evening, I attended the 10th anniversary of the African Canadian Caribbean Potpourri Incorporated, where more than 300 people toasted the accomplishments of 14 area youth with scholarships totalling more than \$12,000. The young people were phenomenal. Their accomplishments were impressive. Over the past 10 years, this project,

the brainchild of retired teacher Eleanor Rodney, has believed in children. It has put its money where its mouth is and has invested in their future.

Since 1995, when the project began, more than 80 young people from this community have been recipients of the scholarships. Many more have been mentored by community members and graduates who want to give back.

These are the stories of youth that don't make headline news. These good news stories are easily forgotten by a public that is focused on making youth look less than human.

The day after that, more than 1,000 youth from Catholic schools in the area participated in the second annual youth pilgrimage in which money was raised by students to help make life a little better for people living in deplorable conditions in developing countries.

In the media's eye, this spectacular

event warranted only minimum coverage ... a photo of the young people at Bayfront Park.

Young people are an asset to our community and our world. The demonizing of youth only serves to create a sense of hopelessness and further alienate youth from the mainstream of society, leading some of them to criminal behaviour.

They are our children and, as the saying goes, “It takes a village to raise a child.”

We cannot ignore the fact that pathological behaviour among some teens usually reflects the adult-created conditions in their families, neighbourhoods and schools.

The political demagoguery and media stereotyping that blames youth for complex social problems must stop.

Freelance columnist Evelyn Myrie lives in Hamilton and is a social development consultant.

It's tough being a cop in Kampala

Burglary and theft are rampant across Uganda. Police are underfunded, disrespected and overburdened



THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA

It's a midweek night and I'm on a cold, metal chair in a dingy, local police station. Sitting nearby under a dim light, a cop asks me questions.

“Sorry,” he says, hearing of my loss. He writes slowly. Too slowly. I lose confidence early during this, my first Ugandan robbery report, File # 72.19.10.2005.

It could be worse. I could be dead. Or I could be the poor guy behind me, with passport, cash and credit cards all stolen. Still, the relative bad news is that my pricey work camera has been ripped off.

My family's vehicle — a 10-year-old Land Cruiser — was burglarized. In broad daylight. Near a large store entrance. Thieves smashed a back window to steal the vehicle's electronic door panels, apparently hot on Uganda's black market. A Roots Canada bag, with said camera, was likely just a bonus.

Thud, went my heart, when I saw the mess. I called over parking security: three scrawny boy-men. Carrying old, wooden guns, they might as well have played cops and robbers with hockey sticks underarm. They didn't have much to say. Two hours later police, with AK-47s, arrived. That is after I walked to the above-mentioned station to get them myself.

“Sorry,” an officer said, scanning the damage. Another hour and the parking security manager arrived. “Sorry,” he echoed.

Later, trying to understand why a competent investigation was going nowhere fast, I learned about Ugandan justice. Surveys show less than half of Uganda's thefts are even reported. Victims simply have no hope of recovering their property. Just one-quarter of Ugandans are satisfied with their police. To compare, North America's rate is as high as 74 per cent.



THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Detective Joseph Gamukama looks over a report on the theft of property of columnist Thomas Froese, in Kampala, Uganda. Africa has among the world's highest rates for theft, yet police in countries like Uganda have few resources to deal with it.

No, cops here aren't society's top guns. In fact, broken relationships and rotten living conditions contribute to their high HIV/AIDS rate of 13 per cent, double the national average.

And they get no respect. None. A hydro company recently turned off the lights at precincts across the country, over unpaid bills. Such is police funding. A starting constable now earns 150,000 shillings, about \$100 Cdn, a month.

No wonder Joseph, my investigating officer, had to borrow my mobile phone. No wonder, to get to the crime scene, he had me pay for our taxi, a beater-van with about 15 passengers crammed inside.

“You're the police,” I protested, not yet aware of how Uganda's finest live.

The next day, while driving Joe and another vehicle-less detective to Kampala's police headquarters, we arrived to see officers running down the street, chasing a suspect who apparently just snuck out of HQ's front door. It was slapstick at its worst.

Joe, a veteran of 26 years, turned to me and said, “Things can happen here. That's the fun of life.”

Yes sir. Yeehaw.

Of course he's right. Along with Latin America, Africa has the world's highest burglary and theft rates. One survey shows 41 per cent of Uganda's vehicle owners have experienced theft from their vehicles. Nobody is safe. Years ago, in traffic, one brazen thief reached in an open window of my

wife's car, unlocked a back door, and snatched a purse.

