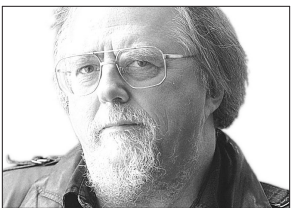


COMMENT

Greenland's giant gamble

Will vulnerable cultures be sacrificed in race for growth?



GWYNNE DYER

Greenland has the highest suicide rate in the world: One in five Greenlanders tries to die by suicide at some point in their lives.

Everybody in Greenland (all 56,000 of them) knows this. In fact, everybody knows people who have attempted suicide — or succeeded.

So is it really a good idea to subject this population to an experiment in high-speed cultural and economic change?

Greenland is not fully independent: Denmark still controls its defence and foreign affairs, and subsidizes the population at the annual rate of about \$10,000 per person. But Greenlanders are one of the few aboriginal societies on the planet that is dominant (almost 90 per cent of the population) on a large territory: the world's biggest island. And it is heading for independence.

So the debate is about what to aim for. Do you go on trying to preserve what is left of the old Arctic hunting and fishing culture, although it's already so damaged and discouraged that it has the highest suicide rate on the planet?

Or do you seek salvation in full modernization through high-speed economic growth? What's remarkable about Greenland politics is how aware the players are of their dilemma.

"If you want to become rich, it comes at a price," says Aqqaluk Lynge, one of the founders of the Inuit Ataqatigiit (Community of the People) party that ran the government until recently.

Lynge doesn't want to pay that price, and under the Inuit Ataqatigiit administration all mining was banned in Greenland. Quite apart from the environmental costs of large-scale mining operations, Lynge said, the many thousands of foreign workers they would bring in would have a devastating impact on what is already a very fragile Greenlandic culture.

But the Siumut (Forward) party won last October's election, and new Prime Minister Aleqa Hammond sees things very differently. She thinks modernization has gone too far to turn back now. Better to gamble on solving the current huge social problems (like suicide) by enabling everybody to live fully modern, prosperous lives.

With this in mind, she has issued more than 120 licences for mining and petrochemical projects including a huge open-cast iron-ore mine that would ship 15 million tonnes of high-grade iron concentrate a year (mostly to China), drilling platforms for offshore oil and gas exploration, and even mines to produce uranium and rare earths.

She has made her choice, and she understands it.

In a recent interview, Aleqa Hammond said: "The shock will be profound. But we have faced colonization, epidemics and modernization before.

"The decisions we are making (to open the country up to mining and oil exploitation) will have enormous impact on lifestyles and our indigenous culture. But we always come out on top. We are vulnerable, but we know how to adapt."

Brave words. But few Greenlanders have the technical and managerial skills to get senior jobs in these high-risk, high-cost enterprises (\$2.5 billion for the iron ore mine alone), and most of them will not want the hard, dirty, dangerous jobs in the mines and on the rigs.

To the extent that a sense of cultural marginalization and defeat, and a life without meaningful work, is responsible for the Greenlanders' problems, it's hard to see how more money from a different source will help. Or how adding a few tens of thousands of foreign workers from places like China to the social mix will help, either.

The epidemic of depression and other psychological illnesses, the rampant alcoholism and drug use, and the tidal wave of suicides that plague the Greenlanders are not unique: Almost all the aboriginal peoples of North America, and indeed elsewhere too, have elevated levels of these afflictions.

In Canada, for example, the general population experiences a 12 per 100,000 rate of suicide, while aboriginal people in general have double that rate.

But the suicide rate among Inuit people in Canada is TEN times as high as it is among the general population — and among Inuit children and teens it is a staggering THIRTY times as high.

The Greenlanders have much more control over their lives, but they belong to the same Inuit culture that extends right across the high north from Alaska to Greenland. They also seem to share the same problems — like suicide.

These problems are unlikely to be cured simply by throwing money at them. It could even make matters worse.

Aleqa Hammond is damned if she does and damned if she doesn't: leaving the people in their current predicament is not a good choice.

But going flat out for modernization doesn't feel like such a good option either.

Gwynne Dyer is an independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

I want to see him resign, that's what I want to see. Either he resigns or I'd like to see his boss fire him. He's not a very compassionate man. He was ignorant, forceful and actually disgraceful.

