

Fear of trying

By Tony Pearson

?The only thing we have to fear is ? Fear itself: unreasoning, unjustified terror?
- U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, 1st inaugural address, 1933

When Franklin Roosevelt spoke those famous words, a lot of Americans had good reason to be afraid. The economy hit depths never seen before or since. Almost one third of the labour force was unemployed. The savings of millions had been wiped out by the collapse of the stock market and widespread bank failures. Thousands of farms had melted away in the Dust Bowl. Without any government assistance, poor families were literally starving as well as homeless.

Roosevelt himself, a few sentences later in the same speech, acknowledged: ?Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment? So what did he mean telling people not to fear?

He explained that the fear he worried about was that which paralyzed people ? robbed them of the ability to see the larger picture of what needed to be done, and froze them into inaction. He asserted that ?there is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously?.

Fear, of course, is an old tactic of the reactionary ? the person who fights change, who wants to halt social progress. Such people, like many in our late and unlamented Harper government, tried to find shadow threats to keep people afraid: terrorists, refugees, immigrants, people of different faiths and cultures.

Another such bogeyman is the threat of a crime wave - the idea that criminals are multiplying, and will break into your home at any moment. The reactionary also wants you to believe that most criminals are scary strangers, totally unlike you and me ? justifying numerous ?tough on crime? actions, which are long on punishment and short on remedy.

But what's the truth? First of all, crime is in decline ? violent crime has been dropping for over two decades. Second, most violent (as opposed to property) crime isn't committed by strangers, but by people known to the victim.

Which brings me to the unintentional Internet collaborators of the reactionaries. Last weekend, a Facebook posting from someone in Oshawa received a lot of local circulation. The report was that unknown men in ?a white van? had tried to abduct a child in the Bancroft area.

That rang some memory bells. I remembered a spate of reports from Ottawa about 15 years ago about child abductors cruising neighbourhoods in ?a white van.? They all proved false. There's been a host of such ?white van? stories from the U.S., and even Australia. The Australian Broadcast Company was blunt about all these stories ? they're ?urban legends?. The Bancroft report too was phoney; the OPP received no such call.

Children are, of course, abducted. But in almost all such cases, the abductor is a family member ? normally an estranged parent. It's not a stranger who breaks your heart; it's your former partner.

As for violence against young children, again the most likely abuser is not a lurking stranger, but a parent. It's the same with most instances of violence against women. They aren't carried out by masked intruders. Again overwhelmingly, they're done by spouses and (ex-) partners. As Basil Borutski demonstrated, it's the devil you know that does the most damage.

However, the rational explanation lacks the ability to inspire fear in the general community ? so ?white van? stories proliferate. And the media can contribute to the climate of generalized fear. Crime shows on television tend to spread the myth of the ?unsub' (unknown subject) ? the stranger ? as the one to fear.

But most crime is local. As such, it needs a local solution. And in many cases, that isn't the police, but a social agency. For example, a lot of calls to the local OPP involve ?disturbances' (not crimes) created by people suffering from mental illness. The best way to deal with them surely isn't by arresting them, putting them in handcuffs, and driving them to jail in Belleville. As the OPP themselves will tell you, they're not the ones best equipped to deal with situations like these.

Panic ? especially groundless panic ? is of little value. Instead, we need to address the conditions that give rise to calls for police intervention. In many cases, the incident may be triggered by mental illness, addiction, or adverse living conditions. The best answer may not be arrest, but counselling, addiction treatment, and in the long run, better housing.

That's why a Bancroft ?community safety? initiative deserves more attention. It's not spectacular or even dramatic. In fact, it sounds downright bureaucratic. But bringing together the health and social agencies which can address the roots of why police get called in, means that they will be called in less often.

So why don't we take FDR's suggestion and look at what we really need to work on to reduce our levels of fear. Unless, of course, we are addicted to being afraid. Scaring ourselves may be fun on a roller coaster, but it's not great for developing effective social policy.