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Living within the Sound of Sirens

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Introduction:

All of life, however sophisticated and secure, has an underside of silent suffering, of powerlessness, poverty and pain, of addiction and abuse. Most of the time we manage to be oblivious to these darker realities until suddenly they intrude. We hear the desperate cry for help of a victim of violence, or an intruder alarm demands our response, or the wail of an emergency vehicle shatters the silence of the night. We are stabbed awake to our own vulnerability -- and, perhaps to our responsibility for the sufferings of others.

Some years ago, Dr. Richard Selzer wrote a fascinating series of reflections on the life of a surgeon entitled *Letters to a Young Doctor*. I have a brother who is a surgeon, and it helped me to understand that surgery, as is often true in other absorbing professions, is not just something one does, but something one becomes. Writing to his young protégé about the choice of surgery as a specialty, Selzer comments: "Some people live out their whole lives within earshot of bells. As though it were the sound of these bells, the chiming, that were necessary to life, an essential element like oxygen. But you have chosen to live out your life within the sound of sirens . . . [There will be times when you will regret that you chose sirens over bells]" [p. 41].

The Salvation Army has made that choice. Salvationists have chosen -- or, as we believe, have been called by God, to live within the sound of sirens. Some of us might have preferred to settle down comfortably at the foot of a carillon tower to listen to the bells. But the Salvationist's spiritual imagination is stirred by the passion of the great missionary adventurer of another generation, C.T. Studd:

Some wish to live within the sound
Of church or chapel bell,
I want to run a rescue shop
Within a yard of hell.

That choice is driven by our faith -- a faith that both moves us to compassion and calls us to combat the evils that demean human persons, rob them of dignity and deprive them of hope. As a spiritual movement informed by faith, the Army for more than 130 years has sustained its programs of human compassion which now extend into 103 countries around the world

We choose to live within the sound of sirens because we believe in the value and dignity of human persons, sick or well, whole or flawed, unborn or aged, productive or dependent, contributive or inconveniencing. That understanding is grounded in our experience of God's love for all and the compelling proof of that love in the offering up of the life of his Son for our salvation. We believe in the redemptive potential of human persons, however victimized or vitiated by sin, suffering or circumstances, when touched by the love of God and the liberating power of his Spirit.

This is not religious rhetoric. It is street-tested reality that keeps us living hopefully within the sound of sirens. John Stewart grew up tough on the streets of the inner city. Despite the anguished efforts of his parents -- and he was fortunate to have both parents to care about him -- he followed his older brother into a life of violent crime and substance abuse which ended in his repeated incarceration. "I was on a collision course to hell!" he says. He was introduced to The Salvation Army's Adult Rehabilitation Program. And through the tough love of Army staff who could see past his hardened exterior to a hungry heart and its unvoiced cry for help, he was brought to a life-changing faith in Christ that opened the door on a future that he was convinced had forever been forfeited. Later, he responded to God's call to commit his life to the service of God and others. A year ago, in Niagara Falls, New York, having completed his education and officer training, it was my joy to ordain and commission him as an officer of The Salvation Army.

The drug and alcohol rehabilitation program operated for street homeless in Kiev, in the Ukraine, by a Canadian officer, Captain Lois Dueck, is much less sophisticated than the quality rehabilitation programs the Army maintains across Canada and the USA. It is but one dimension of her heroic efforts to meet the diverse and urgent needs of the homeless among whom she works with such dedication.

She manages this recovery program on a shoe string in an abandoned building, breathing hope and future into a handful of men living on the edge of despair -- often contending with the hostility of the authorities who have no will to own the problems of the homeless poor that they are helpless to resolve. The facilities and program standards are far different than a generous public makes possible in North America, but the dynamics of redemptive love and stubborn faith in the power of the Gospel, are the same. We heard five of these men tell in simple but moving testimony of the dramatic change in their lives. Sustained by her faith in the love of God and its power to transform lives, Lois Dueck chooses to live within the sound of sirens. She is making a difference.

Having drifted from the moorings of a biblical faith in the value and dignity of persons as loved by God and redeemed by him, our contemporary society has allowed its sense of the value of human life to be eroded. Australian ethicist, Peter Singer, openly advocates for a view of human mammals as no more entitled to survival than other species. An intelligent chimpanzee, in his view, may have more claim to survival than a severely handicapped human child incapable of a reasonable quality of life. His bottom-line is to call for an abandonment of the pretense that the human fetus is not a human person. Even if it is, it has no necessary claim to survival, in his view, as circumstances may dictate that its life should be forfeit.

