

Images of pain and beauty

On Sept. 2, 2015, the world was stunned by the image of Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian boy lying face down, as if asleep, on the beach at the Turkish resort of Bodrum. Aylan, along with his 5-year-old brother and 11 others, drowned when the small boat ferrying him and a host of other Syrian refugees capsized in the Mediterranean Sea.

But that haunting picture was only one of many images from 2015 reminding us of the pain and brokenness so evident in our world. Alongside Aylan, the past year holds memories of public beheadings in Syria, escalating cycles of violence in Israel/Palestine, panic-stricken streets in Paris, and more than a million refugees moving through southern Europe, desperately seeking a safe haven from the horrific violence they face in their homelands.

Here in the United States, we were confronted almost daily by the ongoing epidemic of shootings, the persistent ugliness of racism and the mean-spirited cynicism of our national political discourse. And even closer to home, we will remember 2015 as the year when the fragile unity of Mennonite Church USA came undone.

At home and abroad, it seems, the poet W. B. Yeats was right: “things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”

And yet ... and yet. Even amid all of the darkness and ugliness in the world today, I also experienced moments of breathtaking beauty in 2015.

Beauty takes many forms. I think, for example, of the opening worship at the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Harrisburg, Pa., last summer, when representatives of groups from around the world, dressed in traditional garb and carrying banners, danced into the service to “When the Saints Go Marching In.” Or the sudden tears in the worship services that followed as 7,500 people from 65 countries joined their voices together in songs of praise.

I recall the moment, two days before Christmas, when I heard the news about a group of militants who boarded a crowded bus in Mandera, Kenya, with the intention of killing Christians. But the Muslim women on the bus refused the order to leave. Instead, some gave Christian passengers their hijabs, while others told the attackers to “kill us all together or leave them alone.” When the passengers refused to separate based on their religion, the gunmen left the bus.

Recently, while traveling in Spain, I entered

the basilica of the Sagrada Familia, designed by Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí, and was overwhelmed by the enormity of space, the intricate design of the supporting columns and, above all, by the light streaming through an aperture above the altar and dancing off the stained-glass windows along the west side. Here was a physical structure—a human creation of stone and glass—that nonetheless pointed beyond itself to a noumenal world of wonder and beauty.

Or consider the quiet ceremony that took place on Dec. 15, 2015, that brought an official end to a civil war between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government—a war that began more than 50 years ago and killed or displaced millions of people. One small step in that long journey of reconciliation was an initiative each year at Christmas to encourage guerrillas on both sides to disarm and demobilize. One year, organizers decorated trees along strategic paths in the jungle with thousands of Christmas lights. Motion sensors suddenly illuminated the trees at night, bathing combatants in light. “If Christmas can come to the jungle,” was the message, “you can also come home ... during Christmas, anything is possible.” Another year, organizers floated large plastic balls, also beautifully illuminated, down the rivers at night. Inside the balls were small gifts and handwritten notes, inviting combatants to lay down their arms and return to their families. In each instance, the appeal was based on the vulnerable power of beauty and the essential humanity of those who were locked in conflict.

Beauty is fundamental to the Christian life. Unlike kitsch, beauty is not an escape from the reality of pain and sorrow. Instead, when beauty breaks through the shabbiness and despair around us, we catch a momentary glimpse of God’s deep love for this world and the essential goodness of Creation itself, formed out of the chaos of the void. Encounters with beauty remind us that the center is indeed holding—that despite all the evidence to the contrary, love will overcome fear and light will vanquish the darkness.

Beauty is essentially noncoercive. It invites; it bears witness; it testifies. But it does not demand or impose.

If we are going to be true ministers of the gospel—agents of reconciliation in our divided churches and our violent world—our efforts will be successful only if they are also beautiful. 



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