

Never Such Innocence 2020-2021

Silent conflict. An endless cycle.

By Connie Heather (Ireland)

People think that when conflict is over, it's over. A war can be ended with a flourish of pen on paper, but there's a reason why officials don't follow their signatures with a full stop. They can provide an end to a battle, but they cannot provide closure. They cannot put a lid on conflict and pack it off in a box and leave it to collect dust on a shelf.

Right now, we're living through a global pandemic and slowly, steps are being made to emerge from it with the distribution of vaccines. However faint, there is light at the end of the tunnel. But there will be no one day, one moment, when the pandemic will end once and for all. Even if my entire country is vaccinated – even if the entire planet is vaccinated - the pandemic won't be over. Let me explain why...

Unresolved conflict acts as a parasite, a malicious creature that drinks our oceans like blood and devours the earth's crust like it's skin. There's two groups of parasites: ectoparasites and endoparasites. The former feeds on the host from the outside in, the latter, from the inside out.

When we think of conflict, we look to the world around us: to our communities, the oceans, the skies and continents miles away. We look to the ectoparasites eating us from the outside in. But conflict doesn't always require two or more people. Inner conflict requires just one, and it can eat away at a person from the inside out.

Ectoparasites are often diagnosed and treated faster than endoparasites, but not because they're any more or less serious. The reason they're attended to first is that they're clearly visible, and because they can be seen with the naked eye, they're harder to ignore.

The attitude of many is that if you can't see something, it simply isn't there. People may be reluctant, however, to claim that love and hope aren't real, just because you can't see or touch them. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said with regard to mental health conditions - which aren't always visible. Mental health conditions are a serious type of internal conflict and just because you can't always see them, it doesn't mean they're not there.

Internal and external conflict have been and always will be intertwined: one spurring the other in an endless cycle as old as time itself. You cannot expect people who have suffered as a result of external conflict - such as soldiers, refugees, natural disaster survivors and more - to experience no internal distress or conflict as a result. This also applies to people who live with internal conflict - such as those living or having lived with depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions. It's completely unreasonable to suggest their internal conflict wouldn't impact their external lives.

We often treat external wounds before we begin to think about the internal scars a situation has left on someone, even though these scars can be just as damaging to them. If we continue to deny the inextricable link between internal and external conflict we won't be able to resolve any conflict at all, because it will just keep changing shape and shifting form to evade us.

The pandemic is not over. It will not be over for many years to come. Because the COVID-19 crisis was only one of the many strains of pandemic to stem from the spread of this infectious disease. Not only are we facing a biological pandemic, we are facing a mental health pandemic.

One day, the events of this crisis will be documented in history books for schoolchildren like me to read. They will recite the statistics: the millions dead and millions more infected. What the history books will not mention are the people who survived, but at a cost.

In our obsession with clinging only to the facts, humanity will make another blunder. Facts alone don't show the full picture. You cannot - and should not - put a number on a person's grief or pain. But just because something cannot be assigned a numerical value, doesn't mean it doesn't have any value or bearing at all.

This is the silent, unseen conflict and these are the hidden figures. If we don't warn future generations, I fear there'll be another pandemic, bigger than the likes of which we've seen before. And the casualties will not just be those who die, but the survivors as well.