

Reality bites of 2016

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

I think the biggest lesson we learnt in 2016 is that we have been living in a bubble of delusion - about the kind of world we live in. The first major bubble that burst our incorrigible complacency was the ramifications of terrorism unleashed by ISIS which we realised with horror, had reached every nook and cranny of the world, including our own home. ISIS and its sympathisers (whether recruits or lone wolves) have proved that there is actually no limit to human cruelty, the manifestation of which we were forced to witness on July 1. I will not go into the details of that just as we begin a New Year but we must acknowledge the fact that what ISIS and other terror outfits have taught us is when there is a vacuum of basic values in the existing system and in our personal lives, the seeds of extremism will germinate at exponential speed and will infect even the most unlikely targets. Could we have ever imagined that youngsters, barely out of their 20s who had been brought up in luxury and had the privilege of going to the best schools and universities, who never had to suffer the deprivations that so many young people from poor families do - these young men would be capable of becoming such ruthless killers? They had been brainwashed to such an extent that they were willing to give up everything - their families, their future, their very lives, for some distorted idea spread by a few evil men. We learnt with growing fright, the profile of religious militants were no longer

confined to poor, neglected, youngsters who had only been exposed to religious education and so were easy targets of extremist indoctrination. The new brand of terrorists did not sport beards and long kurtas, they wore jeans and T-shirts, could be friends of your children or even sons (and daughters) of your extended family. This is something we must think about very deeply and try to understand why our young men and women would be drawn to such distorted, destructive ideology. On the other hand the same horrific incident also gave us the most incredible sacrifice of a young man named Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain. Educated in the most prestigious educational institutes at home and abroad, from a respectable and wealthy family, this 20-year-old who happened to be quite religious, showed the world that religion and humanity was one and the same thing. By refusing to leave his friends, both young women he went to school with, one of Hindu faith, he showed what true courage, piety, nobility and loyalty was. His sacrifice was a slap in the face for the terrorists who justified their heinous murdering spree as being for the sake of Islam. Faraaz's sacrifice is more important for Muslims all over the world because it refutes the western stereotype of what a Muslim represents - terror, backwardness and ill treatment of women. Faraaz has told the world that being a Muslim means being humane, being courageous in the face of injustice, it means friendship and it means tolerance of other people's differences. If ever there was an example of what a modern, enlightened Muslim could be like, that would be this innocent young man who was brought up with the best values a human being could have.

A humungous bombshell fell on the entire world (and it is still reeling from the experience) when Donald Trump won the US presidency. The media coverage of the campaigns exposed the extent of Islamophobia and xenophobia of a large portion of the electorate that found Trump's political incorrectness so appealing. The America that had been admired for its liberal thinking, its passionate adherence to

denial - definitely the American media was - about how much their country had changed and how many of their compatriots believed in an all-white America. In fact the all-white agenda is spreading fast all over the just divorced UK and Europe as more and more non-whites are forced to leave home to seek refuge in western countries. The most damning realisation of 2016 is that the human race has

scores with international rivals and sustain the arms industries. As climate change makes itself more known to the world, there is little hope that there will be less conflict if we carry on like this, for how do we tackle the influx of more and more climate refugees, the loss of natural resources, the scarcity of land and water and most importantly, the greed and selfishness of humans?

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the constitution, its acceptance of people from all cultures and faiths - all that was brushed aside by Trump and his supporters. Again, the media, and us living thousands of miles away yet so invested in the outcome of the US elections, realised, we had been living in that delusional bubble. Not that there were no signs of this wave of narrow-minded populist nationalism, in the US and before in other parts of the world. It is just that we were in

become more confused, divisive, racist and violent than ever. Technology has been abused to kill human beings - whether they are assault rifles or drones that can wipe out whole villages. And no matter how much the West and its eastern allies try to arrest the haemorrhaging in the wars they instigated, the bleeding just won't stop. Because the intentions are not to 'save' people, it is to expand power bases, settle

