

## Stepping Outside The Box

Service presented by Carl Tichler, July 27, 2008

### Opening Words

#### Tacitus, from the **Agricola**

*The Romans --- pillagers of the world, they have exhausted the land by their indiscriminate plunder, and now they ransack the sea. A rich enemy excites their cupidity; a poor one, their lust for power. East and West alike have failed to satisfy them. They are the only people on earth to whose covetousness both riches and poverty are equally tempting. To robbery, butchery, and plunder, they give the lying name of "government"; they create a desolation and call it peace. [1]*

#### Sermon

In the summer of 2006, I purchased the New York Times on my way to work. I felt compelled to purchase the paper because of what I saw on the front page; a picture of the head of Abu Masiq Al-Zarqawi, who had been killed in Iraq the previous day, by two missiles launched by the United States military. Perhaps some of you may recall this picture; it was on the front page of many newspapers at the time, and an enlarged poster of his head, approximately 2 feet high, was shown at the military news conference announcing the event of his being "brought to justice". I was disturbed by this picture, which appeared to be celebrating this man's death. Mr. Al Zarqawi had been repeatedly mentioned in newspaper and television in the preceding weeks as the elusive leader of "Al Qaeda in Iraq", presumed to be responsible for many of the suicide bombings and terrorist attacks within Iraq in the preceding months. Some newspapers were overtly triumphalist and celebratory in their reporting. The Times article was more restrained, describing how the special forces of our military were able to track this wanted man to a particular house in the neighborhood of Baquba, and then destroy the entire house with "precision guided" missiles. Near the end of the article, it was mentioned that several "associates" of Mr. Zarqawi were also killed during this missile strike. When I later searched the internet for more details about this event, I noticed that some articles instead said that these several people killed were members of a family living in this house. No mention was made in these articles about whether or not this family were involved in any way in the group "Al Qaeda in Iraq", or whether they were part of the insurgency. One article, in the BBC, mentioned that one of the members of this family was a girl, between 5 and 7 years old.

There are many ways to understand this event and report on it. It could be a victorious story of the capture of a person who had, according to military officials, committed numerous outrages and acts of terrorism. It could be a story of outrage at the innocent victims of war, the killing of innocent bystanders that often goes by the euphemism "collateral damage". I would present to you instead some other stories. There is a story of a young girl's life, of her hopes and dreams, and the challenges she had to confront while living during wartime occupation. Perhaps her parents or others in her family were fighting against our occupying forces, or perhaps they were just trying to get by in their war-torn country without becoming victims. There is the story of the following days, weeks, and months, of how the death of this girl affected the circles of family, friends and neighbors in Baquba who felt the loss and pain of her absence.

Why are these stories suppressed, or to use newspaper jargon, "buried"? Why is the story of this young girl --- even her name --- missing? The straightforward answer would be this --- that to do so would call into question the presented narrative of a "surgical" strike which gets the bad guy. But I think there is more going on here. In my opening words, Tacitus relates the words of a Caledonian rebel named Calgacus who says of the Romans: "They create a desolation and call it peace". In the article, "Euphemism and American Violence", David Bromwich, professor of English at Yale, describes the purpose behind such language:

*Certain habits of speech ... abet the ferocity and arrogance of the empire by infecting even the enemies of Rome with Roman self-deception... The frightening thing about such acts of renaming or euphemism, Tacitus implies, is their power to efface the memory of actual cruelties. Behind the façade of a history falsified by language, the painful particulars of war are lost. Maybe the most disturbing implication of the famous sentence "They create a desolation and call it peace" is that apologists for violence, by means of euphemism, come to believe what they hear themselves say. [2]*

Later in the article, Mr. Bromwich quotes from George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language":

*Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called **pacification**. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called **transfer of population** or **rectification of frontiers**. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called **elimination of unreliable elements**. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. [3]*

