

If You See Something, Say Something

by James M. Truxell

After the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, signs went up saying “If You See Something, Say Something.” Those signs come and go. They will be coming back again after the terrorist assaults in Paris on January 7 – 8. Be vigilant, they say. Report suspicious activities.

But in the coming weeks and months, and not just in France, there will likely be another backlash. Another primitive brain, adrenaline-fueled, knee-jerk reaction against Islam and Muslim immigrants. Political far right-wingers will point out (accurately) that the Paris gunmen were Muslim and claimed that their actions were avenging the honor of the Prophet Muhammad. They will (justifiably) argue that such murderous attacks against free speech are the product of values incompatible with modern civilization. They will (inarguably) say that such atrocities must not be allowed to continue.

So far, so good. But they will then begin serving up their own “final solution”: get rid of the Muslims. It will begin by calls to restrict the immigration of Muslims. It will continue by attempting to circumscribe expressions of their faith, such as women covering their heads in public. Spray can-wielding graffiti “artists” will have a field day desecrating mosques. Left unchallenged, it will likely escalate into destruction of Muslim properties, threats of bodily harm, and making those threats come true.

We . . . in the United States . . . have been here before. In 1998 in Laramie, Wyoming, 22 year-old Matt Shepherd was clubbed to death because he was gay. In 1964 in Selma, Alabama police clubbed and fire hosed peaceful African American marchers seeking equal voting rights; and between 1882 and 1968 in the Deep South, 3,446 people were lynched because they were black. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, in its pursuit of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, tens of thousands of “savages,” *a.k.a.* Native Americans, were “removed” (and sometimes killed outright) to set-aside lands so that the American people with their “exceptional” virtues and institutions could pursue the God-ordained redemption of the west through the establishment of an agrarian society.

In each instance, some characteristic or behavior of a person or group was signaled out as a threat. The instance of the real or imagined threat was then generalized as typifying the group as a whole, so that *the removal of the group would solve the problems of the dominant group*. It is the ugly practice of “scapegoating” . . . from an Old Testament practice of priests ritually laying the sins of the people onto the back of a goat, which was then hazed and driven far out into the wilderness to its death . . . thus “cleansing” the people of their sins.

It’s an instance of the tired old myth of “redemptive violence”: the notion that only violence can redeem . . . that only by “cleansing” away the offending persons can peace and harmony be restored. Yes . . . you’re right . . . it’s throwing the virgin down the volcano. It’s “ethnic cleansing.” It’s pure evil.

Its most well-known modern example is Adolph Hitler’s “final solution”: the genocide, or mass destruction, of 6 million Jews in Nazi Germany who were gassed to death and burned in ovens because they were Jewish. It was the culmination of a decade of increasingly severe discriminatory measures of the sort mentioned above. Less well-known is the Cambodian genocide in which, beginning in 1975 and lasting for three years, a quarter of the country’s population of 7 million were executed. In April, 1994 over a hundred day period, more than 750,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus in Rwanda were hacked to death by the Hutu majority.

Each of these instances of cultural genocide were widely reported . . . *and widely ignored* . . . until it was too late for the victims . . . or until those (like most in isolationist America) were themselves under attack. Only then did they speak up.

“When you see something, say something.” In the coming months we are probably going to see a lot of blowback against Muslims in France . . . and in the United States as well.

When you see it happen, what will you do? Shake your head and drink a second cup of coffee over your paper? Be glad you aren’t a Muslim? Turn off the news and distract yourself? And when you hear it from a neighbor, a co-worker, even a family member . . . will you say something? What will you say?

If you see (or hear) something: speak up! Bring curiosity to it: “Oh? Tell me more. Why do you think that? How do you think that will help? What are some other responses that might help without hurting.”

If you see something, say something. Educate. Tell about some of the lessons of history mentioned here. Do your research. Expand on it.

If you see something, say something. Examine your own heart. If those dark impulses are there, say some words of heartfelt confession. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a *right* spirit within me.”

If you see something, say something. None of us would wish later to join the German Lutheran Pastor Martin Niemoller who, reflecting on recent history in his country, including his own self-confessed inadequate response, said:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

If you see something, say something.