

A LONGING FOR COURAGE: THE DECLARATION OF PEACE

A Reflection

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Although the representatives of the U.S. citizens, i.e. the U.S. Congress, never officially “declared war” on Iraq, a broad coalition of U.S. citizens recently “declared peace.” Let us explore the sources of this longing...

When the tears keep pouring out...when the fear of the final day and the final breath chills ones bones...when the distrust of a government created by and aligned with a foreign military segregates families and communities...in this space one may begin to empathize with the daily life of most people of Iraq.

When the loneliness of being so far from family permeates one’s activity...when the suspicion and distrust of nearly everyone without an American uniform weighs even more on one’s psyche than the weight of arms...when the primary activity is intimidation, coercion, and violence; in this space one may begin to empathize with most soldiers from the U.S.

When 46.6 million (15.9% of) Americans lack access to health care¹ ...when 37 million (12.7% of) Americans are below the poverty level with the number rising each of the years between 2000-2004² ...when over 727,000 Americans are homeless³ ...in this space one may begin to empathize with people who are poor in America.

Arising from these initial tastes of empathy, shall we continue clinging to such a society, to such a becoming for human beings? What do their voices say? 85% to 90% of Iraqis,⁴ 72% of U.S. troops,⁵ and 66% of American people⁶ say ‘no’ and see another way without the U.S. troops in Iraq. The chorus is singing “turn your swords into ploughshares and your spears into pruning hooks.” In the midst of the suffocating residue of another declaration of war, the hearts and voices for lasting peace are declaring, yes, declaring peace!

This chorus represents a “freedom from” the illusion that we’re stuck between ‘lethal force’ and ‘cutting and running.’ This illusion arises

from a paradigm of violence. In contrast, the chorus declaring peace offers a “freedom for” the cultivation of empathy, especially for the people of Iraq and the U.S. soldiers. Arising from empathy, we begin to hear the voices; we begin to imagine an Iraqi-led peace process; we begin to commit to solidarity, especially with the suffering by offering reparations and reconstruction to the people of Iraq, along with increased support for traumatized U.S. veterans.

In the U.S. a coalition of over 500 peace and justice groups organized the “Declaration of Peace”⁷ and recently (Sept. 21) offered a week of focused resistance to both enter into and illuminate this suffering. A unique characteristic of this coalition is the significant number of groups oriented toward a religious way of life, which offers a fertile ground for the cultivation of empathy and a re-imagining of courage. The Declaration of Peace Pledge is a commitment to take non-violent steps for a comprehensive, concrete, and rapid plan to end the war in Iraq. (See pg. 20 for more facts about the activities and the eight-point pledge.)

If the troops begin pulling out, violence may linger or even spike in the short-term. However, the force of cooperation will have more fertile ground to grow. Distrust will diminish when we: remove our concrete ability to threaten the people

of Iraq; affirm the autonomy of Iraqis to act on conscience; generate more effective reconstruction by offering contracts to Iraqi companies; empower Iraqis to supervise the reconstruction efforts; and allow them to embrace the gifts they are as humans. In all, such a change will illuminate both their and our human dignity. The voices of Iraqis say that 61% approve of attacks on Americans in Iraq (primarily military, business persons, politicians) and 78% think the U.S. presence is fueling rather than suppressing the insurgency.⁸

As the recent elections demonstrated, the U.S. seems ready for radical change with a new party in control of Congress. A poll issued



A Declaration of Peace activist being arrested in Washington, D.C. during a die-in

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on Oct. 24th before the election indicated that 20% think we're not winning the war.⁹ Yet, even this question, this notion of 'winning or losing,' maintains our enslavement to the paradigm of violence.

We must ask 'who are we becoming?' The trauma and dehumanization of the Iraqi people (especially the poor), of American soldiers and vets, and of the poor in America is dishearteningly obvious. A moment for courage is upon us -- a courage to enter boldly into a new paradigm. We seek a courage that creates a space in Iraq and in the U.S. for conflict transformation, not merely an absence of war. We seek a courage that goes beyond 'fight or flight'/'win' or 'lose' scenarios. We seek a courage that stays involved, enters into the chaos, and creates the conditions for accountability, healing and reconciliation within Iraq, within the U.S., and between Iraq and the U.S. We seek a courage that arises to a justice known as restorative justice, similar to the impetus for truth and reconciliation commissions. Yes, we seek a courage that declares peace!

References:

- 1 <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf>; p. 27
- 2 <http://www.usccb.org/cchd/povertyusa/povfacts.shtml>
- 3 http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-10-11-homeless-cover_x.htm
- 4 <http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=4915>; <http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=11809>; <http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=9421>
- 5 Le Moyne College/Zogby International 2/06; <http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=10308>
- 6 CNN 8/06; <http://www.uslaboragainstawar.org/article.php?id=11158>
- 7 www.declarationofpeace.org
- 8 Editors, "Voting Counts," in *Commonweal: A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture*. Oct. 10, 2006; p.5.
- 9 <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/10/23/iraq.poll2/index.html>