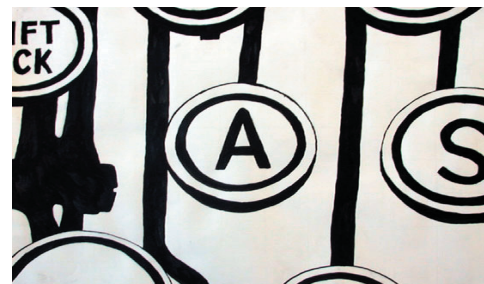


THE LAST WORD

Knockin' on Heaven's Door



Death, disease, terrorism, flesh eating flies (?) What does a girl have to do to enjoy the Sunday papers, for crying out loud!

Recently while overseas, I had the dubious “pleasure” of flicking through an international Sunday paper. I don’t get to see too many of those in Māyāpur, so I was looking forward to it. I settled down to relish the various sections, all folded neatly into one thick, exciting package.

But straight off I noticed a trend that I might possibly have missed if I read the paper daily: the bad news. Okay, so we all know newspapers are full of bad news – but every page? This was something else, and it got so bad so fast that I had to get a notepad and pen and start recording the horrors.

First there was an outbreak of Legionnaires disease in an aged care facility in Canada, killing sixteen residents, and from there it only got worse: six dead from a hurricane-related bacterial cholera in San Francisco; thirty dead from cholera in Manila; over one thousand deaths in North India from encephalitis; the canine flu in New York; the bird flu in Asia, which had now spread into Europe and the Middle East; mudslides in Guatemala; one hurricane hot on the heels of another in the United States; terrorist alerts in the New York underground rail system; terrorist bombings in Bali; an earthquake in Pakistan; even a flesh-eating fly in China (I kid you not).

On top of that, Australian mental health officials reported that one in five teenagers now has a significant mental health problem, and male suicides between the ages of 15 and 19 have increased four-fold in the past few years. Meanwhile in Thailand, they’re giving out free condoms to battle AIDS, and back in Australia, a policeman suggested that anyone living higher than the 13th floor should have compulsory parachutes so they can escape from buildings that are targets of terrorist attacks (as in New York), because police and fire rescue equipment can’t help

anyone above that. There was more. Seriously. But I got the point: this world is definitely not the slick, smooth, attractive, and desirable place that we are mostly convinced it is, or was in the past, or might possibly be in the future. The newspaper was one great big newsflash: it’s an illusion. If I had any doubts at this point, there was more to come to convince me that disease, death, and any multitude of horrors could visit me any time, any place.

“THEY SAID WHAT?”

What started as a leisurely stroll through the Sunday paper was becoming a fascinating litany of horrors that no country on the planet seemed to be able to prevent or escape from. Perhaps the most remarkable and poignant was the article that detailed a study by the World Health Organization which reported that 388 million people will die from heart disease, cancer, or diabetes over the next ten years. They claim, however, that 36 million of these deaths can be prevented. They obviously weren’t reading the same papers as I was: despite any number of scientific cures, I had evidence in my hands on that particular Sunday morning that material nature was finding all sorts of new and interesting ways to convince people that death was inevitable, not something that could be “cured.” But no one seemed to be listening.

At one point I thought this article might be dated before it was even printed: no one wants to read about the Bali bombings months after they’ve occurred. But then I found a most interesting story that sent the concept of “dated” into the stratosphere. The report outlined how scientists have recreated the 1918 Spanish flu virus that killed

fifty million people worldwide. Correctly guessing the response of its readers, the report immediately asked “Why?” The answer, they say, was that the scientists claim that recreating the virus will help them to better understand, and therefore cure, future flu epidemics. Their findings showed that the virus was particularly dangerous to young adults.

TATA TRUCKS AND MILLIONAIRE CURES

This was a very interesting detail: every year we read in different parts of the world how a flu virus during the winter months takes the lives of the very young, the old, or the infirm. I recall a year or two ago a rather nasty strain in Britain that killed ninety people, all of them babies, young children, or the elderly. Yet with the Spanish flu, the scientists’ research showed that it targeted young adults: an age group that is normally less susceptible to viruses of this nature. Here was evidence of the mastery of the material nature, who is doing her best to wake us up and give us a message – no one can escape death, nor can they cheat time by creating so many wonderful “cures” or antidotes or preventative immunization. Nothing will work. In an interview with a reporter in 1968, Srila Prabhupāda pointed out that it was foolish to assume that we could cheat time. “We do not know when death is coming. It is not that because I am old, I am nearing death, and you are young, so you are not nearing death. Who knows that you may die before me? So there is no certainty.” It was a pointed reminder that death can come at any time and make “old people” of us all in one swift moment.

The little dose of Sunday morning research I had unwittingly undertaken was confined mostly to the way death can visit us through the medium of material nature: diseases that we might innocently catch, diseases that we’re aware of and yet we still act out of ignorance (such as AIDS), and natural disasters: tornadoes, mudslides, earthquakes, and the like. It also highlighted acts by other parties that we had no control over, but which caused death: acts of terrorism, war, crime, and so on. Yet the desire to escape death goes beyond these “natural” disasters. Everywhere, everyone is trying to control their

quality of life, all with the distinct purpose of shutting out death, denying its existence, covering up its tracks, and convincing themselves that it won’t happen to them. As I was being driven along the Māyāpur road on my return to India, I realized that India really does have a unique slant on this death thing: they are definitely not in as much denial as the rest of the world. We were driving behind a classic Indian TATA truck: big, crooked, wobbling, overloaded, dangerous to the max, and rattling along at a speed that was frightening, and we were behind it – it’s worse from the front view.

