

“The Bright Blessed Day, the Dark Sacred Night”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
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One evening a few weeks ago the strains of that song made famous by Louis Armstrong hit me. I mean they hit me:

I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.

right on through to that last wrenching verse:

I hear babies crying, I watch them grow
They'll learn much more than I'll never know
And I think to myself what a wonderful world
Yes I think to myself what a wonderful world.

Now this is not about a la-la world. It's about a world that is and a world that can be. Both. I heard it anew, and I found my eyes misting and my heart breaking. Our wonderful world is hurting, and it's still beautiful. We humans are wreaking havoc with each other and screaming justification for each act of violence, and we're still creatures of hope. Each of us was once a baby crying, as we leaned into the promise of green trees, red roses, a wonderful world.

Surely it's a world of wonder.

Perhaps you remember that on Christmas Eve I spoke of the then recent kidnapping of four members of a group known as the Christian Peacemakers Team, founded by the Mennonites, the Quakers, and the Church of the Brethren. For almost twenty years, they have heeded Jesus' call to peace, so faithfully that they have traveled throughout the world to stand in harm's way in the most perilous of human conflicts – from Central America to the Balkans to Baghdad. Another group, called the Swords of Righteousness, announced responsibility for the kidnapping and that all four would be murdered unless their demands were met to free all Iraqi detainees held in U.S. and Iraqi-run prisons. The irony of this act was the reality that these four were in Baghdad precisely to stand in solidarity with those on all sides of the conflict. The four men – and they all happened to be men – did not take sides. They rather stood in solidarity with their fellow humans who were caught up in the horror of this continuing conflict, and they were actively working for the release of the Iraqis whom their kidnappers named as their cause.

For months their fate was unknown. Christians and Muslims and secularists from every camp worked for the release of Jim Loney, Harmeet Singh Sooden, Norman Kember, and Tom Fox. In late January, all four appeared in a video released to Al Jazeera, the ten-year-old television station based in Qatar. Two weeks ago, Al Jazeera received a silent videotape of three of the hostages. Tom Fox, the 54-year-old American Quaker among them, was missing. Just days ago Tom's body was found by Iraqi police in western Baghdad. He had been shot; and worse, he had been tortured.

Perhaps our first instinct is to rally against the Swords of Righteousness Brigade, to decry their brutality. But this was not what Tom Fox was about. This is not what his peacemaking was about. This was not why Tom Fox was here.

On November 25, a day before he was abducted, Tom wrote these words:

Why are we here?

...I have read that the word in the Greek Bible that is translated as “love” is the word “agape”. Again, I have read that this word is best expressed as a profound respect for all human beings simply for the fact that they are all God's children. I would state that idea in a somewhat different way, as “never thinking or doing anything that would dehumanize one of my fellow human beings.”

As I survey the landscape here in Iraq, dehumanization seems to be the operative means of relating to each other. U.S. forces in their quest to hunt down and kill “terrorists” are as a result of this dehumanizing word, not only killing “terrorists”, but also killing innocent Iraqis: men, women and children in the various towns and villages.

... As soon as I rob a fellow human being of his or her humanity by sticking a dehumanizing label on them, I begin the process that can have, as an end result, torture, injury and death.

“Why are we here?” We are here to root out all aspects of dehumanization that exist within us. We are here to stand with those being dehumanized by oppressors and stand firm against that dehumanization. We are here to stop people, including ourselves, from dehumanizing any of God's children, no matter how much they dehumanize their own souls.

Such were the late November reflections of Tom Fox.

The call to peacemaking as an activist enterprise was issued two millennia ago. You perhaps know that my favorite carol is that written by Unitarian minister, Edmund Sears, on a December night in 1849. His words transcend the seasons:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world hath suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strains have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!

“These are verses of hope, and without hope, we are lost,” wrote my husband, Dan, in his correspondence with the Mennonites in the aftermath of the death of Tom Fox. His message continued:

“If we have not the courage of a Tom Fox, may we not be brought to doing nothing at all. Each does what she or he can. Bearing witness in the manner Ron Sider, [the Mennonite leader who inspired the formation of the Christian Peacemaker Teams] famously urged is more than most of us can bring ourselves to do, but still, it is not cowardice to be afraid, and it is not sin to fail to overcome our fears. Otherwise nearly all

of us are doomed to perdition, and I can't bring myself to think that way. We are, after all, made in God's image.

Yet still fear must not bring us to violence, which is what has happened to this unhappy nation. Inspiring fear is a tool of those who become the powers, not of those who confront the powers...."