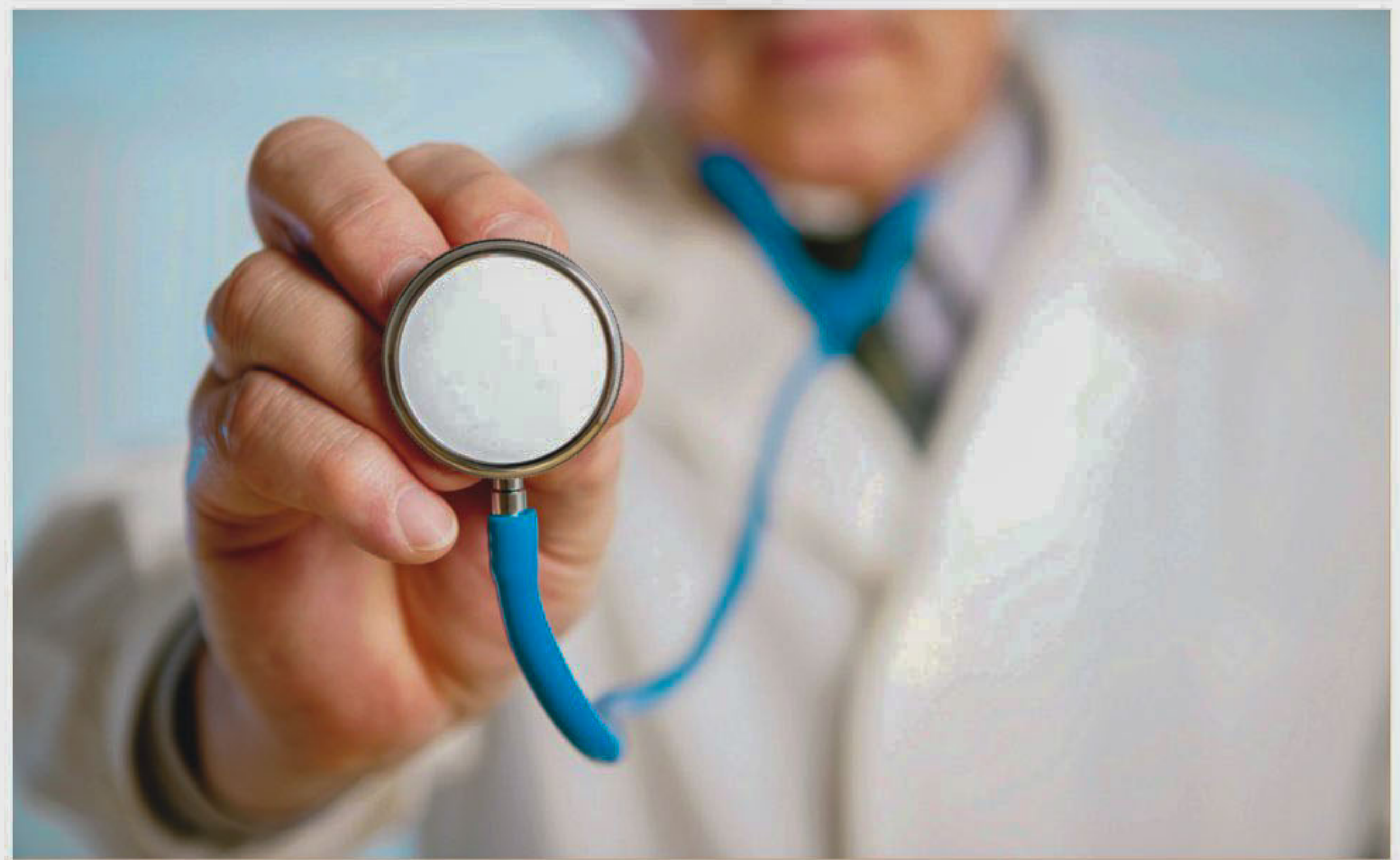
Stepping into a new year therefore, brings with it huge baggage, the burden of the truths we have been forced to recognise. The question is always can we move forward? Can we learn the lessons of last year and try to be better human beings? But perhaps the real question is: How much do we really want to?

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Honesty is the best medicine

BRIG GEN Q M SHAHJAHAN HAFIZ

DOCTORS learn a lot of things in medical school, but death is not one of them. Dissection of dead bodies teaches us human anatomy. Medical textbooks have almost nothing on aging or dying. How the process of death unfolds, how people experience the end of their lives and how the near and dear ones around them are affected are never taught. The purpose of medical study is to save lives, not how to help them die when it is inevitable. To make the medical study more humane and well-rounded, students are taught physical examination etiquette, effect of socioeconomic and race on health. At other times students contemplate helplessly the suffering of the patient as he lies ill, worsening moment to moment from some unnamed, untreatable disease. No one can agree on a diagnosis and remedies they give him accomplish nothing. He suffers pain and torture helplessly.



