

Letter from . . . Chicago

Voices from the grave

GEORGE DUNEA

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On a dark lugubrious night last August, while angry storms were raging through the desolate cemetery of Dumaguete on Negros Island, the ghastly voice of murdered Teresita Basa burst forth from her grave and instantly faded into the pitch-black Philippine sky. Exactly 45 minutes later the voice entered the body of a doctor's wife in Chicago, causing her to rise suddenly from her living-room chair and go into the bedroom, where her husband found her staring blankly and speaking in Tagalo—the national language of the Philippines—but with a strange Spanish accent. The voice showed that she was wandering about on nights and described murder most foul and horrible—how the murderer had stabbed her with a butcher's knife, set her clothing on fire, and stolen her jewelry. The voice then departed, leaving the wife amnesic and the husband perplexed. But after a repeat visitation the good doctor decided to call the police, who quietly conducted an investigation, found that the suspect's mistress was now wearing the stolen jewels, and at last arrested the murderer, thus allowing the tormented ghost to return to the underworld and rest in peace or fast in fires. Sceptics later pointed out that the doctor's wife had reason enough to know about the murder even without being visited by the voice—having worked in the same section of the hospital as the lady ghost and her assassin—and that she may have concocted the voice from the grave story for fear of reprisal by the suspect. Others, however, took the story at face value.

Another voice, rising not from the grave but the penitentiary, was that of mass murderer Richard Speck, who in 1966 broke into a Chicago dormitory and stabbed or choked eight nurses in one of the most savage crimes of the century. One single nurse survived to bear witness by hiding under a bed and pretending to be dead. The jury took less than an hour to come up with a guilty verdict; but the death sentence was never carried out; and for the past 12 years the murderer has been in the penitentiary, working in the vegetable room, watching television, occasionally getting high on moonshine or speed, and corresponding with pretty but strange young women seeking to form a romantic relationship with him. He had always steadfastly maintained his innocence, claiming that amnesia "like a white blank wall" obscured his memory for the event. This year, however, the voice from the jail confessed, and Richard Speck described to a reporter how, crazed by whisky and heroin, he had broken into the dormitory and murdered the nurses in that grisly night of 1966.

Two other nurses, both from the Philippines, were convicted last year on charges of poisoning six patients at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, by injecting

the muscle relaxant pancuronium into the tubing of their intravenous infusion. No clear motive for the crime was ever established, the evidence was entirely circumstantial, and the verdict was widely criticised, being called a frame-up and a miscarriage of justice. There were protests, rallies, thousands of dollars were collected for a defence fund, and eventually a Federal judge overturned the verdict on grounds of overwhelming prejudice and gross irregularities in the conduct of the investigation. In February, at last, the case was closed by the Government deciding to drop charges rather than proceed with a second trial.

On a happier note, still, we learn that Miss Nightingale has not after all flown away but instead is fluttering back to the bedside. This welcome phenomenon is described in a magazine illustrated with a 1920 American Red Cross poster saying "Still the World's Greatest Mother" and depicting a lady looking rather more like the Statue of Liberty than the heroine of Scutari. But the facts are that for several decades the American nurse had become a kind of a hospital foreman, being the desk-bound leader of a team of clerks, orderlies, technicians, dietitians, aides, and practical nurses. In recent years, however, the nurses have increasingly gone back to patient care and bedside nursing. According to the magazine, they want to walk from bed to bed, tending the patients and cheering them up—and in the process they are regaining their lost identity. One formula is "primary nursing" in which the nurse takes over many of the tasks she used to assign to her aides. But the primary nurse has a new look, often carrying a stethoscope and working closely with the physician in caring for the patient and planning treatment, education, and after-care. Some nurses make house-calls, and others have specialised in areas such as intensive care, tuberculosis, haemodialysis, or outpatient treatment of hypertension. Not all hospitals as yet use the nurse in her new role, but the trend is healthy, so that after many decades of role disorientation it is evident that the nursing profession remains alive and well.

Low birth rate and raised retiring age

Also "alive" but not necessarily well, at least not in the United States, is the ghost of Mr Thomas Malthus, who once predicted that hunger, "the last and most dreadful resource of nature," will eventually step in to check mankind's irrepressible urge to multiply itself. The ghost will find little to interest him here, with the exception of some reports of starvation in the Mississippi delta in 1967. In fact, he may be well advised to change vocations, and considering the truth of the old saying that "gluttony kills more than the sword," he might look into some of the proposed surgical cures for obesity such as bowel anastomosis, acupuncture, or jaw wiring. The medical remedies, however, have recently come under some cloud with the reported deaths of possibly as many as 30 people living exclusively on synthetic protein liquid diets. Two hundred obese rats fared equally badly, with 95% dying within a month,

generally from arrhythmias, and despite taking vitamin and potassium supplements. As a result, the Food and Drug Administration has labelled liquid protein diets as potentially fatal and has clamped down on what at first looked like a promising new industry and a profitable field for high-yield returns on investments.

