

## Do we all have a touch of the ostrich syndrome?

**ATLE HETLAND**  
EN ROUTE

**Y**es, I think we do. Like the ostrich, we often hide our head in the sand, believing that when we cannot see anything, there is no danger – no running dog or human being hunting us. We pretend that the danger doesn't exist. True, human beings have a bigger brain and better instinct than the ostrich. But then, maybe we just ruffle our feathers, beautify ourselves with borrowed feathers, and do all kinds of other things in our short-sighted pretence, just like the ostrich. Let me admit, I remember many times when I behaved like an ostrich – but I won't tell you all such embarrassing stories!

And then I am a Norwegian, and we are known for not always facing problems and issues head on. The famous Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen wrote about that in his play *'Peer Gynt'*, where he talks about *'bøygen'*, which could be translated to the *'doubt'*, a semi-subconscious voice that keeps telling Peer not to be too honest, too direct, too principled, and so on. Instead, Peer should be a bit sly and smart, do things that could benefit himself, well, without directly hurting others. And if reality was against what Peer thought, then he could just dream a bit; on the summer's day he could rest in the hay, gaze up on the clouds flying over the light blue sky, ignore any dark clouds with rain and thunder, just pretend they were not there.

I have several themes and topics proving what I am saying; that we are all a bit like Peer – and ostriches.

Earlier this week, President Obama gave an important speech about climate change, and he was accusing many of his American countrymen and women not wanting to admit that the largest economy in the world, along with China, the second largest one, are polluting more than anyone else – and that soon it may be too late to stop the damage that they cause. So, many Americans behave like ostriches. They are not alone, and the field of climate change is not the only field where the uncomfortable truth is wished away; we all rewrite history sometimes, change scientific data, and delete some facts we don't like.

A decade or two ago, I remember the stubborn opinion by an otherwise logical and academic former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, who for some inexplicable reason claimed that he didn't believe that AIDS came from the HIV virus. Or, more recently, a senior American politician who suggested that if a woman who had been raped had not had any pleasure from the act, then she would simply not get pregnant. And the politician said it in broad daylight, expecting to be believed; at least, the electorate didn't elect him.

Although illogical ideas may be easy to notice, and dismiss, there are plenty of seemingly logical ideas that are wrong too; they are often in social, economic, cultural and philosophical fields, less than in the technological and natural sciences.

There is a migration crisis in the world today, indeed so in Europe, in particular the wealthy European Union countries. But people don't want to analyze the migration and refugee issues seriously. We hide data, we pretend we can find quick 'solutions', we overlook moral and religious aspects, that each person is as valuable as the other in the eyes of God and humans, as was also stated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Just now, British politicians and authorities argue that their French counterparts must stop the immigrants from leaving Calais in France, so that they don't cross the English Channel and land in Dover, UK, by sea or through the channel-tunnel.

People who live elsewhere in Europe, especially a bit away, will say that "it is their problem", or they will just keep quiet since that is often safer. People simply hope that the North Africans, Syrians, Iraqis, Eritreans and

others from the South will not all want to, or be able to, in desperation, knock on the doors of Turkey, Greece, Italy and the other countries in the North. In other words, we seem to suffer from the ostrich syndrome.

Yet, we know full well that the immigration crisis will get worse, and that entirely new approaches must be sought. We must find ways where immigrants are welcome even to the rich countries. Well, the word 'even' is not quite right to use because immigrants have always moved from poorer lands to such with more opportunities for themselves and their children. That is simply intrinsic to immigration, such as when Europeans a few hundred years ago immigrated in hordes to America.

True, in Europe, immigration must be regulated in such ways that it is simpler and safer to come as legal immigrants rather than illegal and smuggled ones. Perhaps Europe should look for areas with spares population density and opportunities for immigrants within its own lands? Russia and Scandinavia may be such lands, but it requires a new mindsets and new approaches. We must try to get cured from our ostrich syndrome; yes, let the ostriches fly away – and fill our heads and hearts with logic and passion. And we must work for fairer trade and development worldwide so that people don't have to leave home, because they don't really want to.

I have already mentioned environmental issues, indeed climate change, which is one of the most important areas in our time. We must become more realistic in our thinking and take appropriate actions; and we mustn't postpone everything till tomorrow. It costs money to do new things, and many who have big money and want more, are hesitant to contribute.

Poor people who suffer from climate change and other negligence and wrong environmental policies have little say. That is the case as regards the floods in Myanmar at this particular time, often in remote areas where refugees live. And it is also the case in Sindh and Gilgit. If we had been willing to *plan better* and set aside more funds to mitigate environmental disasters, the negative effects would have been less. True, when Pakistan has floods – and that is almost happening every year now – the response is often good. It is the local authorities and the affected people themselves that carry the main burden. Foreign donors do less, but they often get much of the media attention.

We should underline that better planning is needed in all areas in developing countries. Poor, superficial and unrealistic planning is typical characteristics of being a developing country. But we may not quite want Singapore's rigorous planning either, in spite of the economic and technocratic city state's success. Singapore's national day is 9 August, and this year it will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Rich, industrialized countries also need to become better, more realistic and democratic in future planning; they too need to include unpopular topics. Take the West's resource consumption; if we want a fairer world, the rich countries must turn around and become more realistic, less selfish. Take the enormous military budgets in the world; they must be reduced dramatically and the money used in the interest of people. If we indeed were democratic, military expenses would have been minimal. Instead we would have invested in health, education, job creation and other fields that can help people improve their daily lives where they live.

Today, it is timely to be reminded the bombing of Hiroshima, which took place on 6 August, 70 years ago; and three days later, Nagasaki was bombed. There is no excuse for such a crime against humanity.

I have mentioned a few important areas where we hide our heads in the sand and don't want to see and do what is right. I could have mentioned many other things. But my intention was to draw attention to the importance of being realistic, future-oriented and fair-minded. Ostriches are beautiful birds, but human beings have much bigger brains and hearts. Let us make good use of what God gave us, and the beautiful earth we share as his/her custodians.

---

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.