

Chapel Talk  
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“War and Creativity”

For my seventh birthday, my parents took me to the military academy at West Point. There on the shores of the Hudson River, about an hour north of New York City, generals and commanders and infantry soldiers have been trained, including Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, Douglas McArthur, and the thousands of army troops now fighting in Iraq. In late September 1963, the United States was at war in Vietnam, and my great Uncle Ted was chaplain at West Point, having been appointed to that post first by President Eisenhower, and then reappointed by President Kennedy. Like most boys my age, I constantly played soldier and war games, but this particular Saturday was my first encounter with real soldiers in real uniforms with real guns. My most vivid memory of that day, a hot, humid Saturday less than two months away from our country's loss of innocence on November 22, 1963, was watching the soldiers parade in full military dress. We sat on bleachers with families of the soldiers in the bright, blistering sun. Columns and columns of soldiers – all men, ages 17 to 22 – marched up and down the field in their wool parade-dress uniforms; I don't think polyester had yet been invented. My four first grade buddies and I sat in awe as these incarnations of our G.I. Joe toys filed past us in their crisp white pants; their dashing gray jackets with white cross belts; the black parade hats with plumes and the army gold insignia; and those black dress shoes which shined brighter than anything we'd ever seen before. We gazed at the stern, emotionless men, their guns stiffly held over their shoulders. During the parade a couple of soldiers fainted in the oppressive heat. Their comrades merely walked over or by them. The fallen soldiers just lay there, crumpled on the ground, an eerie premonition to future battlefields awaiting too many of them in Southeast Asia.

Two years later we returned to West Point for my great uncle's funeral, a service with full military honors. At his graveside, I jumped seven times as the honor guard fired

the seven-gun salute over his coffin. I can still smell the gunpowder; I can still hear that explosion. I can still remember staring down at the ground as the guns fired, wondering why my Buster Brown church shoes didn't shine like those of the nearby soldiers.

That moment from 1965 came back hauntingly to me a week ago, ironically at Disney World, during the National Anthem before an Atlanta Braves spring training game. It was a beautiful, warm evening in Florida; the boys and I had eaten our hotdogs and Cokes and peanuts; and we as a nation were at war in Iraq. There was a moment of silence for the soldiers before the National Anthem – and it was silent in that packed stadium. When the guest singer came to those awkward high notes, “And the rockets red glare, / The bombs bursting in air,” the stadium crew sent up huge fireworks over the scoreboard, and they exploded thunderously just as we had seen and heard them do on TV in Baghdad. We weren't in Baghdad; we were at the Magic Kingdom, the sprawling city of make-believe – but those fireworks were suddenly harsh and uncelebratory connections to a gruesome reality supposedly far away.

We live today in such a disconnected world, a time of disjointed language and emotions and events. We are immersed in “March Madness,” not fully aware of how “mad” March has become. We hear phrases like “war for peace,” “friendly fire,” “surgical strike,” “Operation: decapitation” – and we are numb to their illogic and grotesque absurdity and to their deadly consequences.

In the midst of this crisis, it is hard for us accurately to see ourselves at this juncture in time. Are we at a blip, a tiny regional skirmish which will end soon; and then time will smooth over it like a heavy blanket; and those after us will hardly concern themselves with studying these events? Or, are we at the cusp of history, the precipice of a defining age, what Winston Churchill described as “not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning”—? How will we act and respond to what life has presented us with? What can we possibly do? What is our part, here in the cornfields of Delaware, 7,000 thousand miles from where the executions and gassing and barbaric cruelty has reigned and where now our bombs and soldiers fall,

that ancient land fed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers where human civilization began? How can we not be paralyzed by fear – even as we have lived so closely with fear these last two years –; or numbed by the almost surreal minute-by-minute reports on TV; or buried within denial by the ubiquitous presence of war in the media and within our School?

A minister friend of mine challenged his congregation last Sunday to

remember that war is a cowardly escape from the giant problems of peace. We must not live our lives in fear of the unknown. Fear is the enemy of learning; it gives ignorance its power. Rather, let us recommit ourselves to a new coalition of moral strength, not just of those who would follow us in military ventures, but those who would work together with us in building a new world for a new day. Let us not be heady with arrogant idealism or national bullying and opportunism. Let us recommit ourselves to standing strong in partnership with our allies around the world. Let us not desert, but rather put more spine into the United Nations, NATO, the European Union, and every alliance that works for the greater good, not only of its own nation, but of the Commonwealth of Nations. (Gary Wilburn, March 23, 2003).

This admonition is a potent weapon with which to accost fear. It echoes what Professor Matsuda asserted Friday night, when she told us that we need to be able to flesh out different, complex ideas without killing ourselves. “Fear is the enemy of learning”: so we must learn and understand and hear and ask questions. Through the search to know, we disarm ignorance and bigotry.

Another path for us to confront this war is to create. No matter how just or righteous or how unified the coalition, war destroys. It destructs. It decreates. The mental

image we have of Sarajevo is of a war-torn city pummeled by bombing and torture and vicious killing. Yet, in 1984, Sarajevo hosted the world for the Winter Olympics. Look sadly at how much has been lost, ruined, massacred where once flourished harmony and spirit and excellence. In this current war with Iraq, buildings and alliances have been destroyed, relationships and laws and communities razed – and as much as I oppose the steps our government has taken to go to war, I hold Saddam Hussein, by universal consensus a ruthless dictator and killer, wholly responsible for establishing the situation we felt we had to respond to. He has uncreated his country.

