

LETTER: TECHNOLOGY VS. HUMANITY: TWO VIEWS ON FACING UP TO OUR ACTIONS

Published: December 19, 2003

Section: LOCAL, page B10

Type of story: LETTERS

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Last Sunday, two articles demonstrating different understandings of the world appeared in The Virginian-Pilot. One was "Exhibit of bomber Enola Gay avoids ethical questions," on page A13. The other, "Elie Wiesel talks about human rights, hopes for peace," appeared on the front of the Commentary section.

The Enola Gay article displays for all to see a central problem in the psyche of any country confronted with the horrors inflicted on human beings in its name - our collective unwillingness to recognize in human terms the consequences of our actions. The Enola Gay is now on exhibit at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. But the museum rejected petitions to give voice to the hundreds of thousands of lives lost in seconds as a result of the use to which this "most sophisticated propeller-driven bomber of World War II" was put (to quote its plaque).

Reflecting on this, museum officials said the exhibit "does not glorify or vilify" its role in history. "We do not tell people what to think about" the bombing, said museum director John Dailey.

He's correct, in a way. The display and its manner of presentation may not tell people what to think. But the display and the response to the public controversy about it tell people what not to think.

This is the danger. Think about the technology but not the people technology has affected. Avoid mentioning people at all costs. Deny and distance oneself as far as possible from human suffering in the midst of technologically camouflaged righteousness.

In the second story, Elie Wiesel, a humanist and human rights spokesman, pierces this mist with rays of light. He provides a witness for humanity.

When staff writer Phillip Walzer asks Wiesel about the prospects for peace in the Middle East, Wiesel says: "I really oscillate between extreme optimism and deep pessimism. Pessimism when I see and read about the suicide attacks. Whenever I see a dead child - whether Jewish or Muslim or Christian, a child is a child. It must break one's heart."

In these few words, Wiesel shows how those who hope for peace bring us face to face with the human consequences of our actions. Wiesel sees the children, the people. He does this without taking sides in the political conflict that wages on year after year.

All of these children, all of the people, are valuable and their loss in conflict is a loss for us all. Wiesel sides with humanity in the face of those who deny and distance themselves from humanity.

Looked at in this way, these two articles in the same Sunday newspaper should help us think. Can any nation achieve good in the world if it continues to deny the voices of those harmed both outside and inside its borders?

Can any of us do good in the world if we ignore the harm and suffering of those our actions or inactions help to produce?

Humanity does not have sides. We are all in it together.

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