To return to Mr Malthus, however, statistics indicate that the US is approaching zero growth and that the birthrate has declined from 23.7 per 100 000 population in 1960 to 15.3 in 1977. With women's liberation and their increasing tendency to take jobs, the fertility rate has come down to 1.8 births per woman in a lifetime, this trend being undoubtedly accelerated by easy availability of birth control and abortion and by the high cost of housing, education, and medicine. The decline, which has been most pronounced in the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) segment of the population but affects most other ethnic groups, may result in a need to import millions of workers (and conceivably even mercenary soldiers) and could profoundly change the demographic make-up of the country. Last year over one million aliens crossed the border from Mexico, and within 50 years aliens may constitute one-half of the US population. Then there is also the issue of a continuing rise in the median age of the population, with the prospect of a shrinking work-force of young people supporting an increasing number of older, non-productive people, and with enormous problems in planning adequate social security benefits for people expected to retire in the 1980s and 1990s. It appears that Congress is now ready to raise the mandatory retirement age to 70 years and eliminate mandatory retirement for Federal Government employees altogether, but these changes would themselves have vast implications on industry, universities, and medical or retirement planning. With a reduction in jobs and a slowing of upward mobility for the young and middle-aged, there are anticipated problems with current pension plans, less effective employees may have to be retained longer in their positions, and universities may be forced to retain their aged and expensive professors rather than turning them to emeritus pastures at the age of 65.

Meanwhile some observers have been displeased with the facts behind Mr Carter's rhetoric about less government interference, and point to hefty budget increases for environmental protection, trade, equal employment, and occupational safety agencies. In Milford, Illinois, however, the town's baby-sitters have threatened to go out of business rather than conform with a regulation requiring licensing of all women spending more than 10 hours a week taking care of children—a move that would disrupt a local economy based largely on women working in a refrigerator plant. And in Congress anti-Government sentiment dealt a death blow to an eight-year-old effort to establish a special consumer protection governmental agency. The vote was 227 to 189, a defeat for Mr Ralph Nader and his lobby, but a victory for those who think there is already "too

much protection, too much of what other people think is good for them."

Child abuse

In need of more protection, however, are many of our helpless young children, and in recent months authorities have reported a major increase in child-abuse deaths in the Chicago area. According to the police there were 11 child-abuse murders during the first three months of 1978, but the true number is believed to be much greater, and many cases are probably unreported or classified as accidental deaths. Though bound by law to report suspected cases of child-abuse, doctors are often loath to get involved; social agencies tend to avoid interfering in order "to keep the family together"; the courts are often reluctant to offer protection; and the neighbours and friends not uncommonly join in the conspiracy of silence, so that it is often difficult to find witnesses. Child abuse is most common among inadequate and immature parents, often unmarried teenagers with little resources or family support, but probably occurs in all classes of society. It may take the form of beatings, strangling, arson, drownings, gross neglect, or starvation, and various other atrocities, prompting recent calls for an investigation and for legislative and administrative reforms. Suggested remedies included increased legal and counselling help, more case workers, earlier diagnosis and reporting, changing judges' attitudes in making it easier to terminate parental rights, and educating young people to postpone having children until they are sufficiently mature to be adequate parents. But the problem is complex and reflects merely one facet of the larger issue of violence in the home and in society at large.

Finally, still on the subject of violence, a "voice" provoked by one of my earlier letters. Dr Vera Morkovin, a Chicago emergency physician, complains that I have drawn too freely on her lecture on wife-battering and requests I identify my source as a "personal communication." This I hasten to do to set the record straight, especially since I disclaim any personal experience with this condition, being potentially prone to mistake it for osteogenesis imperfecta or cryoglobulinaemic purpura. And another voice takes me to task for not referring to Professor Uplavici's famous colleague, Dr Zepartzat Gozinto, a figure well known in the engineering world, and author of a series of papers on inventory control in the manufacturing industry, with all "parts that go into" it. In latter years Dr Gozinto shifted his interests to medicine and co-authored with Dr Uplavici such classics as "Brownian movement of *E coli*" (*RCMP Journal*, 48, 10), and "Magnesium infusion by balloon catheter" (*Ectopic Bulletin*, 103, 2), as well as several papers whose authenticity is now being hotly disputed in the traumatic literature.

WORDS PRIMARY, IDIOPATHIC, and ESSENTIAL. The use of these terms betrays ignorance. There is nothing blameworthy about ignorance unless the means of avoiding it are available. These terms may have been acceptable before the days of scientific exploration and discovery into the causes of disease, and later they were a useful convention as a screen to hide one's uncertainty. With advances in our understanding of the aetiology of diseases, their use is declining. "Primary" was used until the 1930s to describe one of the two main categories of anaemia—namely, those anaemias that were regarded as disease entities (pernicious anaemia, acholuric jaundice), the secondary anaemias being symptomatic of underlying disease, and mostly hypochromic. In the 1940s we had primary atypical pneumonia now known to be caused by mycoplasma infection. "Idiopathic" (1732), not the result of another disease, is still met occasionally—for example, idiopathic epilepsy, that is, not due to tumour, injury, anoxia, or metabolic disturbance. The idio-route is of some interest. Idio-derives from *G idios*, own, personal, private. IDIOSYNCRASY is a personal, individual response, not the usual or expected one, to a drug, food, or other substance or influence. An IDIOM is a form of

speech peculiar to a group of people. In modern Greece a private car-parking place will be indicated by the display of a notice *Idiotikos choros*. *G idiotēs* was not a pejorative term; it denoted a private person in the sense of not being a public servant. The meaning shifted to indicate one with no special knowledge; thence, an ignorant uncouth person; and hence IDIOT came to mean a person so deficient mentally as to be incapable of ordinary reasoning or rational conduct. ESSENTIAL—for instance, hypertension, thrombocytopenic purpura—does not mean one must try to get it regardless of cost. Essence is not easy to define. It is that by which a thing is what it is and by which it differs from other things. A definition of essential that comes close to its use in a medical context is given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and marked obsolete, thus, dependent on the intrinsic character or condition of anything—not on extraneous circumstances. The term essential was applied to hypertension by E Frank in 1911 and continues to serve its purpose until the cause is unravelled. CRYPTOGENIC is surely an eminently suitable word to describe any condition whose cause is unknown; *G kryptos*, hidden + *genesis*, origin.