

LEFT (to us) TO RIGHT

My son is in Vietnam. Thirty-five years ago, many American fathers made the same announcement. Same words, maybe even same pride. At that time, though, peril cleaved the fathers' hearts and the nation's soul. Back then, those who listened, those who waited, understood the danger even as they wrestled to explain the mission and to find a resolution. Over the past ten days, my boy has ventured up river from the Mekong Delta to the city once known as Saigon through Da Nang into the wild mountainous region in the north and on to Hanoi. His campaign encountered vast cities and forgotten villages, all teeming with citizens – some rich, most very poor. All of them, seemingly, at peace with America, extending friendship to these young visitors from the United States. How unimaginable. Once upon a time, a war was fought by patriots on two sides of a deadly conflict. Nowadays in Vietnam, as well as here at home, most battles are waged on the killing fields of inequity. The poetic irony of history finds two former enemies up against a common foe. Today in their country and ours, unequal resources pierce lives where bullets no longer reach.

Life tosses curve balls just when we expect a pitch straight down the pike. No one is as easy to read, no choice is as simple, no decision as certain as we first imagine. What we know today will change tomorrow. This need not cause confusion or suspicion. Instead, the multi-faceted realities of how people think, feel and act should encourage us to remain open to possibilities, to change and to common ground. We should be able to sometimes cooperate and sometimes disagree with one another. That's human nature and the enduring gift of relationship.

Take my grandfather, for example. He was not an enigma to his guilty society which, after learning a terrible lesson, refused any longer to divide and polarize people and their ideas. He held some complex and even contradictory points of views. He was a banker. He was a socialist. He was the sweetest man I ever knew. When he became Austria's post-war Secretary of Commerce, he welcomed good ideas from anywhere in order to help his nation rebuild after the Second World War. The ashes of national racism yielded to a policy of political neutrality and economic alliances with east and west during the Cold War. He understood that objects (including people and countries) are most stable when supported on all sides. To this day, parties to conflict convene in Vienna to negotiate trade across ideologies.

We can learn some deep lessons here that might serve our current crusade to brighten the future. Guaranteeing the right of all children to live in secure, caring and healthy families and communities is the smartest idea mankind has ever come up with. So far, however, no place has fully achieved this foundation for world peace and prosperity. Here at home, I see kids stuck in a time warp every day. Their 21st century neighborhoods perpetuate 12th century rejection of the equal value of every person. Too many youth know what they need, what they want and what they will likely never have. They figure out early that place, race and who's your daddy are powerful social determinants of health and wealth. They grow hateful toward those who don't notice their humanity and don't protect their equal rights. Too often, they also end up hating or hurting

themselves. From Tampa to Tibet, social justice and civil war contest the road from dignity to civility. We need our civic, business and citizen leaders to believe that they can only insure their own children's happiness, safety and success if, in concert, they also actively support the well-being of everyone else's children in their community.

My son is in Vietnam. Where they remember the tragedy they call the American War. Where Jonah and his classmates are humbled by the distance, the time and the diversity they could gap so quickly. Where those with older memories of events that shaped a generation still struggle to rest in peace. And where our young world travelers find a place of mystery and beauty. Through their eyes, I discover hope for a future we must yet again create for our nation and for another halfway across the globe, for the old and the young – a future healed not by those who eventually forget but by those who ultimately forgive.

Then as now as will ever be, the child is father to the man. Thirty-five years from now, how will today's sons and daughters view the world we leave them? And which of our values will help them find a sustainable path through the ever more complex truths they'll face?