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Rules and humanity - their place in our world

As one who has enjoyed a satisfying life, a happy career as an educator, an exciting role as a politician, the delights of a loving family situation, I find it pleasant to reminisce about the factors which made it all possible.

Without the support and guidance of family, employers, young people, community leaders and many co-workers, life could have been much different for me.

Time and again, I have witnessed compassion, common sense and encouragement - actions which have left an indelible imprint on my beliefs.

It soon became clear that policies, rules and regulations all have their place as guidelines. Yet they can never replace genuine sensitivity or humane reactions when problems need resolution, when life gets complex.

Early in my teaching career, a rather stern school principal chided me. "Young, don't let your bleeding heart affect your bloody head."

He meant well, but in my 35 years of interaction with kids in classrooms, I must say that his words reflected a hard and simplistic approach that was not necessary. In most cases, the "bleeding heart" proved to be more beneficial than the "bloody head."

The hard-nosed attitude of a senior functionary in that school typifies clearly the bureaucratic approach encountered all too frequently in the world around us.

There seems to be an unjustifiable reliance on the importance of flexing muscles, of displaying power, of ignoring the impact on others when problems could often be solved without such bravado - and with considerably more heart.

When a scaffold broke down on a Toronto highrise, the horrific construction accident in which several immigrant workers fell to their deaths must have shattered the lives of their families.

How could any bureaucrat compound the misery of that moment by promptly advising the mother and children of one victim that they might be sent back to Israel to face a future they were trying to escape as refugees to Canada? Such a crushing and heartless announcement could surely have been postponed or avoided.

Then we have the raw milk fiasco in Durham. The ruling that the farmer may continue to sell unpasteurized milk to an even wider market when all research proves that there would be increased risk to the public from such pathogens as listeria, salmonella and E. coli truly flies in the face of reason.

An effective decision could have avoided future expensive litigation and ended the selfish ambition of the appellant.

Randy Hillier did little to increase the stature of any Conservative MPP by sending congratulations to a self-centered citizen oblivious to the welfare of others.

Letters to the editor continue to draw attention to the unfairness of the current assessment system for retirees on fixed income. The process really forces them to sell their properties when they should be enjoying their "golden years" in homes they had worked hard to purchase. With the money being paid to MPPs and senior bureaucrats, surely they could find more reasonable alternatives. Yet a bureaucratic brick wall faces those whose lives are altered by inflexible rules and regulations.

On the bright side, how rewarding it is to see the manner in which Clara Hughes has been turned into the flag-bearer for the 2010 Olympic Games. This young woman pulled herself away from a life of alcohol and drug experimentation which began as early as age 13. She now financially supports rehabilitation for others, repaying those who guided her to respectability through patient and caring direction.

Perhaps as our civilization continues to become more humane, we may be able to prevent situations such as the one in Michigan where a 93-year-old Second World War veteran was allowed to freeze to death because of unpaid electric bills.

In Ontario, bureaucratic policies and rules are used to defend staff of the Community Housing Corporation who evicted a respected 82-year-old gentleman who later died on the streets.

How can ambulance workers in Toronto justify sitting in their vehicle for half an hour while responding to an emergency call for help that might have saved the life of Jim Hearst? The excuse is regulations!

At what stage does humanity and common sense reach such people?

My final salvo is aimed at media types who can destroy people's lives for the sake of a captivating photo. Despite the perceived humour in that picture of a TTC token taker sleeping on the job, did anyone even contemplate the implications for a tired old worker on a boring job?

They ignored what the complications might be for his family, his health and his future. Where is the compassion, the humanity in such behavior? Even the press should remember that good will is achieved by many actions, but can be lost by one.

June Callwood once wrote "Nothing is more useful to the development of personal worth than people."

I would agree, remembering Thoreau's cautionary quip "Any fool can make a rule."