

“Meeting the Enemy”

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Sixty-one years ago this week, the United Nations came into being.
The UN is not a perfect institution.
We all know it has problems.
But in spite of all the scandals and the corruption we hear about,
there's something about it that captures our imagination.
The goal of the UN has been
to bring together all the nations of the earth—
not a few, not some,
but *all* countries and *all* people—
to work together and to make peace.
Its vision is of people from every country working together, as equals,
as partners in preserving peace.

That sounds pretty good to me.
And what a contrast when I turn around and ask,
what is the vision guiding our own United States foreign policy?
As I consider the state of our own country,
it seems to me that ever since September 11
our government has been preoccupied with carving up the world into good guys
and bad guys, friends and enemies.
Remember President Bush saying,
“You’re either with us or against us”?¹
It’s such a simplistic way of meeting the world.
It’s like we’ve put our own needs at the center of the universe.
And everyone we decide is against us,
everyone we decide is our enemy,
we seem to have decided they’re not really human beings.

How else could our president and our Congress have decided
that it’s OK to torture people they think are terrorists?

¹ President George W. Bush, news conference on Nov. 6, 2001, quoted at
<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>.

For five years we've watched our government pushing to get around those pesky Geneva Conventions that require us to treat prisoners humanely.

Just this past Tuesday, we watched as President Bush signed a bill denying the basic right of habeas corpus to men who have been prisoners at Guantanamo Bay for years, without access to lawyers, with no charges filed against them.² You and I are now living in a country that claims the legal right to hold human beings in solitary confinement without charges, without a trial, forever.

And we've watched as this administration has decided we need to protect ourselves by torturing the people they tell us are our enemies.

Four years ago, Donald Rumsfeld gave his blessing to interrogation techniques including stripping prisoners naked and threatening them with dogs.³

Now they're trying to convince us that we should all get behind a practice called *waterboarding*.

Waterboarding, as you may know, is a torture technique where one person pours water over another person's face, into their nose, without stopping, and what happens is, you feel like you're drowning and about to die.

Sometimes people struggle so hard to get free that they break their bones.⁴

The Khmer Rouge did this to people in Cambodia.

And now we're doing it to people God knows where.⁵

It's bad enough that it's not even going to get us anywhere; we've known for a long time that people will say anything when they're being tortured; it simply doesn't work as an interrogation technique.

That's bad enough.

But the worst part is, we're doing this to human beings, we're doing this to people who live and breathe and suffer and feel pain.

Whatever they may or may not have done to us,

however they feel about the United States,

it is so irrelevant, because we are talking about putting another person in a completely helpless position, completely under our power, and deliberately

² Richard B. Schmitt and Julian E. Barnes, "Bush Signs Tough Rules on Detainees," *Los Angeles Times* October 18, 2006, online at <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/front/la-na-detain18oct18,1,6460769.story?coll=la-headlines-frontpage&ctrack=1&cset=true>.

³ Glenn Kessler, "State Dept. Study Cites Torture of Prisoners," *Washington Post* March 1, 2005, online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A60540-2005Feb28.html>.

⁴ "Waterboarding," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waterboarding> (viewed on Oct. 17, 2006).

⁵ Brian Ross and Richard Esposito, "CIA's Harsh Interrogation Techniques Described," ABC News Investigations, November 18, 2005, online at <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=1322866>.

hurting them, making them feel terror and physical agony, making them scream in pain—and this is a *choice* we are making!

You hear people making excuses for it.
But I don't care if other countries do it;
I don't care if Al Qaeda would torture me
if they got hold of me by some mischance;
all that is completely irrelevant.
We are talking about torturing a fellow living soul.
There is a point beyond which we should fear to go.
The things we do change us;
they make us wrong on the inside.
I'm afraid of what our country is doing.

I know this is not a new thing.
We've been involved in bad stuff for a long time.
Our government has a history of complicity in torture
around the world.
And the stuff that is in the past tends to recede;
we know it was bad, but we can't change it any more—
but right now, this is *now*;
this is the moment we are in right now,
and we had better not turn away from it.

I wish we could.
It hurts to even think about it.
Some days I just want to tune it all out and forget it.
But this stuff is happening!
Our government is torturing and brutalizing human beings
because they've decided it is necessary to protect us.

And it makes me so angry.
Especially when I see how President Bush's religion has egged him on.
He seems to be under the sway of a very divisive mode of Christianity that says
we are the "good guys" and our enemies are the "bad guys," now and forever.
His kind of Christianity takes as a given that *we* are morally pure. Making war on
our enemies is doing God's work;
our military strength is evidence that God is on our side.
Because we are morally pure,
whoever disagrees with us is certainly wrong,
very possibly evil.

And whatever we do, by definition, must be right.
No matter who gets hurt along the way.

It's not just the "War on Terrorism." We see this kind of "my way or the highway" Christianity all over the place. The other day I read a newspaper article about a group of conservative Christian clergy called "Patriot Pastors." It seems there are about 5000 clergy across the country who have pledged to promote a conservative political agenda in this year's elections. James Dobson's group Focus on the Family has produced an election guide to help them. According to the *LA Times*, this guide includes the helpful tip that if a congregant says her main concerns are health care or foreign policy, you should suggest Jesus would prioritize abortion and gay marriage.⁶

Oh, my goodness, when I read that, I got so mad!
OH! I gasped—how could they twist the message of Jesus like that?!
I was *so* angry!
But then something else crept in.
I started to feel manipulated by my anger.
I saw myself falling into this reactionary pattern of anger against the conservatives. (And by the way, notice how we say "conservatives," not "conservative *people*," because it's easier to be mad at a faceless mass than individual human beings!)
We have this pattern going—we all know it by heart!—where conservatives get mad at liberals and lash out and rage against gay marriage and abortion rights, and that makes liberals mad at *them*,
and we lash out at them and ask, how can they distort the *truth* of religion like that?!

