

“The War: Year One”
by Rev. Martin Woulfe
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This week of course marks the one year anniversary of the shooting war in Iraq. As I prepared for today, for this moment, I read a lot of sources and I did a lot of reflection. And two quotes came to mind, both by Albert Einstein. Einstein said, “I believe only two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity. And I’m not so sure about the former.” And he also said, on another occasion, “When we developed the atomic bomb, everything in the world changed, except for how we think.”

One year ago, or a little before, I and a group of regular citizens of the south suburbs of Chicago gathered together and we wrote some copy for an advertisement which ran in the local paper. I have a photocopy here. It says, “Stop. Think. No attack on Iraq. Iraq is not the imminent threat. Al-Qaida is. Then it lists a series of warnings: war will breed terrorism; war will wreck the economy; war will take a terrible toll in human life; war will discredit America in the world’s eyes.” And we wrote, “It’s not too late. War with Iraq is not inevitable. We believe that there are better options, such as continuing tough weapons inspections through the United Nations. We, residents of the south suburbs, join Americans across the country and people around the world to stop and think and heed the warnings.” Of the people who signed, there were about thirty from the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Park Forest, myself included. I stand by these words, today.

In recent weeks, we have been told that this pre-emptive war was actually begun, in terms of planning, almost as soon as the present administration took office. They bided their time, waiting for an excuse to launch their war. And there are actually several wars which we are now fighting simultaneously. There is the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. And the costs? What are the costs? In terms of lives lost and marred, in terms of our own military men and women, and those of our allies, military deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq combined are approximately 750, another 4,000 or so seriously wounded. Afghan troops, how often are those reported? 8,000 killed; 24,000 wounded. Iraqi troops: approximately 7,600 killed; 22,800 reported wounded. Of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq: approximately 11,500 killed; 21,000 approximately wounded. A total – one year’s toll – 99,000 approximately.

It is true that Saddam Hussein has been removed from power and is our prisoner. It is likewise true that the Iraqi governing council has agreed to a provisional constitution. Both seem to be good things, I think. But like the farmer I mentioned in today’s story for all ages, I would be cautious. Maybe these are good things, perhaps this is progress. Time will tell. We shall see.

In any event, I believe, now as then, that the attack on Iraq was a gross mistake. Daily of course, deaths are reported. Sometimes we will see footage of Iraqi civilians who have been seriously injured, or killed. And it stirs our sympathy and a sense of outrage. But on the other hand, we do not see the images of our own dead, the men

and women in uniform. Those images are hidden. And their coffins come home unacknowledged. And so it is also with our soldiers who have been wounded.

Those who promote this war are not fools. They know that images will stir our emotions and that these can be exploited for their gain -- or against them -- and so they control what is seen and when. If you can't see the images of our own dead and maimed, the impact is minimized, unless, of course, you knew them personally.

For a moment, let us expand our parameters and think outside the box, think outside the year. Let us include for a moment some of the victims of some of the other bombings that are connected to the current war, the larger war: in Bali, in October, 2002, 187 dead; in Spain this week, 200 dead, 1,400 wounded. Or perhaps we could include the attack on the USS Cole, in October, 2000, 17 sailors dead. The two separate attacks on tourists in Egypt in the fall of 1997, 80 civilians murdered in cold blood. Or all the victims of Pan Am flight 103, blown up over Lockerbie on December 21, 1988, 270 murdered; or the attacks on our embassies, hundreds more. And perhaps we should also include the victims who were aboard the Iranian airbus, shot down by our forces, over the Gulf, on July 3, 1988: 294 dead. We are adding thousands and thousands to the casualty list.

Many, if not all of these attacks, were indiscriminate, vicious, and calculated. Many, such as the attack in Spain this week, were calculated to inflict the maximum of pain to ordinary men, women and children. This week, as I watched the footage in Spain, I was struck by the carnage and how I was riveted to what I saw. And it occurred to me, that not to long ago, I spoke to you how I will not go see certain movies, such as *The Passion of Christ*, or *Casino*, or *Hannibal* – movies that glorify violence. And yet I am conditioned to watch real life, real events, as they unfold and see to the carnage that real people do to real people. And I ask myself at times, “Is this a form of voyeurism?”

I don't pray very often because of my theology. I don't believe that there is a personal divine intelligence at work in the universe, let alone something that can hear us, let alone respond. And yet, from time to time, I will stop and I will say a short prayer. More often than not, it is simply, “Thank you.” This week, though, I said a different prayer. It was, “Oh God, please.” Unspoken was – please, on behalf of the victims, their families, this world, our children and their children, please may these killings stop. May the savageness in which we live and move, may it end.”

I blurted that prayer this past Thursday. On that day, the phone rang, quite early. It was Angela's family calling from Spain, giving us the first news of the bombings in Madrid – as I mentioned during “Milestones”, several of the bombings occurred within a half mile or so of where they lived. And within several hours, there were other calls: we learned that one of Angela's sisters had been aboard a train, but not one of the trains. Between calls Angela's attention, and to a lesser extent mine, was riveted to the television. Not unlike I had been two and half years before on September 11. No doubt many of you were also likewise riveted: more soft targets; more collateral damage. There but for the “grace of God,” as they say, go we.

One of the most chilling items that I heard is that many of the victims were carrying cell phones and that families were trying frantically to reach their loved ones. As rescue workers picked up the broken bodies, those phones were ringing, but the workers did not know what to do. They didn't want to answer the phones and tell them that their loved ones were dead. It's a haunting notion. Much like the recordings of some of the phone calls made on September 11 and some of the emails sent by people who knew that they were about to die.