But the truck made me laugh: only in India, where death is accepted and is no big deal. In “civilized” western countries, no such truck would ever make it onto the roads. The danger was obvious, and thankfully laws exist to prevent dangers of this type being permitted in most countries. Yet the laws themselves are evidence of our belief that we can control death, that we can cheat time; that if, by making everything nice, safe, and neatly packaged, then death will perhaps – *hopefully* – take one look and think, “Oh, hang on, that person can’t die: their car is too roadworthy,” and flee to the next unsuspecting victim, leaving us to live eternally and experience true happiness. Well...you get the point.

Of course we have the right to act in a way that protects our lives and the lives of those we love and care for. But doing so won’t chase death away. Safety features in modern vehicles, road rules, immunization from disease: none of them will prevent those same loved ones from death at some point. I read recently that Bill Gates had donated \$20 million to assist in the research of a cure for malaria. It’s a noble thought, but even if they find the cure, people will still die of something. Nothing has been gained in the end except the illusory idea that we have bought time and cheated death. But we haven’t. It happens all the time: just read your Sunday paper.

Yamarāja once asked Mahārāja Yudhiṣṭhira, “What is the most wonderful thing within this world?” Mahārāja Yudhiṣṭhira replied :

*ahany ahani bhūtāni
gacchantīha yamālayam
śeṣāḥ sthāvaram icchanti
kim āścaryam atah param*

“Hundreds and thousands of living entities meet death at every moment, but a foolish living being nonetheless thinks himself deathless and does not prepare for death. This is the most wonderful thing in this world.”
(*Mahābhārata, Vana-parva 313.116*)

In reference to this verse, Śrīla Prabhupāda writes: “Everyone has to die because everyone is fully under the control of material nature, yet everyone thinks that he is independent, that whatever he likes he can do, that he will never meet death but live forever.”

The studies by scientists and the World Health Organization underlined this: their claims that so many deaths could be “prevented” are unfathomable to one who understands the true nature of the soul.

DIFFERENT DAY, SAME PLAGUE

The black plague was a devastating pandemic that hit Europe around the middle of the 14th century, killing an estimated one third of Europe’s entire population. A series of plague epidemics also occurred in large portions of Asia and the Middle East during the same period, and reportedly returned to Europe every generation with varying degrees of intensity and fatality until the 1700s. Today’s plagues, viruses, and pandemics are the same: AIDS has killed an estimated 21 million worldwide; no one yet knows how many the bird flu will kill. How can anyone know that all these diseases haven’t visited us before, or will take on a slightly different strain in future to avoid the “cures” or preventions we take precautions to administer? We may fool ourselves with euphemisms: that some government is to blame, or perhaps change the name from “plague” to AIDS, and put the word out that only some people are susceptible to it. But like the Spanish flu proved, material nature conquers our feeble attempts at immortality, regardless of what name we give the disease, and despite our lifestyle. Diseases don’t come simply to kill the impious or those who don’t live according to religious principles: disease is a representative of death, who comes to take everyone.

My journey to Māyāpur behind the TATA truck

underscored the culture of spiritual knowledge in India. None of the things that disturb the delicate sensibilities of westerners are hidden: poverty, the lack of cleanliness, disease, and death – things that, in the west, are swept away by the disinfectant of denial. Yet those who are convinced that their sanitized existences can prevent death are actually feeling a sense of existential displacement. The fact is that no place within the material realm is free from these afflictions, and nothing we can do will make our homes safe. Our real home is not amongst the decontaminated and sterilized mecca of advanced western civilization, where even death is kept quiet, tame, well-behaved behind the sound-proofed doors of funeral parlors, and softened by the thick, lush carpets that line their halls. The calming words of solace issuing from the mouths of those who deal with death for a living are merely attempts to gloss over what they don’t really understand: the destination of the soul.

Surrounding ourselves with the temporary and illusory comforts of western technology is no panacea to the suffering of the soul, who desires to return to our real home, the spiritual world. Filling our lives with modern comforts, lining our walls with beautiful art, elegantly draping our homes with the softest, most exclusive decor – none of these things will fill the aching need in the deepest recesses of our hearts that we strive to dampen.

Our destination is unknown while we traverse life’s roadways with a merry ignorance of the signposts: death, disease, terrorist attacks, suffering, old age – even flesh-eating flies! – surround us, reminding us of the temporary nature of our travels. We don’t need an air-conditioned, velvet seated, latest-model vehicle with top-of-the-range CD player (complete with an oxygen mask to keep out nasty diseases) to make our journey easier. We have the best, most appropriate, perfectly attuned vehicle available in the universe: the human body. Despite its vulnerability to disease and death, it’s the only vehicle by which we can transcend the miseries of the astoundingly deceptive, wonderfully modern world we live in, and steer ourselves toward the ultimate destination – Kṛṣṇa’s holy abode.

See you there – and if you get there first, save me a seat ...

— The Editor 🍁