Seeing good and evil: The virtues of witness

by Thomas J. Callahan in the November 4, 1998 issue

My faith took a turn for the better ten and a half years ago when something very sad happened. My brother Danny was struck by an automobile and died. During the three days in which I watched over him in the hospital, I was confirmed in my faith in Christ and God's mercy. As I sat by his bed in the middle of the night, with a certainty I did not know I possessed, I knew that our separation would be only temporary.

In the aftermath, I found myself far more tuned into the troubles and losses of those around me. As the poet William Wordsworth wrote when his brother drowned in 1807, "A deep distress hath humanized my soul." Danny's sudden passing had "humanized my soul" a bit. It was then that I began to suspect that sadness, suffering and even evil could, if faced squarely, reveal God's love and joy more perfectly.

I was severely tested in this belief when I traveled to Rwanda in June of 1994. The genocide that took place there was still fresh. The U.S. Embassy had been evacuated when the killings began, and I was the first U.S. official to return to the country--and that was against the advice of diplomatic security. I went because I wanted to understand better what had happened, and because I knew the situation could become even worse.

On my way from that trip, when the sights and smells of the killing fields were still fresh, I wrote to my sister:

The stench had settled everywhere like a fog. I backed away quickly and tied a bandanna around my face. I did not want to throw up in front of the young soldiers with me, all of whom had lost relatives in scenes like this one. It would have seemed disrespectful to them.

Outside the doorway lay two perfect little skulls--maybe a six-year-old and a nine-year-old. Some weeks ago these were laughing, crying, running, sleeping, breathing children. Perhaps a boy and a girl, a brother and sister, I thought. My mind flashed to a photo that hangs in Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust museum. From a roomful of striking black-and-white photos taken in the Warsaw Ghetto, one has remained etched in my mind: a young girl, about 11 or 12, cradling the unconscious form of a five-or-six-year-old boy on a grimy curbside. The expression on her face says, "What do I do? I'm supposed to take care of him!"

I think about the silence and remoteness of this place. The newspapers back home have reported the astounding numbers: 200,000, 300,000, half a million possible dead, but the numbers are too great, too astounding to comprehend fully. If you hear only the incomprehensible numbers, it's almost like another form of not knowing. To really know tragedy is to think about the murder of the little boy and girl whose skulls lay among the piles of garbage, to imagine their last moments of stark terror, and to consider its repetition a hundred thousand fold.

I ended my letter with these words:

What has happened in Rwanda is evil. No explanations of ancient tribal animosities or political maneuvering are adequate to the reality of babies held in the air with one hand and hacked to death with the other. That is what happened in a calculated, systematic fashion. That is the evil. I don't think the U.S. or the rest of the world has an adequate "policy" for dealing with such phenomena, but I think we need one.

This was another turning point for me. In the months and years that ensued, I thought a lot about my faith and God's mysterious plan. In that time, I developed an intuition that our knowledge of good and evil is both a burden and a blessing. In Genesis 3 when Eve tells the serpent why the fruit of a particular tree is forbidden, he replies: "You surely will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." I had always believed that the serpent lied, but God confirms his words just a few verses later: "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." To recognize the evil that the innocent suffer is a burden and a frustration. The Book of Job makes clear that even the most righteous of men may not fathom God's mystery. When challenged by Job, God offers the greatest conversation stopper of all time: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." Eventually Job gets it. After years of suffering and loss and a full-

scale argument with God, Job realizes the error of his fundamental assumptions:

> I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know . . . I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You.

And what he "gets," I think, is not an understanding of God's plan, but the understanding that he'll never know the plan of God--at least not in this lifetime. He gets it that God doesn't operate on a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" principle. He now knows that being righteous means doing so whether you experience earthly reward or no.

Although the knowledge of good and evil is a burden, it is also a blessing. For with that knowledge, and the willingness to bear witness to evil, we can know good more perfectly. In 1644 John Milton wrote:

> It was from out of the rind of one apple tasted that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom that Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good by evil. . . . He that can consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race.

True warfaring Christians: I like that. This is the phrase that leaps to my mind when I see and talk to aid workers out in the field, battling with suffering, strife and sometimes threats to their own lives, taking a hard road and bearing witness. As Milton concludes, "Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary."

At every turn of my sinful and impure life, my faith has been lifted and forged by something difficult, something contrary. I cannot say that I am yet like Job, that I now see God with my eye, but I believe that I have become better able to face evil without flinching and without losing my own humanity.

We live in a wonderful country, but I fear that it is all too easy to forget about the rest of the world, to block from view those who are truly in pain, truly suffering. Part of my job is to help members of Congress and policy-makers in the executive branch to take a look around, to see what I've seen, even though it may not be pleasant, or something their constituents are likely to discuss with them.

By seeing the world through the eyes of the oppressed and the powerless, by bearing witness to suffering, by facing--even vicariously--the life and death trials that play themselves out on the remote corners of the world's stage, these men and women of power and influence may improve their own knowledge of good and evil.