RON CLARKE, A VETERAN FROM NORTH SYDNEY, N.S., REGARDING VETERANS AFFAIRS MINISTER JULIAN FANTINO. VETERANS ARE OPPOSED TO THE CLOSURE OF EIGHT VETERANS AFFAIRS DISTRICT OFFICES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

You're never too old for Heavy Metal

Earplugs in, my wife and I make the scene



PAUL BENEDETTI

Last Friday, I was at a heavy metal concert when a couple of guys who were moshing almost hit me while slam dancing around in the crowd.

Now, there's a sentence I never thought I'd write, along with: "Some years ago, after my second trip to Africa, I decided to take up BASE jumping" and "Can you bring my Ferrari around? You can't miss it. It's the one with Kate Upton in it."

(Note to wife: That last sentence is completely in jest, I swear. I've never really wanted a Ferrari.)

Anyway, back to the concert. My wife and I had braved the winter weather to take in a little metal at the Ron Edwards Family YMCA in Burlington. Now, you may find it strange that a sedated couple (sorry, I meant "sedate") in their 50s would be keen on a night of metal music and perhaps a bit of aggressive "pogoing" — and you'd be right. Up until a few years ago, I thought heavy metal was plutonium and Anthrax was an infectious disease. But all that changed when our eldest son, James, began playing in a metal band.

James was kind enough to carefully explain the origins of metal to us and provide several samples. For example, he played a song from one of his favourite bands, Scar Symmetry. At the start, it sounded like an industrial machine running at full tilt, then there was a part where the machine is cutting through chunks of steel and then the "singing" began. This sounded a lot like someone had fallen into the machine and was not enjoying it much. That went on for about seven minutes.

"Wow," my wife said. "That's certainly very ... loud."

She always tries to find the positive in things. James explained that there were many genres of

They call their band Act of Sin. They were keen on Cannibal Corpse or Vomit Remnants, but those names were already taken.

metal and he provided some examples.

Classic Heavy Metal is extremely loud, has distorted guitars, fast drumming and screaming vocals.

Thrash Metal is "more aggressive," which translates to louder and faster.

Speed Metal is the same as above only faster still.

Death Metal is when the band plays so fast and hard the musicians explode onstage. Not surprisingly, most of these bands have only one album.

I may have some of this wrong — it was really hard to hear James while the songs were playing and I had to take time out to stem the flow of blood from my ears.

Like all good parents, we expressed our support for his band and we were pleased to see him out practising every week. They call their band Act of Sin. They were keen on Cannibal Corpse or Vomit Remnants, but those names were already taken. (I wish I were kidding.)

Anyway, after posting a demo online, the band got some attention and eventually some offers to play. That's how we found ourselves out at the Y's fundraiser Metal Band Night Event. Being no fool and remembering vaguely that Metallica and Motorhead wore black, I did the same in an effort to, you know, "blend in."

When we got to the ticket table the kids just stared at us. "Senior swim is downstairs," said one.

"We're here for the metal bands," I said, opening my coat to show my black sweater.

"You know it's loud, right?" said the other kid. She looked worried.

"No problem," I said. "We brought our earplugs."

And thank the Gods of Metal we did. The room was not very big and we stood near the back, but I knew we were in trouble when the recorded warm-up music was just slightly quieter than a 747 taking off. The boys took to the stage — Nick, Dylan, Matt, Dave and James — and began. At first, I thought their song sounded a lot like a large train passing with a man strapped to the front screaming. But after a few minutes, I realized these guys were really good. Great guitar work, propulsive drumming and a lot of good stage energy got the crowd going.

I think it's a bit late for me to get some tats and ear discs, but I might just sneak a little Slayer into my playlist.

You know, right after Sinatra.

Paul Benedetti lives in Hamilton. He is a former Spectator reporter and now teaches journalism at the University of Western Ontario.

Prison was Mandela's prescription

Solitude and quiet can teach who we are, where we've come from



THOMAS FROESE

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

— From the poem *Invictus*

KAMPALA, UGANDA Much has been made about the tremendous story from Africa that ended 2013, that of Nelson Mandela and the worldwide send-off he was given, and rightly so.

Mandela will be remembered as the embodiment of William Ernest Henley's poem, *Invictus*, that 19th-century verse describing a man who, as Henley put it, fell in the clutch of circumstance, who knew the bludgeonings of chance and bloody head, who found wrath and tears and horror, but through it all was unafraid and, in the end, "captain of his soul."

