

Seeing things in a positive light

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

A friend who reads my columns regularly told me a few days ago that I should find some lighter themes now. “We have become too serious”, said Dr. Memoona, a university teacher in economics in Islamabad. I wasn’t sure if she talked about me, or about herself, that some of her students or colleagues had reminded her of discovering the positive even in difficult situations, which would be a good reminder for a social scientist.

About me, she certainly had a point, but my excuse would be that columnists must write about important issues in an earnest way, trying to be truthful and honest, not only diplomatic, the same as teachers. Perhaps it isn’t all that important what we say; what is important is that the readers and listeners continue to think and analyze issues, and that we inspire each other. For a columnist, that can be to express views and share information that the reader already supports, or it can be the opposite, take up issues that contradict popular opinion, and consider issues from different angles.

In any case, I shall today discuss a few important current issues, trying to see them in a positive light, yet, without glossing over reality.

First, the Greek financial debt crisis, which is serious and sad, but maybe Greece can snatch victory from defeat. Maybe the country’s great Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Finance Minister Yannis Varoufakis can teach us all important lessons in how a country, group or community, once in difficulties, have to find solutions that are fair and good for all. This week, I felt proud of the Greek leaders, whom opponents in the establishment have termed, ‘young, inexperienced, academic, ideological’ and more, also wanting them to ignore promises to the voters and ignore consequences of continued austerity measures. We all know that Greece cannot pay all its debt, ever, but we talk as if it were possible ‘if only Greece would do the right thing’.

This week, the Greek politicians came out and said that the rich must pay much higher taxes than they have done in the past; the politicians are right even if it will take time to get tax collection systems in place. Why should only ordinary, salaried people shoulder the bill?

What the Greek leaders do now may be a paradigm shift in European politics, a revival of the true socialist and social democratic thinking, which was clearer before and after World War II. I believe the Greek leaders do a service to all Europeans and people everywhere, even if they don’t succeed fully – in a time when equalities grow, and the availability of resources is more than ever.

I also believe that Angela Merkel, Germany’s logical leader sympathizes more with the Greek than she can say in public. After all, she grew up in communist East Germany, in a religious family, and she was educated to be a scientist. She must know full well that Germany and the other big countries profited from the Euro-zone and EU policies at the expense of Greece and the other small countries lagging behind in development. The Greeks lived beyond means, but Germany was happy to make money on it, selling Mercedes Benz’s and the like to them. Merkel cannot have forgotten all the criticism of capitalism that she grew up with, and in honesty, she must know that most of it was right.

The crux of the political thinking was: *‘From each according to his/her ability; to each according to his/her need’*, an ethical and economic principle popularized by Karl Marx, although coined before him. Coming to think of it, that principle is also a valid pillar of Islam, and reminder to us all during Ramadan and the rest of the year, irrespective of religion or politics.

The second issue I would like to draw attention to today is the race relations in USA. Earlier this year, there was the Ferguson tragedy when a young black teenager was shot at killed by police for no reason. Last week, it was a terrible shooting in a South Carolina church, where a young white man shot African Americans in a Bible study group. Both are sad cases and unworthy of a country like America. Far too little attention has been given to educating people about race and equality in the land. But, in the midst of it all, I was glad to hear President Obama address both tragedies. Perhaps that can help lead to a new debate and new positive actions?

I was also glad to see the church goers in the southern state congregation pray for the perpetrator. They said they wanted to forgive him. But even if all cannot do that, they can feel for him, realize that he was misguided by his own society to have developed hate against black people. He and his family are victims, too, not only those who died or were injured. That is always a lesson when terrorist attacks happen, also in Pakistan.

The third issue I would like to mention today is the vast field of refugees and forced migration. Even in that field, we can find many positive stories. The World Refugee Agency UNHCR's chief Antonio Guterres came to Pakistani this week for what was termed a 'Ramadan Solidarity' visit.

There are still 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and probably another million unregistered refugees. The refugee crisis is referred to as the world's longest protracted refugee crisis. Durable solutions are sought, either at home in Afghanistan, in the host countries of Pakistan and Iran, or 'third countries'. It is urgent to find those 'durable solutions'.

When the World Refugee Day was marked on 20 June, a key message this year was that, in the midst of tragedy, we should look for the positive stories. We should realize that refugees are ordinary people who live through extraordinary times, and that they cannot postpone living till they have returned home, or found another permanent home. We should note that Pakistan has done quite well as a host country for one and half generations. That becomes clear when we compare with the current refugee crisis in Syria and Iraq, and the West is only half-heartedly willing to help. There are some 60 million displaced people in the world today, more than ever. "We must all open our hearts to refugees everywhere", said UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon last week.

Dear Dr. Memoona, did I write about the topics I chose in a more positive way this week than I usually do? I tried to do as best as I could. That may not be good enough, but that is all we can do, in whatever field of work and life. We must be sincere and honest, on both sunny and rainy days.

I wish you continued *Ramadan Kareem*.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.
