

Lessons from the Sunflower Movement

April 13, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

I don't believe I have ever written 3 times within 4 weeks in this space on the same topic. I hope that after today I can toss my political hat back into the closet, and cover my balding pate with something more fun to wear. For today, however, there seems to be no way to avoid the question: what have we learned from these recent, difficult days?

Surely we have learned that Taiwan's society remains a decidedly divided society. The gulf between the views of the Sunflower protestors, for example, and those of the president and, apparently, most of his party and a certain segment of the public, could hardly be wider than it is today. As in the long days of the street movement against Chen Hsui-bian some years ago, we have seen members of the same families fiercely split in their opinions. We've seen friendships rattled and entire generations shoving against one another, different sides absolutely convinced they are right and their "opponents" wrong.

I know students who for years have affectionately called each other classmates and pals who are now unable to smile at one another (for the time being, at least) and exchange a civil "hello." Colleagues are not overly eager to share their take on questions related to punishment, prosecution, or amnesty for students guilty of behavior that was technically illegal, the destruction of property and so forth.

Our current days thus teach us that we are a people badly in need of healing.

This is not to say that the proposed pact between the two sides of the strait was or is wrong in all ways or that the Sunflowers are useless weeds that never should have sprouted. Democracy in Taiwan is stronger today because of what these young people and their supporters have done.

The events of the past three weeks have also reminded us of the Latin term "ad hominem." English language uses this expression of course to describe a form of rhetoric that leaves issues aside and attacks a perceived enemy in a personal way. When critics of the Sunflower students ridiculed the way one of its leaders dressed, or when some of the protestors threw ugly names at public officials, we

saw pure "ad hominem." This type of ridiculousness is never productive and always destructive. "Ad hominem" here lately should have taught us that it is counter-productive to go after people with whom we disagree by personal negativism. Assaulting others with nasty words rather than arguing issues, and jeering at social position or sartorial preference is, to say the least, unhelpful in human relations.

Some voices howl now for the equivalent of Shakespeare's pound of flesh. The cry feels as if it is lifted directly from the confrontation in "Les Miserables," the scene in which Javert and Valjean clash over the difference between "the law" and the human spirit.

Those who are demanding pounds of flesh from the students for the material violence that occurred in the legislature and in the aborted taking of the executive yuan a few days later need to also measure the social damage that occurred when KMT leader Chang Ching-chung pulled the rabbit out of the hat on March 17. His declaration that a "review" of the pact had been acceptably completed in less than 30 seconds, a denial of a promise for a semblance of transparency and double-check of the conditions, was as violent an act against democracy, not to mention common sense, as anything the students did. In addition, the crowd of upwards 500,000 that later marched in support of the Sunflower Movement was no joke. Authorities should consider the significance of that march and take a humane view of the regrettable acts of a minority of those who occupied the legislature.

I expect to be roundly criticized, but I stand on the side of leniency, whenever possible, for the students. History will show that the good they accomplished far outweighed the negative consequences of some of their behavior.

Finally, we also learned that, with the exception of the use of water cannon on that one ugly night and what appears to have been isolated incidents of brutality, our police officials proved themselves noble public servants. These men and women deserve our respect and thanks. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. Now that the Sunflower Movement has ended its occupation of the legislature, the people of Taiwan can if they want look back to ask: What did this protest teach us? Is there any individual lesson about life or politics that you learned in reading about the Sunflower Movement or talking with others about it? Did you learn anything specifically here?
2. Perhaps only "hard core" political "junkies" want to tackle this Q, but let's at least consider it: the KMT and the DPP, the two major political parties in Taiwan, appear to have taken a back seat role in the government these recent 3 weeks. What might be the consequences for the near future for the KMT and DPP?
3. A person's age may affect one's ability to let go of animosity and to heal divisions and hurt feelings. IF you have had emotional pain over the Sunflower days, is healing happening now for you with friends, family members and others who may have different views than you do?

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