

Fish Tales for the Middle East

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – October 14, 2012

Wisdom abounds in nature. Over the years, I've learned much by observing the natural world around me. A good example would be the lessons taught to me from tending our backyard koi pond.

This is a classic story of the struggle between good and evil. I say that, because it starts with a young koi and a novice pond keeper. But, stick with me.

Several years ago, as a new pond owner, unschooled in the science of aquaculture, I watched in horror as one precious koi developed a nasty, life-threatening disease. The poor fellow – named Pythagoras for the red triangle on his head -- was stricken with Hole-in-the-Side Disease. It's exactly what the name suggests! I won't gross you out with gory details, except to say I was almost too late to save him. Luckily, just-in-time treatment with expensive antibiotics, quarantine, and hands-on care were enough to pull him through.

After that, I did some reading to find out how to prevent such problems in the future. The gaping wound in young Pythagoras's side was caused by bacteria known as aeromonas and pseudomonas that enter a scrape or cut and wreak havoc on the surrounding tissue. They are flesh-eating bacteria. You can use antibiotics to kill these bad bacteria in the pond, but that also kills the good bacteria that keep the water safe and healthy by processing toxic fish waste into safe nutrients for the pond plants. A pond is a delicate, but amazing ecosystem. A sterile environment cannot sustain life.

Luckily, I found a product to combat the "bad" bacteria. It was not an antibiotic or chemical treatment, but rather a "probiotic" -- a solution of bacteria, enzymes, and nutrients that multiply to consume all of the nutrients the aeromonas and pseudomonas need to survive. (The same kind of stuff you see food companies putting into yogurt and other foods these days.)

Simply put: The good guys grow and multiply, crowding the bad guys out of the pond. Now, we can talk about good and evil.

I was reminded of my pond story recently, watching events in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the September 11 attack on the US Embassy in Libya and the murder of Ambassador Chris Stevens, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman wrote about the "Backlash to the Muslim Backlash." In a hopeful piece, Friedman shared tales of Libyan protestors carrying signs saying "We want justice for Chris" and "No more Al Qaeda." Friedman cites multiple examples of writers in the Arab world who are speaking out boldly in the wake of the Libyan incident with harsh, condemning words against the perpetrators. Many are openly challenging the extremists' obsession with

the West. Friedman sees in these developments the possibility of a strong moderate stand against extremists in the Islamic world.

Now comes shocking news from Pakistan this week of a barbaric Taliban attempt to assassinate 14-year-old Malala Yousufzai for her outspoken anonymous blog advocating educational opportunities for Pakistani women. As she fights for her life in an Islamabad hospital, women in Pakistan and elsewhere around the Islamic world are taking to the streets in large numbers, inspired by a young girl with a courage few of any age could hope to match.

It's a common knee-jerk response in our confused, frustrated, sometimes arrogant western world to react to these events by condemning all Muslims or all Arabs. "Nuke 'em," I hear some say. But, that's no more the answer to the conundrum of the Middle East than is the dosing of my pond with mass quantities of antibiotics.

By seeing all Muslims as western-hating terrorists, we condemn not only the Taliban gunman and the murderers of Ambassador Stevens, but also Malala Yousufzai and the brave women who now stand with her. The answer is not annihilation of all; it is nourishment and support for bold moderates and free thinkers who strive for a better world in the Middle East. When we fail to stand with the Malala's of the world and lump her in with the rest, we're saying it doesn't matter which side she's on. We're allowing the seeds of freedom to wither and die upon parched, cracked earth.

Pythagoras is bigger now and healthy too, though his right side bears the scar of a hole that exposed vital organs and nearly killed him. Probiotics are not a one-time fix. The good bacteria in our healthy pond ecosystem require regular reinforcements.

Pythagoras has healed. We hope and pray the same for Malala and her people.

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