

Signs of Hope

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"All changed, changed utterly,
A terrible beauty is born."
- W B Yeats, "Easter 1916"

"Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today."
— Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*

This is a blog I would prefer not to write; certainly prefer not to **have** to write; but as a New Zealander, I cannot **not** talk and write about the ghastly killing of 50 people at prayer in two mosques, in Christchurch on the afternoon of 15th March. Unless you've been in a news blackspot for the past 10 days, you cannot have missed the coverage, not only of the shooting, but also of the dignified, compassionate, inclusive response from our political leaders and from leaders of the Muslim community of New Zealand. Those who followed the press briefings of the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, or of the Police Commissioner Mike Bush; or the statements from leaders of the Islamic communities in Christchurch and other cities; who watched the public outpouring of support, protection, grief and love, will be well aware of just how the nation's - and the faith's - leaders responded to such a dark moment in our history. Such has been the extent of the domestic and international coverage, that there's no need for me to cover that ground again here. However, I do want to use the few paragraphs I have to offer some of the vignettes that stood out for me; to draw a few mediation-linked observations; and to reflect on what might be the next steps.

First, an observation on language, tone and leadership: from the outset, in the first couple of hours after the news broke of the shootings, the PM's press briefings were notable for a couple of key features; one was the use of inclusive language, in a briefing peppered with "we", "our", "us", setting a tone that was to be heard in media appearances by leaders of the Muslim community, and comments by members of the public. Equally there was an empathy and authenticity - borne of that inclusiveness - that again echoed through public and political responses. While there was clearly disbelief that such an atrocity - immediately labelled, for good reason, as a form of white supremacist terrorism - could happen in a largely safe and peaceful country, there was less anger and vitriol than there was compassion and support.

So, in responding to conflict and threat, it's clear that leadership and tone matter.

Secondly, some of the vignettes that touched me as I took in the wall-to-wall coverage of the public responses to the killings, the vigils, and the briefings:

- one of the most moving (for me, at least) was the [haka performed by students of Auckland's Al-Madinah school](#), one of two Islamic schools in the country. Here was a group of Muslim kids, performing a traditional Maori challenge, as a way of showing thanks for the support from the community;
- and on the theme of Maori responses and support, we saw a powerful [haka](#) and challenge from members of a local motorbike gang, Mongrel Mob, outside a mosque in Hamilton; as well as a haka by the gang at the Christchurch mosque;
- members of that same gang also [stood guard and vigil](#), to protect the mosque;
- in another haka, performed by students at a school in another city, in the middle of that group, exemplifying the nation's diversity and inclusiveness, was a young Sikh student wearing a patka, the lighter form of turban typically worn by younger men;
- at the commemorative vigil, one week after the shootings, and following the call to prayer, in Arabic, Imam Gamal Fouda echoed the tone and style of the Prime Minister in his inclusive language which not only underscored the Muslim community's appreciation for the love, protection and support provided by the community, but also reinforced the sense of belonging rather than separation;
- Imam Fouda was followed by a very brief address from Dr Mustafa Farouk, the President of the Federation of Islamic Associations New Zealand, who concluded his words by speaking in Maori;
- at international airports (Auckland and Christchurch) Customs officials closed the departure gates on Friday 22nd at 1.32pm, at the time of the vigil, and formed a row in front of the exit gates, eyes closed, in silent support of the vigil, in a move that drew praise from domestic and foreign travellers alike;
- and a notable feature of vigils and the gatherings of support around the Christchurch mosques has been the articulate presence and leadership of young people, such as [Okirano Tilaia](#), the head boy of Cashmere High School, which lost two pupils in the massacre.

Of course, not everything was love and peace: a man wearing a T-shirt with a swastika had to be moved on by Police after he stationed himself outside a mosque a day or so after the killings; the self-appointed "Bishop" of one of the non-mainstream churches waxed indignant about the fact that the call the prayer would be an Islamic one and would refer to the "one true God" (forgetting, conveniently, that Christianity, Islam and Judaism are the three great monotheistic religions); the Prime Minister has apparently received death threats from Internet trolls . . . and ten days out from the massacre we await any word at all from Mark Zuckerberg, whose platform, Facebook, facilitated the wildfire distribution of the killer's manifesto and live-streaming of the killings (on that point, it's worth noting that Facebook responded to the video only some 8 minutes after the alleged killer had been arrested, which was a mere 26 minutes after the shooting began; and Facebook has - at the time of writing - failed to respond to a request from the Privacy Commissioner concerning their role in the video's distribution).

The question we now face is: what next? Many of the funerals have taken place; some bodies are to be repatriated to the home countries of the victims; there will be further vigils; there will be a criminal trial in the coming months; people will return to their usual routines; legislative moves will be made to implement the gun control promised within six days of the shootings; and the Prime Minister has announced a Royal Commission of Inquiry into security questions, with a wide remit to inquire into how this act of terror happened and could have been prevented. But hard questions need to be asked, some which were uncomfortably raised during the days after the event: while public and politicians alike affirmed that such terrorist acts were "not us", and that the Muslim community was "us", we also know that there are forms of structural and attitudinal racism often not far from the surface; we heard from some of the Muslim community (refugees and migrants alike) that they did not always feel safe in New Zealand, as they faced regular prejudice; that intolerance and anger can be stirred by 'shock jocks', talkback hosts and opportunistic political leaders; that immigration remains a red flag issue for many; that there is racial profiling by government agencies; and that casual racism creeps into everyday conversation. It's possible - and this is where the hope comes in - that this ghastly moment, followed by an astonishing week of public response, will trigger something new. It's possible that positive responses will become embedded, such as that from a gentlemen who conceded that his attitude had changed towards the mosques which he'd walked past every day for 40 years. But it's equally possible that the cynical, the opportunistic and the dogmatic will find occasion to press home points of political and historical "triumph" and blame, especially as the conventional themes for divisive exchanges - white/black/brown, Christian/Muslim, New Zealander/immigrant etc - are ready-made scripts for the shouting match.

The work, then, is still to be done - to have those hard and challenging conversations about who "we" are, beyond the declarations that this is "not us". There's no easy escape from the ongoing and community-building tasks of those dialogues of difference by merely affirming that this event was "not us".

These are now the conversations, at political, community, school hall, family levels, about what it actually means to live in a diverse community, and one in which we can only be enriched - while also being challenged from our complacency - by our differences. As Lord Bhikhu Parekh wrote, "In an intercultural dialogue neither the majority nor the minority way of life can escape the other's scrutiny." [B Parekh (2006) *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, 2nd ed., New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan; p 293].

This is not an exercise in flattening differences or subsuming them into some sort of culturally-neutral blandness (nor one of reducing cultural differences to a celebration of the new-found range of 'ethnic' restaurants we now have, though that is not to be denied as a gain). Rather, as Lord Parekh notes elsewhere in his book, these dialogues are bound to involve "passages of incomprehension, intransigence, irreconcilable differences." [p.272]

I can do no better than to quote Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks:

"Conversation - respectful, engaged, reciprocal, calling forth some of our greatest powers of empathy and understanding - is the moral form of a world governed by the dignity of difference."

The Dignity of Difference, 84.