Well over a month after Mandela's death, his name is still easily spoken across Africa. Yesterday it came up during coffee with an American friend talking about the story *The Shawshank Redemption*. My daughter's Grade 5 class has now studied Mandela's life. Even while driving daily to the kids' international school, we pass Mandela Stadium.

The irony is that, humanly speaking, Mandela should have ended up in the trash heap of history's forgotten freedom fighters. As high commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, he had planned sabotage, guerrilla war and open revolution and was expected to have been hanged precisely 50 years ago, just after his late 1963 trial.

Instead, South Africa's apartheid government opted for the surprising, if not risky, sentence of life imprisonment. And that, eventually, as we now know, changed everything because Mandela allowed the bitter pill of prison to become his prescription against hate.

In jail, his eventual reaction wasn't unlike that of

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who, after time in a Russian gulag, said "Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life." In prison, he said he "came to realize the object of life is not prosperity as we're made to believe, but maturity of the human soul."

In a 1975 letter to his wife, Winnie, Mandela, said it similarly: "You may find that the cell is an ideal place to learn how to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your mind and feelings ... the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct."

In this, there's something for any of us. Because, like Mandela, we all have a story. A journey. And there may be nothing more important than creating our own private space to keep track of it: who we are and where we've come from and how we've changed.

To lose track of this — the good times, the dreams, the dreams broken, even the mistakes — is to become terribly impoverished, it seems to me, detached from life itself.

My own feeble attempts to keep track have been imperfect. I have other things to do. The bus is coming. Lunch beckons. But for years, I've found an annual journal to be helpful to simply record my prayerful desires and thanksgivings. And while plenty of pages are blank, others are not.

What's most interesting is to look back on dreams for my vocation that were never met (which I'm now thankful for), hopes for my relationships that were never met (which I'm now even more thankful for), and desires for one thing or another that were, in fact, met, but in ways so unexpected and unusual, I can hardly take any credit.

In a larger way on the world stage, this is what Mandela experienced. This is why, while he wasn't captain of the entirety of his life to begin with — none of us really are — he was captain of what he did have, his response to a second, albeit tough, chance at it all.

Carving out regular space for reflection is hardly encouraged in our time. Idlers are frowned on. It's easier, apparently, to exhaust ourselves in one rodent race or another. Or show highly edited versions of who we are. (No more than 140 characters, please.) We think this is more acceptable than the real deal.

But this remarkable story is spilling over from 2013. And it's all something to think about this new year. This new day. Or any day, really.

Author and journalist Thomas Froese is a Hamiltonian in East Africa most of the year. Read his blog on fatherhood at www.dailypad.net and his other commentaries at www.thomasfroese.com



BRIEFLY

Short and excerpted comments sent to letters@thespec.com

Ford, Bieber need intervention

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, recalling his own drug-addled youth as a spoiled rich boy, supports Justin Bieber in his destructive antics. Ford asks us all to remember what we did at 19. Truly, on my 19th birthday, I went out and partied. As a reserve army soldier, I had a rifle in my hand and was serving in the brigade we had stationed in Germany facing off against the Soviet Army. By 19, unlike Ford, most of us had learned some responsibility. Bieber is on a course that will see him either in jail or dead: he needs an intervention just as surely as Ford does. VAL PATRICK, HAMILTON

Pay for your own rescue

I want my tax dollars to stop being used for the rescue of stupid people who keep going to these out-of-the-way places and then need to have a huge fire brigade, along with other service people who just stand around and watch, all adding to the cost of the clowns needing rescuing. If I am the airhead that can't stay away from the edge of the Escarpment, then I should be the one to pay for my own rescue. Hands up if you agree. DENNIS MARTEN, WINONA

'Have you no sense of decency?'

The Harper government gives billions of dollars to the tarsands business every year while betraying our veterans in order to end a deficit it created. It is time to ask the prime minister the question asked of another political bully by a lawyer in an American court many years ago: "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?" BILL PRESTWICH, DUNDAS

Count our blessings

We make far too much out of the two big stories currently circulating, Toronto Mayor Rob Ford and pop superstar Justin Bieber. We should count our blessings. I recall when the big news item was a husband going missing after a test drive; some kind of explosion in Quebec; a fire at a retirement villa, etc. etc. etc. SANDRA HARRINGTON, HAMILTON