As I sat there stewing,
an image came to me of a toy I used to play with when I was a child.
(*Hold up blocks.*)
This is a set of blocks called a Jacob's Ladder.
The blocks stack up nicely,
and they're attached together
so you can dangle them in a chain.
Now watch what happens when you flip the top one over:
(*Flip block—others flip over in reaction.*)

This is a pretty cool toy.

⁶ "Clergy Taking Issues to Pulpit," *Los Angeles Times*; reprinted in *The Record*, October 2, 2006.

I love how the blocks all flip over like that.
But as I was reading about those “Patriot Pastors” and feeling myself getting madder and madder in this very reactive, predictable way, the image of this toy came to me, and I realized I felt like these blocks tumbling around. These blocks don’t have a brain; they don’t think for themselves or act based on rational choice; they just react and flip over because that’s the only way they can go. And that’s how I felt, trapped in this reactive cycle of enmity, controlled by forces outside myself, as predictable and passive as these blocks.

It’s so easy to fall into this.
The terrorist bombers of September 11 and since seem to have seen their victims as a mass of enemies, undeserving of mercy, unrecognizable as fellow human beings with hopes and aspirations. And just like these little blocks, reacting mindlessly, so the people in the Bush administration reacted by labeling the suicide bombers and their sponsors as “the terrorists,” “the Axis of evil,” “the enemy.”
It’s the same pattern of consciousness.

And then those of us who are liberals, we too fall into the trap by reacting with so much anger, we forget that President Bush is a human being too, a human person like us who feels pain and suffers, a human person like us who hopes and fears and rejoices. For some of us it is hard to say those words: President Bush is a human being like me!
We get so reactive that we declare him to be our enemy. Sometimes we even fantasize about his death. And yet he too is a human being!
Who are we to say his life has no value?

So this is our dilemma:

How do we *criticize* legitimately
without getting sucked into dichotomizing,
demonizing, and dividing?
How do we uphold our faith
in the inherent worth and dignity of every person
while still getting our social message out?

I want to offer you a personal story of something that has helped me.
Not so very long ago, I looked at the Republican party as the enemy.
Republicans were unacceptable, incomprehensible people
who had very little to do with me.
I made a kind of grudging exception for my dad
and my conservative relatives,
but it was very grudging indeed!

Then something happened to me:
I went on a blind date with a guy named John.
I didn't know much about him,
I wasn't really expecting very much,
and I was joyfully surprised
when on that first date three hours just flew by.
Then, on our second date,
he mentioned that he was a Republican
and he had voted for Bush.
Well! How was I going to deal with this?
The thing was, I really liked this guy.
He made me laugh and he listened to what I had to say.
He took me seriously.

Well, four years later he is still making me laugh,
and he is still a Republican,
and now we are married!
We talk about politics and change each other's minds, sometimes,
and he still takes me seriously.
I knew it was all going to be OK
when, early in our relationship,
he came to a Holly Near peace concert with me
and sang along, a little bit anyway!
John has opened my eyes to the astonishing news flash
that Republicans are people too,
trying to figure out what's best for the world just like I am.

And I tell you this not to brag about how enlightened I am
but to share with you how surprising and humbling it was
to find out that my preconceptions were so far off base.
When I got to meet the enemy,
he wasn't the enemy at all.
He was just a person.
And to the extent that we have changed each other's minds,
we've done it by first respecting each other's heart.

I think we all need to find a way of being politically active
that respects the hearts of our opponents.
Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist teacher—
I've quoted him to you before,
because I've learned so much from him.
He says something that I think is really important.
He says, we need to reach out to people with love
in everything we do.
He says, we know how to write letters to the President
that are full of anger,
but we need to learn how to write love letters.⁷
How can we expect him to listen to what we have to say
unless we can approach him with compassion?

So I tried writing love letter to President Bush.
I wrote it as an experiment to see how it would feel,
and at first I felt a little silly, but it felt good in the end.
This is what I mailed to him yesterday:

Dear President Bush,

I hope this letter finds you well. I'm sure you have a great deal on your mind these days; it must be a tremendous strain to feel that everything you do affects the world so powerfully. I'm writing to share with you a concern that has been weighing very heavily on my heart, and I thank you in advance for listening. When you signed the legislation earlier this week denying prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay camp the right of habeas corpus, my heart sank. I found it very hard to understand how you could wish to be able to keep a fellow human being imprisoned forever, without ever being charged with a crime and without any legal recourse. Surely this is not a fate you would want for yourself?

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, "Ahimsa: The Path of Harmlessness," in *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993), p. 66.

And I have been so concerned by the reports coming out of Guantanamo that we are torturing these men, deliberately making them suffer terrible pain. I understand the temptation to make someone pay for the pain and fear we have experienced as a nation, but as people of faith, don't we both know that this is wrong? I have tried to understand your perspective, and I do appreciate your strong desire to protect our country from terrorist attacks. I just believe so strongly that this is the wrong way. I urge you to reconsider and to honor the basic humanity of the men we have imprisoned at Guantanamo. Please treat them with the same care and concern you would show to a member of your own family. Are we not all brothers and sisters on this Earth?

Thank you so much for your time and attention. I wish you a peaceful and beautiful fall; I'm sure it's lovely in Washington at this time of year.

With best wishes,

Laura M. Horton-Ludwig

Without peace inside us, how can we create peace?
With enmity inside us, how can we end war?
There *is* another way,
and we can walk it together.

May it be so.
Amen and blessed be.