Such are the reflections of my soul-mate.

One can be afraid, but choose not to inspire fear. It is a choice of the spirit. It was the choice made by Tom Fox. It was the choice made by Fadil Fejzić, whose cow had no choice but to go along with what happened. One fine afternoon long after the war in the Balkans had come to its most recent conclusion, foreign correspondent Chris Hedges sat with a Bosnian Serb couple, Rosa and Drago Sorak, just outside the Muslim village of Goražde, that had once been home to them. They issued the expected diatribes against the Muslims, then stopped short. They were duty-bound to explain that not all Muslims were bad.

It was 1992 and the Serbs had begun their siege of Goražde. The Soraks lived there with their older son, Zoran, and his wife. While Serbs, they *ignored* the anti-Muslim propaganda of Bosnian Serb leaders. When the siege began in earnest, and the village infrastructure collapsed, they refused to move out. Instead they found common ground with the Bosnian government and were branded traitors by their fellow Serbs. On June 14, the Bosnian police, Muslims, came for their son, Zorak, to ask a few questions. They never saw him again. Soon after, they lost their second son to a freak accident. They were alone, childless. The horrors around them escalated. Some of their Muslim neighbors threatened to kill them; others defended them. They were among a spare 200 Serbs remaining in town, but were terrified, soon turning against a Muslim government that they had once been willing to accept.

Five months after the disappearance of their son, his wife gave birth to a little girl. Not surprisingly, she was unable to nurse the child. The city was under constant shelling; the residents were shell-shocked, hungry, and desperate. For five days, the baby was given tea; it wasn't enough, and she began to fade. In the words of her grandmother: "She was dying, and it was breaking our hearts."

All the while, their Muslim neighbor, Fadil Fejzić, kept his cow in a field on the edge of town, where he milked it at night to avoid the perils of daylight. Before the crack of dawn on the fifth day, there was a knock on the door of the Sorak home. They had no choice but to answer. There was Fadil Fejzić, clad in black rubber boots, holding up to them a half liter of milk. The next morning, he came again, and the next and the next and the next. Once Fejzić's neighbors caught on to what he was doing, they hurled insults at him. He did not defend himself. He took no money; there was none to take. Said the Grandmother to Chris Hedges: "[Fadil Fejzić] came for 442 days, until my daughter-in-law and granddaughter left Goražde for Serbia."

The Soraks were eventually forced to leave also, moving into the former home of a Muslim family in a nearby town. They grieved daily for their lost sons. They grieved daily for their lost home. They said they had no forgiveness to give, but they also said that they could never listen to other Serbs berating the Muslims without telling the story of Fejzić and his cow.

What did the late Tom Fox see during his precious time in Iraq? American? Insurgent? Sunni? Shia? Or trees of green and red roses that bloom for us all?

What did Fadil Fejzić see in his war-torn village? Muslims? Serbs? Age-old rivalries? Enemies next door? Or the bright blessed day of a baby's cry of hunger? The dark sacred night that bid him to milk his cow?



Every year I move closer to a stance of pacifism altogether. I supposed I could call myself an aspiring pacifist – aspiring, because I can imagine circumstances in which I would be capable of practicing violence myself, circumstances in which I would be forced to choose between protecting those I love or complete strangers from someone who would do them harm and holding fast to the practice of nonviolence. But I am not proud of my capacity even to imagine this. I consider this a shadow capacity of my humanity. It is a struggle in which I engage every day, given the accelerating horrors of a war that I abhor and cannot justify on any ground.

Many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations throughout the country are forging messages and acts of resistance to the war in which the United States is currently engaged in Iraq, a war which our country launched pre-emptively. I would love to see ongoing forums in our own congregation that we enter into with open hearts and minds, reserving personal judgments, respecting the realities that there are adult children of this congregation who have served in the military in Iraq. I have myself been in the position of opposing such a war while having a husband fight in that war. He didn't make it back. My appeal at that time was not to support the troops, but to love the women and men of the military, to love the children and women and men in the nations where war was being waged, and to love peace more than war to the extent that we might learn to wage peace over war, to bring home the women and men who are doing the bidding of leaders who did not ask their opinion, to bring home a commitment to peace.

“Peace on earth, good will to all,” was the legendary message of the angels two millennia ago. Was this a political message or a religious message? Were they simply babbling nonsense in the heavens, or was something deeper and truer being proclaimed?

Let us bear witness to the witness of Tom Fox. Let us bear witness to the witness of Fadil Fejzić.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.

What wonderful world.

Amen.

Sources:

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