There is a certain degree of deception which for some reason they all accept, that he is not dying but is simply ill. He has flashes of hope of getting well but he grows weaker everyday. He lives with fear of death. But his doctors, friends and family cannot accept death which causes him profound pain. The failure of those around him to offer comfort or to acknowledge what is happening is a failure of our character and culture. Knowing fully well the patient has no cure and probably has months to live, doctors often push for all sorts of interventions and procedures which are inherently dangerous and even potentially life-threatening and force him to accept them. What is most striking is not how bad the patient's decisions are but how much the doctors in our country avoid talking honestly about the choice before him.

Doctors should have no difficulty explaining the specific dangers of various treatment options, but never touch on the reality of the disease. They all have seen him for months of treatment for a problem that they knew could not be cured. They can not discuss the larger truth about the condition or ultimate limits of their capabilities, let alone what might matter most to him as he neared the end of his life. If the patient was pursuing a delusion, so were the doctors. The chances that he could return to anything like the life he had even a few weeks earlier were zero. But doctors seldom offer comfort or guidance. They just offer another treatment with the false hope that something good would result.

Modern science has profoundly altered the course of human life. People live longer and better than any other time in history. But scientific advances have turned the processes of aging and dying into medical experiences, matters to be managed by health care professionals. But the profession has proved alarmingly unprepared for it. There is no escape from the tragedy of life - we are all aging from the day we are born. One should come to understand and accept this fact. But that is not the same as coping with what can not be mended. Doctors succeed if they are able to fix. But if it is not fixable? The fact that we have had no adequate answers to this question is troubling and has caused callousness, inhumanity and immense suffering.

We don't have to spend much time with the elderly or those with terminal illness to see how often medicine fails the people it is supposed to help. The final days of our lives are given over to treatments that torment our brains and sap our bodies. They are spent in institutions, nursing homes and intensive care units where regimented, anonymous routines cut us off from all the things that matter to us in life. Medical profession's reluctance to honestly examine the experience of aging and dying has increased the harm we inflict on people and deny them the basic comforts they most need. Absence of a clear view of how people might live successfully all the way to their very end has allowed our fates to be controlled by the imperatives of

medicine, technology and strangers. Being mortal is the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology, with the limits set by genes and cells and flesh and bones. Medical science has given us immense power to push against these limits. But we have to admit this power is finite and always will be. We have been wrong about what our job is in medicine. We have been taught our job is to ensure health and survival. But it is larger than that. It is to enable well-being. Well-being is the reason one wishes to be alive. Those reasons matter all the way in life - in health and sickness. The vital questions are the same whether one is sick bodily or mentally. The field of palliative care emerged over the recent decades to bring this kind of thinking to the care of dying patients. It is encouraging that the specialty is advancing, bringing the same approach to other seriously ill patients, whether dying or not. But it will only bring significant change when all clinicians apply such thinking to every person they touch. It should not be a separate specialty. To be human is to be limited. The role of caring professions ought to be aiding people in their struggle with those limits. Sometimes we can provide cures, sometimes only symptomatic relief, sometimes not even that. Whatever we can offer, our interventions, are justified only if they serve the larger aims of a person's life. If we forget that, the suffering we inflict can be barbaric. If we remember that, the good we do can be overwhelming. The most meaningful experience a doctor as a human being can get, would come from helping others deal with what medicine can do as well as what it cannot.

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The writer is a former Director of Medical Service of Bangladesh Army.

QUOTABLE Quote

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.
AMERICAN BAPTIST MINISTER AND ACTIVIST

Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Makes finer
- Tourney makeup
- Put on a pedestal
- Left at sea
- "House-boat" star
- Canyon
- "Toddleoo!"
- Organ part
- Voucher
- Opposed
- Clumsy one
- Feature of a '50s car
- Tea party guest
- Knightly of films
- "A Perfect Spy" author
- Beat walker
- Clip contents
- Scathing reviews
- Locale
- Sharpen
- Selfrespect
- Merge
- Love affair
- Derisive sound
- More rational
- Lake Turkana setting

DOWN

- Pitcher Maglie
- Oath words
- Rampart's role
- Goodie
- Dispatched
- Comic bit
- Missionary
- Serious shame
- Therefore
- Escalator part
- Battery size
- Snowman's eyes
- Robust
- Winged victory
- Service period
- Vitamin extra
- Stiestas
- Needed to be paid
- Join the crew
- Tubular pasta
- Relaxing places
- "-- La Douce"
- Corn cover
- Bungle
- Essay
- LAX guess

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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