Don't get caught though. Two local construction workers recently convicted of stealing five bags of cement got two years in jail. And the state can't afford much. So Uganda's jails aren't The Hilton. They're also filled with folks who can't read or write, oblivious to their rights.

Back to police headquarters. Joe, his detective colleague, and I drove there — in my messed-up vehicle — to photograph the damage for police records. In this saga's best comment yet, another detective greeting us said, “Cameras are pretty hard to find here (at headquarters.)”

You don't say. I've even heard of Ugandan university students studying photography without cameras. That's the picture of my loss.

I'm hoping Joe can help get me some compensation. But I can't reach him these days. Seems his mobile isn't working.

“Sorry. But don't let this taint your view of the country,” an expatriate friend later told me.

Heavens, no. Don't worry. Our vehicle is fixed. It's now loaded with an alarm that can wake the dead. I'll somehow get another camera. And I know most Ugandans are very fine people.

But I'll still have to write about it all. Sorry.

Thomas Froese appears every other Monday. E-mail 140765@sympatico.ca

Why we still need religion

Without a belief in something deeper than the material workings of the world, humanity's fragile grip on godness easily slips

BY BERNARD BASKIN

The crimes of organized religion throughout history beggar the imagination. At the same time, however, there is religion's benign and positive side.

I am sure that we still need religion for the following reasons:

■ In order to grapple with the riddle of the cosmos and our relationship to it.

We live in “universal time” in which we are granted a “brief moment.” What is our role and goal in life? What is our relationship to the earth, the sea, the sky? Seeking answers to “eternal mysteries” is among the chief and unending functions of religion, whether we be underling or master, peasant or philosopher.

■ Because we must rely upon poetry in our attempt to express the inexpressible.

Why does the 23rd Psalm retain its fascination for even the allegedly “irreligious?” Why does the Bible as a whole retain its paramount place in world literature? Does not this ancient magnificent library still furnish ethical wisdom as valid today as in the

days its scrolls were first inscribed?

■ Because we cannot believe that the universe is a mechanism and mortal men and women merely automations.

Mathematics, astronomy, physics and other domains of knowledge are unable to adequately explain the universe. No matter how far our spaceships and rockets penetrate, the heavens still remain limitless.

The human race has always battled with its own creativity. Technological inventions have been blessings, but they have also created mechanisms of destruction and annihilation. Without a belief in something deeper than the material workings of the world, humanity's fragile grip on godness easily slips. All the blessings of our age will be vain if we permit science to strip us of soul. Human skill creates marvels; still, we cannot let the products of our hands divert us from the prompting of our hearts.

Science involves looking outward. The scientist must be separate from the object studied in order to gain intellectual mastery over it. Sanctity asks us to look within as well as without and to judge not by a scale of

mastery but by a scale of reverence.

For all its power, science cannot be the meaning of our lives or tell us why to get up in the morning. Supreme at asking the “how” questions, science does not answer the “why” questions. That is the function of faith.

■ In order to preserve the continuity of the heritage into which we are born, or which we accept by conviction.

If we cultivate the Hellenic and Roman legacy, we should also adhere to the overarching Hebraic inheritance which has contributed so many of the teachings and practices that form the cornerstone of the world's culture.

Religion can stabilize the personality of our children and young people; it can enrich and uphold the solidarity of family life in an epoch that is reeling from the upheaval of a social earthquake. Why should we lightly or ignorantly discard values that have helped to harness savage human impulses?

■ As a way of testifying to the sacredness of human life.

Religion at its is best and highest insists that all of us incarnate something of the divine. Such a conviction, the sacredness and inviolability of every

individual may seem naive, but it is the hope of the world.

■ As an avenue to solace and consolation.

In the presence of illness and the imminence of death, we are impelled, whatever our skepticism, to ponder the reassuring promise dilemmas of the afterlife.

At memorial services we bring to mind our forebears, with whose spirits ours will be blended; we cast our gaze into the uncharted future and we

wonder at the kinship of the past, the present and the future.

Rather than be hostile or alienated by the dark side of religion, thinking men and women should cling to its affirmative and life-giving precepts, for they enable us, in a time of malaise and uncertainty, to walk humbly and act mercifully.

Bernard Baskin is a regular contributor to Forum. He is rabbi emeritus of Temple Anshe Sholom in Westdale.

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