

FACING VIOLENCE

ALMOST 20 YEARS ago, when my oldest son was very young, I tried to shield the boy from violence and aggression, those alleged attributes of manliness. My wife and I had agreed to raise our children in an atmosphere of nonviolence, without playthings that simulated weapons. Then my uncle came to

visit us from Israel. My uncle, unlike his wife and children, had survived Auschwitz, and he was surprised that my son had no toy guns. I tried to explain, but, asserting the moral authority of a war victim and survivor, he took my son off to Macy's to buy the biggest, noisiest toy machine gun he could find. My uncle said that if people do not go bang bang when they are young they go bang bang when they grow up.

Since then, we have lived in Africa and in Asia and I have seen and heard bang bang. I am not sure I fully understand what my uncle meant, but I no longer think that exposure to the symbols of death and violence

causes little boys to grow up ethically impaired. In fact, now that I am living in North American civilization, where enormous energies are spent rendering death and violence either fictional or abstract, I think the greatest moral pitfall is not that we witness too much bang bang, but that, for the most part, we perceive it vicariously. We shield ourselves from real death and pain while paying to see these same things, sanitized and stylized, in the movies.

This idea crystallized in my mind after a conversation I had a short while ago with Jack Troake, a thoughtful man who, like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, makes his living by fishing from his home port of Twillingate, Newfoundland. Like his ancestors and neighbors, he also used to spend the

icebound winter months hunting gray skin seals, but he does so no longer. The market for seal pelts in Europe and the United States has been destroyed because of protests launched abroad by animal-rights groups. The original protests were against the clubbing of baby white-furred seal pups, a hunt that Jack Troake never joined. Then the outcry spread to include all seals. Last year, a British supermarket chain declared it would no longer stock Canadian fish because of someone's belief that some fishermen either now hunt seals or once did.

As we sat on Mr. Troake's radar-equipped boat watching his sons mend nets, he made it clear that he was flabbergasted and insulted by what he assumed to be the view of some foreigners that he and his neighbors were barbarians. "Look old boy, there's no doubt about it, I make my living killing things. We kill mackerel and cod and we used to kill seals. Now, there seems to be a bunch of people who do not like that. I imagine them sitting eating lamb chops and steak and chicken, thinking they all come neatly wrapped in plastic from some food factory. I wonder whether they have ever seen anything die or anything born, except on television and in the movies. But, to tell you the truth, old boy, I really feel sorry for those people who are so upset about this old Christian."

Me too. I left Twillingate, and in a motel that night I watched the footage from Beirut. As I remember now, it contained what have become the current visual clichés of violence. Men firing bazookas around a corner at something. Smoke and rubble. Women with shopping bags walking fast across a street. Adolescent gunmen smiling into the camera from the backs of trucks. It conveyed a sense of destruction, but it stopped short of being horrible. I knew the images were authentic, but they did not seem real. They blurred into an already crowded memory bank of two-dimensional violence: Dirty Harry, the A Team, Beirut, Belfast, El Salvador, car crashes. And I thought how I, bombarded with such pictures of death, had, two years ago, backed away from the real drama of death when it touched me as something more than a witness. I had sent my own mother to die in a nursing home, among death specialists. I did not hold her as her life ebbed. Later, I

consoled myself with the thought that this is what people do in a technological culture, and that, anyway, the room was clean and the doctors said she did not suffer greatly.

I recall how we used to hear that the images of the Vietnam War, shown on television, sensitized the nation. Perhaps. I can recall the naked little girl running from napalm, and the man being shot by a police official in Saigon. But everything else has been jumbled in memory, and what remains are mostly recollections of what I now think of as my skin-deep shock and my pious responses. There were too many images. The only people I hear talking about Vietnam now are the ones who were there.

What I do remember is the first dead man I ever saw, a man shot and bleeding on dirty stairs in New York. I remember victims of massacres in Zaire and Rhodesia, and I can recall where each of those bodies lay. I remember an Afghan freedom fighter in a hospital in Peshawar, his leg lost in a land-mine explosion. He had his rifle with him, and his 7-year-old son was on his bed touching the man's stump. The father was talking about returning to fight Soviet forces; he hoped that his son would continue the fight. For that small boy, perhaps, the moment was indeed too much bang bang, but I am no longer sure.

As for little boys playing with toy guns, I don't think it matters much, one way or the other. What does matter, it seems to me, is that at some time in their formative years, maybe in high school, our children should bear witness to the everyday violence they could see, say, in an emergency ward of a big city hospital. I know it sounds extreme, but maybe our children could learn something valuable if they were taken for a day or two to visit a police station or an old-age home. It might serve as an antidote for the unreal violence on all our screens.

What would be learned, I think, is that, up close and in three dimensions, the dead, the dying and the suffering are always to some extent "us." On the screens they always seem to be "them." I don't understand it, really, any more than my uncle's view of bang bang, but I know that as long as men die and men kill it is wrong to turn away too much. Also, I am certain that I would prefer to be judged by the hunter Jack Troake than by anyone who would judge him harshly. ■