What, then, can we create in the face of his atrocities and our current war? How can our creative gesture free the Iraqi people and stop the war? Initially, we can begin by creating understanding, as Professor Matsuda urged us to do. We need to start the debate, open up the table, invite to it those voices we fear or don't want to hear. This year we as a School have heard from hawks and doves; we have debated since September many aspects of our foreign policy at Headmaster Forums and in classrooms and at meals – not to reach consensus and therefore be unified, but to see and understand these problems in all their nuances and complexities. To still disagree is not unpatriotic. We are not, we cannot be a country of “America: love it or leave it.” We can be fully unified behind our soldiers while still questioning our leaders. Understanding is not synonymous with conformity. We need to learn Arabic; we need to understand why Americans are hated abroad; we need to listen to voices that don't know how to speak or who feel we don't care to hear them. This type of creation requires patience and time and humility and resilience.

Secondly, we must also work to create a world where this situation can't happen again. I know, I know – that hope is so idealistic and futile. But to imagine anything less is to allow for cruelty to incarnate in a Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler or Slobodan Milosevic, and to infect deeply their very countries. We need to find out why repressive governments surround the world's oil reserves; why our country can't solve its ever-growing dependence on oil; how to feed the millions who starve in this world; how to slow the frightening spread of AIDS or the growing presence of nuclear weapons around

the world. If we don't come up with approaches and solutions to these situations, these supposedly distant problems will become ours, ours in ways we don't want. Only when we grant ourselves the chance to envision another way, as idealistic as that initial dream might be, can we start to imagine something better. And I do recognize that our fellow Americans at the White House and at the Pentagon are trying to forge something better for the Iraqi people: but it is so hard for more violence to lead to a more lasting peace. Former President Jimmy Carter stated when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize last December: "War may sometimes be a necessary evil, but no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good."

The third antidote for stopping war and engendering freedom is to create ourselves. In this week's *New York Times*, Azar Nafisi, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, wrote that

it is precisely during such times when our lives are transformed by violence, that we need works of the imagination to confirm our faith in humanity, to find hope amid the rubble of a hopeless world. (March 27, 2003, p. A25)

Professor Nafisi believes in "the importance of imagination in times of war." When she taught in Tehran during the Iran –Iraq war, under constant threat of chemical bombs, Professor Nafisi credits Tolstoy, the great Russian writer, with saving her from those Iraqi bombs. "The excitement," she wrote,

that came from discovering a hidden truth about *Anna Karenina* told me that Iraqi missiles had not succeeded in their mission. Indeed, the more Saddam Hussein wanted us to be defined by terrorism, the more we craved beauty.

How does Tolstoy's novel, *Anna Karenina*, or Aaron Copeland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," or Penderecki's haunting "Threnody for Victims of Hiroshima" which

the III and IV Forms have studied, or the current movie, “The Pianist,” or Picasso’s “Guernica” counter the destruction laid waste by years of savage killing in the world and now in Iraq? Remember Professor Nafisi’s assertion: “we need works of the imagination to confirm our faith in humanity, to find hope amid the rubble of a hopeless world.” Words, notes, streaks of paint, voices expressing what is so painful to express: this is how humanity since the beginning of civilization has borne witness in the face of tragedy. The creative impulse wrestles chaos and ruin and incomprehension into form. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* ends with “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” Such creations of language, sound and sight become symphonies of a new whole, a canvas of affirmation in the face of destruction, a tale of witness. At their core, these collected fragments are the tragic hero’s belief in Life and humankind despite death or defeat. To paint the nightmare, as Picasso did in “Guernica,” is to purge the horror, reveal and share it.

What will they say about St. Andrew’s during this tumultuous period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Those who look back at us from the future will see how we affirmed our values and our human bonds, how we worked harder to discern the problems of the world, and how we created and raised up what we hold most essential. They will see that our response to the world was to build an arts center – not a graven image but a manifestation of the human spirit praising the mysteries of God’s world. In that creation is our elixir and our sustenance: this building will be a vibrant hall for the lamentation that seeks release and healing and frame and communion. Music, art, dance and applause won’t stop the killing and the madness, but creation endures long after the swords and the guns have fallen. It lasts as a monument to our thirst to know and imagine and hope and survive. Our songs are incantations, requiems of our grief and losses and questions. To sing the despair, or to paint the maelstrom, transforms the darkness into healing and light. To dare to create becomes a spiritual confirmation of how God molded what was without form into firmaments of Heaven and Earth.

Therefore, let us make Arts Weekend resound with our optimism to this tired world gone so terribly wrong. There must be an urgency, an edge, a passion to our colors and voices and minds this spring. We must animate what has fallen lifeless and inert. We

must paint and sing and laugh as if the kernel of civilization depended on our efforts – and it does. We must dance and write as if they are the only shields and bandages against the assaults of anarchy – and they are. We must praise and perform and imagine as if the only breath of hope resided in the souls of our being – and it does. May we not shirk or shrink from this chance to recreate a better world, relying on what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature” to lead us out of this pandemonium into a land of compassion, grace and possibility. To create, to imagine, to appreciate and to wonder – these are our testaments to those who journey after us. It is our scratch upon the void that marks our survival: it is our assertion, despite the screams and senselessness and ferocity, that we are connected to a spirit that is larger, grander, eternal and magnificent.