

Substantial Disruption



Kids, Caves and Orangutans

By Mike Tully

*America, where are you now?
Don't you care about your sons and daughters?*
- Steppenwolf, "Monster" (1969)

In 2013, comedian-pundit Bill Maher compared Donald Trump to an orangutan. Everybody but Trump recognized the line as satire. “That was venom,” the future President told *Fox News*. “That wasn’t a joke.” Trump was so upset he filed a lawsuit against Maher. The comedian laughed it off and Michael Cohen, Trump’s fixer-attorney [dismissed the case](#) two months later. In reality, Maher deserved to be sued, but not by Trump – by the orangutans.

Comparing Trump to an orangutan does not insult Trump, but it does disparage orangutans, a kind and intelligent species that *Animal Planet* includes in its list of “[Top 10 Animal Moms](#).” The orangutan mother “never puts her babies down, generally nursing offspring until they reach the age of 6 or 7,” notes the website, adding, “that’s the longest dependence of any animal on Earth.” Humans could learn from orangutans, especially our brittle, humorless President who presides over an administration that kidnaps immigrant children to use as hostages in support of an immigration policy built on scapegoating. Some of the youngest victims of his policy were absent from their parents for so long they [no longer recognized them](#).

As I write this, the most famous boys’ soccer team in history [rests and recovers](#) in a hospital in Thailand. We all followed their story arc, from news they were trapped in a flooded cave, to their discovery nine days later, to the daring and tragic rescue that brought them to safety after a volunteer diver gave his life in the effort. The entire world watched the galvanizing and captivating spectacle. There was a planetary sigh of relief when all twelve boys and their young coach were finally rescued. The endangered children had been led from the darkness to safety. Their experience should be a metaphor for a human race that nurtures and cares for its children. Sadly, it’s more exception than metaphor.

UNICEF reports 2017 was a “[nightmare year](#)” for children who found themselves in war zones, according to *Deutsche Welle*, quoting UNICEF’s Manuel Fontaine as saying, “Children are being targeted and exposed to attacks and brutal violence in their homes, schools and playgrounds.” “As these attacks continue year after year, we cannot become numb,” he added. “Such brutality cannot be the new normal.” “More than 10,000 children were killed or maimed in armed conflicts last year,” [reported](#) the *New York Times*. “The suffering occurred across the world.” This fact, according to Virginia Gamba, the United Nations Secretary General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, “shows a blatant disregard for international law by parties to conflict, making civilians, especially children, increasingly vulnerable to violence, use and abuse.” She said her office confirmed 900 cases of rape and sexual violence last year – the actual figure is probably higher – and deplored “the use of human beings as toys, as weapons, as terror, to confuse society, and to divide those children from even the remotest possibility of ever being an active part of society.”

UNICEF [published a report in 2016](#) addressing “The Growing Crisis for Refugee And Migrant Children.” “Around the world, nearly 50 million children have migrated across borders or been forcibly displaced,” wrote the authors. “and this is a conservative estimate.” They added, “More than half of these girls and boys fled violence and insecurity – 28 million in total.” What is the future of a species that fails to care for its young?

Most Americans want to see this nation act to reduce the suffering of children, not add to it by ripping kids from parents’ arms as the Trump administration is doing. I think most of us still want to believe we are a beacon of hope in a dark and frightened world, Reagan’s “shining city on a hill.” But the “shining city” has a cracked foundation; the United States doesn’t take good care of its children. Consider a [recent article](#) by Annie Lowery in *The Atlantic*. “This is a country that professes to care about children at their youngest and most fragile,” she writes. “But here, for every 100,000 live births, 28 women die in childbirth or shortly thereafter, compared with 11 in Canada.” The ratio has actually doubled since 1990. The infant death rate in the U. S. is twice that of similarly wealthy countries. Our [child poverty rate](#) is higher than nearly every other member of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. Lowery notes black women in this country die in childbirth at the same rate as women in Mongolia.

The experience of the Thai soccer team was not a metaphor of a caring world, but a metaphor for the plight of children, far too many of whom endure a metaphorical darkness of war, violence and displacement, hoping for brave heroes to lead them out of darkness and fear. Americans should be the heroes, but we are adding to the misery, not combating it. We neglect our own children and abuse the children of immigrants. Perhaps it is unavoidable such a country is capable of electing somebody like Trump.

We’d have done better to elect a real orangutan.