

Rays of light

The holiday season is a good time to pause to appreciate our blessings. On an individual basis, we have many ? family, friends, community. But sometimes, news headlines lead us to believe that we live in an especially dangerous period, fraught with terror, catastrophe, and misery.

Certainly our world is far from perfect. Major conflicts continue around the world, as does severe poverty. Then there's the very real threat from looming environmental disaster.

But amid the gloom, there are many rays of light. To cite a facetious example, it's been over 65 million years since our planet was hit with a giant doomsday asteroid. But there are more recent causes for celebration.

Did you know that in the last quarter century, global child mortality has been cut in half? In 1990, 13 million children died before they reached their fifth birthday. By 2014, the number was down to six million ? an appalling figure, but nonetheless half what it was quite recently.

Poverty and famine are also on the decline. Doing a century over century comparison, between 1900 and 1909 nearly 30 million people died of famine. For the first decade of the 21st century, the figure was around 400,000, a little over one percent the rate just a century ago. It's still disturbing that thousands of people starve to death each year, but imagine if it were still over two million annually.

And everywhere ? locally, provincially, nationally, and globally ? the violent crime rate is dropping, as it has for at least two decades.

There are still social problems we have to deal with at home and abroad. There are too many places on the globe where misery is the everyday experience. But there's less of it than not so long ago, and a lot less than a century ago. Just think: In the winter of 1918-19, over 60,000 Canadians died of the flu. This was just after over 60,000 Canadian soldiers were killed and over a hundred thousand wounded in the First World War, which killed over 10 million people in total. (So much for ?the good old days.?)

Of course, solving important social and economic problems takes more than talk. Today, Canadians understand the need to help out ? to work to improve their communities, their country, and their world. About half of Canadians 15 years of age and older do some volunteer work; they average 156 hours a year individually, or over two billion hours in total. In addition it is estimated that 62 per cent of Canadians will donate to a charity this month, giving \$5 billion.

And we respond to a need. For example, take the number of groups that have formed to sponsor and support Syrian refugees; in Ontario, there are already close to 500. In Toronto, hundreds of garbage bags full of winter clothing have been collected. People are also donating to the UN Children's Fund and the Canadian Red Cross to help kids and families.

Then there's the nearby example of the Masjid Al-Salaam mosque in Peterborough. Shortly after the Paris attacks, it was fire-bombed. But immediately, the community sprang into action to help out the orphaned religious community. Within days, more than enough pledges were received to cover the maximum costs of repairs. The first week after the bombing, the members of the mosque accepted an invitation to use a local United Church for their services. And the week after that, Islamic services were held at Beth Israel, a Jewish synagogue.

The president of the Kawartha Muslim Association responded with thanks and a promise: ?In spite of the incident, we are deeply touched and highly encouraged by the overwhelming support we have received from the Peterborough community at large. We will continue to work with all faith groups and concerned citizens in raising awareness of peace and tolerance.?

Perhaps Larry Forsey, a Peterborough area resident, said it best when he swung by the damaged mosque to offer repair funds: ?If people are down and they need help, let's help them. It's what Canada is supposed to be all about.?

So we don't have to see the glass as half empty. There are solid grounds to believe that progress ? economic and social ? is definitely possible. That's a good thought to carry into the holidays, and into the new year.

? Tony Pearson