I would add the recent euphemism, "enhanced interrogation techniques", that is used to describe waterboarding and other

forms of torture. A few months after this newspaper story, I led a service here entitled "Human Rights in a UU Context". During that service I focussed on two of the many Muslim men who were held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba by our government and subjected to torture and other human rights violations. The legal term "detainee" and "detention" are used rather than "prisoner" and "imprisonment" because these men have not been formally accused of any crime, let alone convicted. Many of these men were detained in Guantanamo because of the large bounties being paid by our military at the time, and had nothing to do with any kind of violence or terrorism. The two men I described in the sermon, the brothers Ustad Badruzzaman Badr and Abdurraheem Muslim Dost., were both poets before arriving at Guantanamo, and continued writing during their time there. When they were released after 3 years, without explanation or apology, the military confiscated most of the thousands of lines of poetry that they wrote there. A lawyer for the detainees, Marc Falkoff, collected poems from many of the detainees and published them in 2007 in the book "Poems From Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak". I will read an excerpt from one of these poems:

### **Is It True?**

by Usama Abu Kabir

*Is it true that the Grass grows again after rain?  
Is it true that the Flowers will rise up in the Spring?  
Is it true that Birds will migrate home again?  
Is it true that the Salmon swim back up their stream?*

*It is true. This is true. These are all miracles.  
But is it true that one day we'll leave Guantanamo Bay?  
Is it true that one day we'll go back to our homes?  
I sail in my dreams, I am dreaming of home. [4]*

Mr. Kabir was released from Guantanamo in November, 2007.

I had hoped by telling the story of the two brothers, by naming them, by reading their poetry, that I would not only bring attention to the human rights violations at Guantanamo, but also personalize the story in a way that was rare in the media. I wanted to also tell the story of the young girl that I just described, but I did not, as I realized that her story and the questions it raised were different and more complicated than the issue of human rights, and might take away from the central message of torture and dehumanization at Guantanamo.

I have struggled since then to understand the lack of outrage among the majority of people in our country about Guantanamo, as more and more evidence of the torture that has been done there comes to light, and as the innocence of so many of the detainees there becomes harder to suppress. There has been the absurd spectacle of legal scholars and people in all levels of government debating whether waterboarding is torture, or whether it or other forms of "enhanced interrogation" can be justified in certain circumstances. We have now reached an even worse absurdity, as several of the Guantanamo detainees are now about to be tried in a military tribunal for organizing the attacks of September 11 --- after years of legal challenges to the legitimacy of these tribunals.

So at this moment in America, we will be having show trials worthy of Stalinist Russia, where even if those accused manage to escape a guilty verdict, they will still be "detained" as "enemy combatants". Our elected officials argue about whether the "surge" is working without speaking of the fear, terror, and death that we have brought with our invasion. They do not speak of the innocent victims of war --- and acknowledge that 90% of the deaths and injuries in modern warfare are of civilians like the young girl I described. We do we not say the names of these victims, or tell their stories.

Instead we have a government and media which perpetuates a myth, that war is a glorious battle between noble, self-sacrificing soldiers fighting an abstract, faceless evil. This myth cannot recognize the inherent worth and dignity of the victims. It instead justifies the deaths of this unnamed "enemy" as bringing peace and democracy to an unworthy people and protecting our nation from terrorism. I will take this myth to its logical conclusion, using the arguments and language I have heard used by our elected officials and media:

*When the enemy forces (terrorists, insurgents, or Islamo-Fascists) fight back and kill our own soldiers, then we must reluctantly use even greater force, to "pacify" those troublemakers, who obviously don't appreciate our good intentions in trying to help them. And after five years, when the country still has not been "pacified", when millions of people have fled the country to escape the violence, when militias fight amongst each other for territory when they are not fighting against us, well, it was a big mistake for us to even try to "subdue" those people, they were obviously not ready for democracy, they really just needed a strong man, a leader to keep things in line. We need to just stay a few more years --- or decades --- continuing to pacify those recalcitrant evil-doers until the country is "stable".*

This description might seem to be an exaggeration. Certainly many people who support the war, or who have supported it, believed the justifications presented by our government and media that we were freeing Iraqis from a despot, but at the same

time would reject the implications of the narrative I just presented. Many of those people, although perhaps supporting the war in its early years, saw the continuing death, devastation, and lack of "progress", and decided that the war was a "mistake", and voted in the midterm elections of 2006 to replace many of their representatives in congress, with the expectation that doing so would indicate their rejection of the current government policy, and that these new representatives and senators would work to end the war.

