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Hope and Despair

I'm sure readers of this newsletter were appalled at the awful tragedies in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania last week. I spent two days glued to the TV watching developments, shocked into disbelief.

As the USA mobilizes I despair of any easy solutions to terrorism and conflict. Somehow we must find ways to bridge the chasms that separate peoples. We've built a communications infrastructure that spans the planet; one idealistic dream I once had was that this web would promote understanding between very different cultures, enhancing compassion and ultimately helping each of us identify with others.

We engineers are an intellectual elite, and are extremely wealthy by the standards of the world. It might be hard to acknowledge this wealth when the credit card statements scream their unhappy messages, but the world is rife with poverty of a sort most of us can't fathom. Our cell-phone, Internet ridden society does not mirror that of so many poor countries. In grappling for some understanding I checked out the CIA World Factbook (http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html) and found that Afghanistan has 26 million people, 100,000 TVs, 167,000 radios, and zero Internet Service Providers. Our "connected world" is a fiction. With Afghani women at only a 15% literacy rate, Internet is clearly something as foreign as space aliens. Even TV and radio are well outside of most of their experiences. If a communications infrastructure will promote understanding and compassion (maybe a dubious prospect), we have a long way to go.

It seems most of the cool electronic products we build are disposable trinkets. And yet, some months ago a reader contacted me for information needed to construct smart 5 KW generators to power small pumping stations in Nepal. Embedded systems can and do help folks even in remote unconnected communities.

I conducted a poll on embedded.com in the Spring (http://www.embedded.com/pollArchive/?surveyno=1962); of the 255 readers who responded 65% claimed they build systems that improve people's lives. That's not bad!

I have seen control systems where a fleck of silicon saves mountains of coal, where a tiny weather station helps poor villagers anticipate ravaging floods, and instrumentation that

lets farmers boost protein levels in grains. As we create the 21st century let's step back from time to time and decide if we're building devices that can help people, prosperous or poor, lead richer and more compassionate lives.

Technology alone will never solve anything, but in this global economy every solution will have a technology component. I hope we developers can make a difference.

Thought for the Week

Niall Murphy, a consultant and also columnist for Embedded Systems Programming, sent a link to the only web hit counter worth considering... it's implemented as an embedded system. Check it out: http://www.embeddedether.net/mhc.html

About The Embedded Muse

The Embedded Muse is an occasional newsletter sent via email by Jack Ganssle. Send complaints, comments, and contributions to him at jack@ganssle.com.

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