

This Is Who We Are

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*I have done no harm. But I remember now
I am in this earthly world – where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly.*

— Lady Macbeth

When the President responded to the release of photos of abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison saying, “This is not who we are” I wanted to believe him. I wanted to, but I couldn’t.

What prevents me from being able to believe it are the profound and haunting images of the faces of the soldier/prison guards. They show delight and enjoyment in the suffering they have inflicted. They’re into it. Contrary to the President’s assertion, *this is who we are*, and it’s who much of the world thinks we are.

By ‘we’ I mean all Americans, including those of us who are gathered here this morning. I’m talking about us in both a collective and an individual sense – you and me included. I know that it is hard to hear that and more difficult to acknowledge it, but I have vowed to speak the truth in love, and this, I believe is an important part of the truth about us. We’ve created our knives, believing them to represent the divine sword, and we’re misdirecting them by looking for trouble in hopes that we’ll abolish our fear. Trouble is, it isn’t working, and the ghosts threaten us.

Our cultural denial allows us to avoid responding with more than revulsion and blame and feeds a growing cultural depression and frustration. I’d be even more concerned if we didn’t feel revulsion and if we failed to seek accountability. Alas, it seems that the quest for accountability has stopped with the seven soldiers who have been indicted.

The levels of anxiety and fear that we feel have been raised by disclosure of the abuse and particularly by the administration’s response. This counterproductive path leads to even more cruelty and violence, and it makes us less secure, our world less safe.

The first step toward recovery from our addiction to revenge and sadism is to recognize and declare that, contrary to what we want to believe, this *is* who we are.

The recent disclosures that some of the guards at Abu Ghraib enjoyed a contest to see who could make the largest number of prisoners involuntarily urinate when confronted with unmuzzled dogs is abhorrent, but pales next to unleashing of a dog against at least one prisoner, sodomizing prisoners with various objects, making a prisoner stand on cardboard boxes while his wrists were bound behind his back in such a way that if he should fall off the boxes his shoulders would be dislocated, mock and actual electric shocks, forced masturbation and simulated sexual acts, and the other atrocities that we have seen in images or read about.

These are horrible abuses and they clearly violate the inherent worth and dignity of every person that we espouse as a core principle in our faith. And yet you've probably seen letters to the editor that argue such abuse is deserved retribution for terrorist attacks against us.

This violence and abuse is not what we espouse, at least when we rise to our best. It's certainly not how we want to see ourselves or be seen by the rest of the world, but denial keeps us stuck in dysfunction. The first step toward recovery is admission. This is who we are.

The White House and the Department of Defense want us to believe the abuse is an aberration, the result of actions by a very few low-level soldiers. But the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Attorney General have set a tone of vengeance, dehumanized the enemy, and supported a no-holds-barred style of fighting. Today's news disclosed that General Sanchez, the top military officer in Iraq, approved at least some of the abhorrent treatment of prisoners.

When the President said that we would hunt down terrorists like rabbits, he said much more than he intended. If you've ever been rabbit hunting, you know that you'll miss most of them. They are quick to dive into their burrows, and they breed more quickly than they can be harvested. Last week the Secretary of Defense said that terrorists are being recruited and trained faster than we can hunt them down and kill them. Just like those Texas rabbits. Shouldn't we at least consider *why* so many people are eager to harm us?

In a revised report, the State Department this week admitted that the number of incidents of terrorism, the number of deaths, the number of injuries, the number of countries where terrorism took place, and the portion of incidents that involved death, injury, or kidnapping all rose in 2002 and 2003, in contrast to earlier claims that the war had successfully reduced terrorism. We are losing the war against terrorism.

This week the President claimed that we do not treat prisoners illegally, but ducked the question when asked if torture is illegal. The Washington Post disclosed that the Justice Department provided a legal opinion to the White House that argued that torture of prisoners is not illegal under the circumstances of a war against terrorism and

sought to define torture as extreme abuse over a long term that resulted in long-lasting harm. The opinion argues that the terms of the Geneva Convention are unconstitutional and that soldiers accused of abuse could likely present a successful defense on grounds that the abuse is not torture and that the Geneva Convention is not applicable.

If that's the basis of the President's denial, it's deeply troubling. It's twisted.

Jungian psychologist Robert Moore and mythologist Douglas Gillette explore masculine archetypes in their book, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover*. In Jungian theory, such archetypes are inherent and attempts to deny the warrior only repress its expression until, like a sleeping volcano, it erupts in physical and emotional violence. While these are primary masculine archetypes, Jung argued that both men and women express masculine and feminine archetypes. The warrior is a part of each one of us, man or woman.

