

Disable the reset-button!



While applauding President Obama's recent initiative to breathe new life into U.S.-Russian relations, it was with uncomfortable smugness that I noticed the dangerous notion of the *reset button* has finally become a mainstream concept. It was only a matter of time!

With a generation of folk so used to the reset function of computer games and the remote control, has the illusion of being able to erase the past become an accepted reality? Are death, catastrophe, crime, jingoistic political/economic policies and, dare I say, failure perhaps considered phenomena that can be wiped away with a simple reboot? As a fiercely proud Canadian, this gives me even more cause for concern when I read that only two provinces in this wonderful country, with its revered world status, have history on the obligatory subject list. Similarly, nearly every *self-help formula* seems nowadays to tout ditching the past as the ultimate panacea.

"Let go of the past", "move forward" are perhaps the most common mantra of our time. Are we living in an era that discards the past as irrelevant?

Not for a minute am I suggesting that we live anchored in the past. Logically, though, it is an inescapable fact that the present and future are built on past realities. Raised in the school of "you are building your future now", I am ever conscious of how past achievements, mistakes, failures, wrongdoing, etc. shape our individual and collective personality, emotional make-up, as well as the opportunities available to us. Much like a vast tapestry or mosaic, every stitch or piece represents our evolution.

It is surely impossible to ignore the positive and negative when observing our impact on others.

Yet in nearly every conflict resolution workshop or mediation initiative I deliver, I find it a huge challenge to persuade participants to look past the first symptoms of conflict or disagreement and examine their actions that potentially lit a slow-burning fuse, ultimately igniting the powder-keg.

So too in the bigger picture, past political, economic and social actions and events in any country, society or grouping have direct bearing on current impact. None of us, I am sure, would advocate forgetting the Holocaust, apartheid, colonialism or other such evils for fear they might happen again.

Wars and subsequent peace treaties have evidenced declarations that such devastation should not reoccur. Do we take the November 11 Armistice Day remembrance ceremonies to heart? Considering only the Iraq and Afghanistan military engagements, we speak blithely of fighting for freedom but seem to overlook the enormous civilian and economic devastation in those countries. When the fighting is over, will we again think that pressing the reset-button will wipe the slate clean? Will wreath-laying ceremonies in years to come suffice to assuage our collective conscience? Will we interpret subsequent anti-western feeling as "hatred for our

freedoms" ... or will we examine our imperfect actions as a possible cause?

Similarly, facing current challenges in the Middle East and Iran, as well as our preoccupation with Islam and anti-western feeling, are we at all looking to recognize, admit and acknowledge what gave rise to what we consider to be so evil? Would this not perhaps, rather than self-righteous or self-interested condemnation, be the first step in moving forward?

Closer to home, I do not think it an exaggerated observation that Anglophone exasperation with the Francophone Canadian sovereignty activists does not pause to look at why people feel the way they do.

The media drives public opinion. Would not a media that consistently insists on "why" rather than assuming polarized standpoints, create a culture that seeks to understand and appreciate why things are as they are?

This does not at all suggest that we should accept or condone criminal or evil acts. The traditional Canadian role of *peacemaker* has always demanded that we fully understand both sides of international disputes. This daunting task seems to be less of a priority than in the past. Perhaps an awareness of history does not always suit political, ideological and economic agendas.

The past can never be erased. Failure to look at history will cause us to mindlessly repeat past mistakes. We will not advance.

New generations deserve the accumulated, not selective, wisdom of mankind.

Rodger Harding is a business leadership and corporate intelligence awareness consultant. He may be reached by phone at (416) 962-6700 or by e-mail at staycool@web.ca.