I hoped that the elections of 2006 would bring the war to an end within the following two years --- although I would have preferred it to end much sooner. I believed that the new Democratic majority in both houses would use their power to at least start this process. I even thought that they might act to end the torture at Guantanamo, to have the men there either brought to trial or released. But they did not. Over and over again, they voted to fund the war --- hundreds of billions of dollars --- each time with the Democratic leaders saying that it was the best they could do --- or perhaps letting us know that some vital health care program or veterans benefits were tied to the war funding, which somehow mitigated the effect of prolonging the war.

And now we are told that we have another chance in 2008 to end this war. The presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, describes the Iraq war a "mistake", a "foreign policy disaster", and calls instead for a "phased withdrawal" for the majority of the troops in Iraq to fight the "real battle against terrorism" in Afghanistan, and leave a residual force in Iraq to fight "Al-Qaeda". He also states that we must keep "all options on the table" against the so-called "grave threat" to our nation, Iran.

The so-called "mainstream" contenders for president, Obama and John McCain, as well as Hillary Clinton and others, presented different choices on many issues of importance to people in our country. To the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, and other countries where we assert the need to invade and occupy, they do not present any significant choice. These mainstream politicians, the "reasonable" ones do not acknowledge the death and suffering that we have brought and continue to bring. Instead they promise more of the same, in the name of a so-called peace and security which is never attainable. The language and euphemisms used have become more detached and abstract.

The writer and journalist Chris Hedges wrote of this in his 2002 book "War is a Force which Gives Us Meaning". Hedges was a divinity student at Harvard and son of a Presbyterian minister, then later became a journalist, reporting from such war-torn places as El Salvador, Bosnia, and the occupied Palestinian territories. He experienced first hand the death and destruction of war, as well as what he saw as the common elements in the wartime experience --- patriotism which deems objection to the war as traitorous, demonization of the "enemy" in racist terms that implicitly deny their humanity, and also the fear of "foreigners" along with anti-immigrant sentiment. He saw all of this in the wars he covered. He spoke at a university commencement in Rockford, Illinois in May, 2003, and warned of how our country was devolving in the same way towards "...an occupation that, if history is any guide, will be as damaging to our souls as it will be to our prestige and power and security" [5]. He was booted off the stage before he could finish his address. After this, he was denounced in an editorial in the Wall Street Journal, and subsequently left his post as reporter for the New York Times.[6]

What Hedges made clear is that what is happening is not new. During wartime we see a rejection of pacifism as being traitorous, a dehumanization of the "other", a depersonalization of the language of war, a glorification of the soldier in the abstract, and always a minimization or denial of the violence that is caused.

Did we really learn the lessons of the barbarism and violence unleashed by the wars of the 20th century? The world did not change after September 11. The politics of fear are nothing new. The myths of war and nation create a mental box, where critical thought, empathy, and a recognition of our common humanity are rejected. We need to step outside this box and see ourselves as sharing the same hopes and dreams, fears and worries, strengths and limitations. We need to recognize that material progress is not the same as moral progress. Most of all, we need to speak the names of the girls and their families, and tell their stories.

So may it be.

### **Closing Words** (from my yoga teacher Francoise)

Five simple rules to be happy:

- 1 - Free your heart from hatred.
- 2 - Free your mind from worries.
- 3 - Live simply.
- 4 - Give more.
- 5 - Expect less.

**Notes:**

1. Lapham's Quarterly, Winter, 2008, "States of War", p. 52

2,3. David Bromwich, "Euphemism and American Violence", New York Review of Books, April 3, 2008  
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21199>

4. Bookforum, "To be free from this cage", The poetry of Guantanamo Bay's Detainees, June/July/Aug/Sep 2006

5,6. Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.com>) article on Chris Hedges

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