

Remembering Tiananmen Square

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I had an “opportunity” to observe the dynamics of Cain and Abel on a large scale during a significant moment in China. More than 20 years ago now, the student demonstrations—almost an uprising—took over Tiananmen Square and occupied the center of Beijing for nearly two months. I was in China for a conference at the height of the demonstration, when over one million people marched down the main avenue. I was still in China for the crackdown and its aftermath.

A couple of reflections: first, the student movement was peaceful. I spent time among the demonstrators and hunger strikers at the very core of the demonstration, and even though there were large groups of people in motion, everything was orderly and safe. Second, the government response for the most part was restrained, given the magnitude of the situation.

Which was Cain and which was Abel? More importantly, who was Cain and who was Abel on each side? Among the student leaders, some understood the gravity of what was happening and worked for strategic moderation, but some got carried away with their own seeming power and became entrenched, vowing not to leave the Square no matter what, unless their demands were met (including the resignation—if not suicide—of prominent leaders). On the government side, too, there were intense, even desperate attempts by some leaders to come to agreeable terms with the student movement, but there were others who harbored resentment and resorted to the politics of fear and violence. In the end, the relatively Cain side won out on each side, and the clash produced detrimental consequences far and wide.

So, in a situation of conflict, the key question is not which side is Cain, and which is Abel (since it is rare for anyone to think their own side is Cain), but rather what are the Abel factors on each side, and how can they be enhanced?