The wail of the sirens may signal an heroic commitment to the rescue and recovery of human lives in jeopardy. Our lifestyles may tell a different story. A few years ago the Journal of the American Medical Association published an illuminating summary of what really kills people in America. Of course we understand that people die of heart disease, cancer, stroke and accidents and the like. But this listing of the chief underlying causes shows that half of all deaths in that country are due to largely preventable risk factors: tobacco, diet and inactivity, alcohol consumption, toxic agents, sexual behaviors, illegal drugs and auto accidents. It would appear that life is cheap -- cheaper than we might have thought.

Meanwhile, 15 million children around the world die each year from preventable causes and 600,000 women die, and 30 times as many suffer debilitating injuries during pregnancy and

child birth for want of access to basic prenatal care and medical assistance in birthing. Apart from a conviction as to the value of human life based on more than sentiment, the commitment to saving life and enhancing its wholeness will falter. We soon no longer hear the sounds of sirens. Aldous Huxley once wrote of human suffering: "Screams of pain and fear go pulsing through the air at the rate of eleven hundred feet per second. After traveling for three seconds they are perfectly inaudible."

Sometimes one must listen with the ears of the heart to hear the sirens -- the muffled tears of silent sufferers -- the lonely and alienated, those who live with dark and disturbing secrets in the cellar of their souls, the increasing number of dependent elderly. And there are the persons with AIDS. True, in some societies they have been more than a little strident in their demands for funding of research and treatment. But hundreds of thousands of AIDS sufferers are ostracized and consigned to a living hell of hopelessness and fear. In many cultures they are the pariahs, the new untouchables.

Recently we were in Zimbabwe where one in ten is infected with AIDS and 500 are dying weekly of the disease. Already, some 500,000 children have been orphaned by its ravages. The Minister of Health, Timothy Stamps, speaks of the 'reverse orphaning' of the elderly, who are left bereft of their adult children to care for them in their declining years. In neighboring Zambia the situation is worse. The Army operates a complex of medical and community based programs in these countries in response to the pandemic.

An international AIDS program design and technical assistance team has been fielded by the Army to aid communities in addressing the crisis. In Mumbai, India a small and sparsely furnished center has been established to assist persons with AIDS in accessing medical services, providing support, counseling and practical assistance. We visited the program earlier this year. We met with some of the 80 'positive people' as they called themselves, who regularly gather there for mutual support. "We hope for a remedy someday," one of their number said. "But we want you to know that healing is happening here already -- on the inside, because of the love and acceptance we find here." Captain Pawar Sureesh and his dedicated officer wife, who coordinate this program have chosen to live within the sound of sirens.

The Salvation Army continues to address the perennial problems of homelessness and unemployment, of hunger, and limited access to health care. We are working to provide moral direction to the young and to strengthen families. As we approach 1 July, 10,000 persons a day are being served by our network of social and educational programs in Hong Kong, while some fifty development projects are operating in ten provinces of Mainland China under Army auspices.

The Army, as an evangelical church and agency of compassion, is motivated by the love of God in Jesus Christ. It brings to its encounter with human need an irrepressible hope sustained by confidence in the faithfulness of God. To the young it offers a new sense of self-worth and future. To the aging it offers a respect for the dignity of even the most dependent of persons. To those struggling with addictive behaviors it offers its tested programs of recovery and skilled counseling -- with the 'power plus' of the Gospel, the 'power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.'

Along with other churches and 'faith-based' charities, it bears witness to the critical role of faith for any society in sustaining and empowering our efforts to address the most painful and intractable problems of our communities and our troubled world. Faith matters.

In the conclusion to a chilling study of the effects of 'moral poverty' on violence and social trauma, William Bennett and John DiIulio refer to what they call the compelling civic case for religion and a growing body of scientific evidence which indicates that churches can help curtail or cure many severe social pathologies. "True religious faith," the authors conclude, "enlarges the human heart; . . . reminds people of their basic responsibilities and commitments; provides society with reliable moral and social guard rails; helps the impulse of compassion take on the name of action; and allows the 'eyes of the heart' to see our fellow citizens not merely as distant body count statistics or as enemies or aliens or 'other' but as moral and spiritual beings, as children of God. For that is, in fact, what they are."

It is to this critical role of faith in sustaining and empowering our efforts as a society to address the most painful problems of our communities and our troubled world, that our presence and programs bear witness. The Army is there -- and will be -- ever grateful for the generous confidence of people, like yourselves, who care about the plight of those who find themselves struggling to survive on the underside of life.

And now -- I think I hear a siren somewhere!