

The Street of the Dead Fetuses

It has been said that one death is a tragedy, and a million, a statistic. But on occasion a feeling person writes something so moving that a statistic is transformed into a tragedy no one understands. Irrevocably, who we are as a people changes forever through vivid moral shock.

I got the shock recently from Dr. Richard Selzer, a general surgeon retired from 26 years at Yale University Hospital. He is a compassionate man who writes from personal experience, not to lecture, but to show. What he has written transcends politics. It serves as a ghastly mirror held up to liberal civilization, for we know this carefully packaged thing happens daily in Canada...and it is time for all feeling people to ask why:

"In our city, garbage is collected early in the morning. Sometimes we are resentful, mutter into our pillows, then go back to sleep. On the morning of August 6, 1975, the people of 73rd Street near Woodside Avenue do just that. When at last they rise from their beds, dress, eat breakfast and leave their houses for work...they close their doors and descend to the pavement.

"It is midsummer. You measure the climate, decide how you feel in relation to the heat and humidity. You walk toward the bus stop. Others, your neighbours, are waiting there. It is all so familiar. All at once you step on something soft. You feel it with your foot. Even through your shoe you have the sense of something unusual, something marked by a special 'give.' It is a foreignness upon the pavement. Instinct pulls your foot away in an awkward little movement. You look down and see...a tiny naked body, its arms and legs flung apart, its head thrown back, its mouth agape, its face serious. A bird, you think, fallen from its nest. But there is no nest here on 73rd Street, no bird so big. It is rubber, then. A model, a...joke. Yes, that's it, a joke. And you bend to see. Because you must. And it is no joke. Such a gray softness can be but one thing. It is a baby, and dead. You cover your mouth, your eyes. You are fixed. Horror has found its chink and crawled in, and you will never be the same as you were...

"Now you look about; another man has seen it too. Others come, people you have seen every day for years, and you hear them speak with strangely altered voices. 'Look,' they say, 'it's a baby.' There is a cry. 'Here's another!' and 'Another!' and 'Another!' And you follow with your gaze the index fingers of your friends pointing from the huddle where you cluster. Yes, it is true! There are more of these...little carcasses upon the street. And for a moment you look up to see if all the unbaptized sinless are falling from limbo.

"Now the street is filling with people. There are police. They know what to do. They rope off the area, then stand guard over the enclosed space. They are controlled, methodical, these young policemen...Yet I do see their pallor and the sweat that breaks upon the face of one, the way another bites the lining of his cheek and holds it thus. Ambulance attendants scoop up the bodies. They scan the street; none must be overlooked. What they place upon the litter amounts to little more than a dozen pounds of human flesh. They raise the litter. And slide it home inside the ambulance, and they drive away.

"You and your neighbours stand about in the street which has become for you a battlefield from which the newly slain have at last been bagged, and tagged, and dragged away. *But what shrapnel is this? By what explosion flung, these fragments that sink into the brain and fester there?* Whatever smell there is in this place becomes for you the stench of death. The people of 73rd Street do not speak to each other. It is too soon for outrage, too late for blindness. It is the time of unresisted horror.

"Later, at the police station, the investigation is brisk, conclusive. It is the hospital director speaking: `...fetuses accidentally got mixed up with the hospital rubbish...were picked up by a sanitation truck. Somehow, the plastic lab bag, labeled HAZARDOUS MATERIAL, fell off the back of the truck and broke open. No, it is not known how the fetuses got in the orange plastic bag labeled HAZARDOUS MATERIAL. It is a freak accident.' The hospital director wants you to know that it is not an everyday occurrence. Once in a lifetime, he says. But you have seen it, and what are his words to you now?

"He grows affable, familiar, tells you that, by mistake, the fetuses got mixed up with the *other debris*. (Yes, he says other, he says debris.) He has spent the entire day, he says, trying to figure out how it happened. He wants you to know that. Somehow it matters to him. He goes on: "Aborted fetuses that weigh one pound or less are incinerated. Those weighing over one pound are buried at the city cemetery. He says this. Now you see. It *is* orderly. It *is* sensible. The world is *not* mad. This is still a civilized society.

"There is no more. You turn to leave. Outside on the street, men are talking things over, reassuring each other that the right thing is being done. But just this once, you know it isn't. You saw, and you know.

"And you know, too, that the Street of the Dead Fetuses will be wherever you go. You are part of its history now, its legend. It has laid claim upon you so that you cannot entirely leave it - not ever."

Let every citizen, every teacher, ask a schoolchild to read this - and then explain what kind of people we are.