When it is fully developed, the warrior archetype supports clear thinking, being fully alert and mindful, ready to evaluate and respond effectively to circumstances. This is the energy that supports loyalty and clear organization. It is goal directed and able to assess strengths and weaknesses, to coordinate resources and apply them with effective strategy. At its best and when it is balanced with the other archetypes, the warrior marshals available resources and devotes his or her energy to create a better world for everyone.

But when the warrior archetype is repressed by fear and anger, its shadow emerges as the demon of cruelty and destruction. Fed by anxiety, low self-esteem, and desperation, this bloodlust is manifest in violence against the weak and helpless in a sadistic effort to humiliate and dehumanize others.

Every day our local papers are filled with reports of domestic violence, street fights, and misdirected rage. Some of you have been victims of shopping cart, parking lot, and road rage. The shadow warrior is manifest in our communities and in our homes when we unleash anger inappropriately. Right now there is a high level of stress and anxiety in our culture, and it affects us deeply, often in ways that we're not even aware are happening. It causes us to close down and withdraw, to hoard resources, to prepare for battle, and it becomes manifest in depression, frustration, sniping, and rage. Those are counterproductive responses. It would not surprise me to learn that rates of divorce, cancer, heart disease, homicide, and suicide have risen in the recent past. We can better combat fear and danger by strengthening relationships and our support systems, participating in communities of hope and care, and pooling our resources than be withdrawing.

Our short fuses are signs of repression of the warrior. This is who we are. The irony of it is that rather than building self-esteem and renewing our full humanity, cruelty diminishes its perpetrators.

But always there is hope. Always hope. The line between good and evil runs through every human heart as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in the *Gulag Archipelago*.

As each of us is capable of sadism and cruelty, so too is each of us capable of compassion and kindness.

Believe that as a strategy and fake it if you must, but embrace hope with a deep faith. Know that hope resides in the transformation of our own hearts expressed through action. It starts when we cast out denial, recognize that we contain both good and evil, and decide to respond to the challenges of this world with love. It begins when we make the choice not to be drawn into brutality by the cultural angst and fears, but rather to respond with compassion and generosity, to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and to strive to create conditions where everyone may enjoy liberty, thrive, and pursue happiness and fulfillment.

Hope arises we redirect the shadow warrior to more effective action. To find alternatives that express our heroic nature and nobility, that offer purpose and meaning, that help us rise above smallness. For this, too, is who we are. It starts in our own homes and within our closest relationships.

Often the end of denial brings grief and deep sadness. It feels horrible, and the suffering may linger, but our salvation lies in knowing that we are capable to making better choices and learning to celebrate the good that results. We sit in a metaphoric exile, along the Euphrates, which is the waters of Babylon, and we weep as we remember Zion, the utopia, the promised land. Our weeping is important, but as in any grieving, so too is moving toward recovery through positive actions.

This war with Iraq is costing us a billion dollars every week. Imagine how else that money could be used. What if we were able to even more effectively redirect those resources and the warrior energy toward strategic and heroic efforts to provide health care, education, clean water and adequate food, and safe places to gather for worship and play rather than making war? Some of that is already happening, to be sure, and we ought to celebrate the soldiers who are befriending kids and working hard to disarm the Iraqi warlords and radical clerics who seek power through violence. We need more kids like the one in the picture who see us as friends and liberators. This, too, is who we are. Would that not be a more effective way to combat terrorism than abusing Iraqi prisoners with such relish? Would that not give us cause to wave the flag with real pride?

There is only so much that words can convey. Art and music have a role, too. When I first heard Palmyra played by Béla Fleck and Edgar Meyer last month in concert, the music washed over me in a way that was evocative and healing. It's a ten-minute jig, with Béla on banjo and Edgar playing piano and double bass. In their concerts and videos, it's clear that these two are friends who challenge each other and seek a real collaboration in music making. Watching them and listening deeply to their music, you know they both love what they are doing.

The first two thirds of the piece is a requiem, evoking a deep grief and sadness in me that arises from recognition of the brokenness of our world and the long path that

lies ahead to healing and wholeness. The last third of the piece invites hope and commitment to transformation as the pace picks up.

I invite you to sit now in reflection as you listen to this music. Both individually and collectively, we are complex beings, capable of both cruelty and kindness. We have the capacity to choose which we will manifest. We can initiate transformation within ourselves, and we have the power to change the world. Let it begin within your relationships and lead you from despair to hope.

Closing Words

The Sad Game

by Hafiz

Blame

Keeps the sad game going.

It keeps stealing all your wealth

Giving it to an imbecile with

No financial skills.

Dear one,

Wise

Up.