One of the issues I've wrestled with has been what if – namely, what if the sanctions begun ten years ago had been allowed to continue? And what were the direct effects of those sanctions? On paper, sanctions were the preferable option, less blood on our hands. And yet by some estimates, half a million Iraqi civilians, mainly children, died as a result of those sanctions, some from malnutrition, and/or disease. If those numbers are accurate, then we must ask, "Were sanctions truly a more humane response?"

But when our attention turns to events as they unfold, the graphic events, whether it's the shooting war in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the terrorist bombings throughout the world, as those images are filtered through our brains and as we process those events, it seems to me that it is very easy, perhaps very natural to want to demonize those who committed these acts, those who did such hateful, despicable things. And I ask myself, as I wonder about who these perpetrators are, "How did they get this way? Are these not men and women? Are they not flesh and blood, like you and me? How is it, that these people, who themselves perhaps have children, who perhaps have brothers and sisters, how is it that they can go and commit such acts, against other brothers and sisters, parents and children? Are they motivated by politics? Are they motivated by religion? What to do?"

These are not easy questions to ask, and I suspect that the answers will be equally hard to hear. But I think that these are questions which we must ask, and answers which we must hear. As I've said before, I am not a pacifist. I never was. I believe strongly that a person should be able to defend himself or herself, and that a country has the right to defend itself. There was a time, as I have told, when I had an appointment to the US Naval Academy, and I was quite prepared to serve God and country, in uniform, as an officer. But as I began to get close to the time when I had to commit myself, I began to read further, to read more than just the military histories, but to read some of the first hand accounts from Vietnam. One of the most memorable was a book entitled *A Rumor of War*, by Philip Caputo, an American, who went through Annapolis, as I had intended to do, and he became a Marine officer, as I aspired to be. And what I discovered is that normal Americans, well trained, well educated, with all the benefits of their background, can still murder civilians. Truly not all service men and women murder civilians. But war is a horrible thing and it twists the soul, and there are

circumstances that will bend and break a person's will and they will do things which under normal circumstances they would never consider.

A year ago, a member of the congregation in Park Forest came to me, after I preached on the war and said, "Martin. My son is a Marine. He's going to Iraq. I'm against this war, but he has a duty. What do I tell him?" And I thought about my own growth, about my own family, about my readings and my reflections on the war. And I said, "There are really only two things that you can tell him. Number one, keep himself and his men safe. Two, don't do anything that you'll be ashamed of later."

When we consider the people that we fight, I am not so quick to blame all the people on one party. I do hope that they are caught. I do hope that they are brought to justice. But on the other hand I recognize that there are many forces of evil at work in this world, that breed evil, that stir up more evil, that thrive on evil.

As we ponder the course that led us to war, as we ponder the result of this war, it begs the question, "Who benefits most?" because that leads us to point a finger why we are there. There are those who of course will blame the administration with their greed for oil. But I think we should also remember the merchants of death, those involved in the armament industry. In January, 1961, then-president Dwight David Eisenhower, who was himself a general of the army, gave what was his final address as president. It was perhaps his most important speech. I reviewed that speech the other day. It's a speech which most of us know by the name, *The Military Industrial Complex Speech*. Then-president Eisenhower appealed to us, as religious people, to be on our guard, against what he called, "the military industrial complex" because he was afraid that it would subvert our democracy and all of the good will that this country had created over several centuries.

Today the trafficking of arms and poison is a global epidemic. It has been so for many decades. I have to wonder, to what extent has it subverted our democracy, as Eisenhower warned? To what extent is public policy dictated by their needs, their desires? I also wonder, in terms of the cost, what about our complicity? To date, approximately \$106 billion have been spent on this war in the last year. We can ask what does that money mean to us and we can debate how that money might have been spent better, to benefit schools, scholarship, and health. But if you break it down, that \$106 billion comes to, approximately \$1,500 per household in these United States. We are financing this war. So we ourselves *are* involved, whether we know the casualties or not.

How to resolve this war? There are at present, responses that people offer, some are political solutions. The notion is let's bring everyone to the table, let's negotiate. Surely, everyone can be reasonable at some point. Next, there is the military solution that says, in effect: if we hurt these people badly enough, they will lay down their arms, they will knuckle under, and we will triumph. And the third solution, which we don't often hear enough, is the religious solution, the hope that we can stir within the

various people, on their side and our side, what Lincoln called “the mystic chords of memory” what I would name, empathy and compassion for our fellow human beings.

The present war with its 99,000 victims has seen too much of the first two solutions and not enough of the third. Meanwhile, we acquiesce. We finance this war. We resume our normal business routines, as if nothing really important is happening, that is, unless and until one of the casualties is someone whom we knew and someone we loved, and then the tragedy becomes personal.

There is another dimension to this war that I’d like to conclude with. It’s not seen often. It’s not spoken about, except perhaps in churches. It’s what this type of war, this conflict, does to our own hearts and consciousnesses. There are many people who have suffered and we have grieved, such as when we grieved, no doubt, on 9-11. There are many who grieve today throughout the world for those murdered on March 11. But the numbers of the victims dull our imagination. They dull our conscience, so some of the bombings, and some of the killings and murders, lose their meaning and their horror. We become, in the words of T.S. Eliot, “the hollow men, headpieces filled with straw.”

As people of faith, I believe that we must resist the temptation to think of the victims only in terms of those numbers. Several faces from 9-11 stay with me. As you will recall, among the victims were a handful of Unitarian Universalists. Those faces were publicized and I studied those faces. Those faces still haunt me.

We are living in a savage age. We are living in an age when people profit from death and people will kill for politics, indiscriminately. And we who watch must be on guard. We must be aware of these evils. We must beware of the evils, and of the darkness, both on the world stage and the darkness which grows in our own heart.