

Good riddance to '12, hope for '13

December 30, 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

I won't offer names of newspapers, dates of publication, or page references, as I often do. That is because the news stories behind the headlines I quote below are probably well etched in our minds, and thus require no wordy explanations. In addition, what we are studying here at the beginning is theme, not precise details.

Our year 2012 is soon to end and, given what's been happening around the world and here at home lately (and the media attention to it all), many of us are likely to say good riddance to it.

Consider these headlines, drawn from two local newspapers these recent days: "NY gunman sets 'trap,' kills 2 firefighters," "US children often the victims of firearms," "Ma never vowed to end death penalty: officials," "Prosecutors seek life sentence for former fire chief," "Indian cop injured in gang-rape protest dies," "Another conviction, jail term for Chen," "US gun sales surge in wake of recent spate of deadly shootings," "Six death row prisoners put to death: MOJ" and, finally, with a hint of sarcasm, "World greets 'doomsday' with pinch of salt."

The term "bad news" seems tepid indeed to typify the grim tag-lines above. It seems obvious that the year 2012 is stumbling and tumbling to its demise at record pace, and on a sure note of sadness, even gloom. Am I the only one who senses that we are groping our way into the New Year, 2013? That is, after all, what we do when we try to find our way in the dark: we grope.

In a moment I'll say a word about optimism, but to do that, I need to refer to a scene that occurred last night in a class on American Literature.

As our old year draws to an end, so is our academic semester drawing to its end. It's been a good ride with more ups than downs (you see the optimism creeping in here), and again I feel grateful for the hours I've enjoyed this semester in the presence of my young friends. If there is one thing college teaching can do for you, it is to inject hope into your weary bones, hope in our young who are so full of zip and ideals and dreams.

Now, it just so happens our Wednesday night course is pondering the words these weeks of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). Among his works that we are reading

are "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." This is neither the time nor place to dive into literary analysis of these short masterpieces, but it is fair to say both offer powerful views of evil in human nature.

So, I found myself unexpectedly asking my students last night if they derive any pleasure from reading about gloom, crime, violence and evil, at least in the manner that Poe ladles it out to his readers.

I had earlier confessed I found these works entertaining, if uncomfortable (similar to my reaction to boxing matches with Cosell and Sheridan calling the fights), you see. Suddenly a student in the first row asked what I find entertaining in Edgar Allan Poe and his ilk. I did my best to answer her question, and then paused for emphasis.

"There is more good in the world than evil," I said, "and more good in people and human nature, than evil."

We are indeed sailing through rough and angry waters as we bid farewell to a year that ends in a particularly grim and dreary fashion. For pity's sake, the events of the past few weeks make Poe's tales seem like "Cinderella."

The content and atmosphere of our current news, however, need not rob us of hope for the year 2013. For all his flaws, John F. Kennedy once observed that the majority of our problems in the world are "man-made." Therefore, he argued, we ourselves can solve those problems.

You will have to find your own answers, as I with some struggle must find mine. Considering the headlines plastered over the top of this column, I say the issue here is fundamentally spiritual. The evil that we find in our news headlines of late has to do with our souls. We have in many cases lost our bearings, lost our way. Too many of us have denied there even is such a thing as a human soul.

That soul is where we must look in 2013 to find our way out of our present darkness.

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Talking points:

1. Do news events ever affect your moods, your feelings, your sense of optimism or pessimism in life?
2. This column hints that "evil" in news events or in literature is somehow interesting to readers and people in general. Do movies or literature about crime or evil appeal to you? Why or why not?
3. This column speaks of "the human soul," which may seem like an odd idea. How do you define a 'soul' in a person?

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