

## **Torture: We're Better Than That (Aren't We?)**

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**Reading:** from *Truth, Torture, and the American Way* by Jennifer K. Harbury

Our history . . . has been one of a long struggle to live up to our own values, to insist upon our national ideals, to put our money where our mouth is. Again and again we have proven ourselves to be all too human, and have fallen short or gone astray in this regard. Yet in the end we have tried, at least, to set ourselves straight, to correct our errors and start anew. Slavery was abolished. Women were enfranchised. The extraordinary civil rights work of Dr. Martin Luther King and . . . others changed the face of American society forever. Our Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld the right to a fair trial, most recently by declaring that not even President Bush is above the law when it comes to the Guantanamo detainees. Slowly, too, our society has rejected the official infliction of pain and suffering, from public whippings and hangings, to police brutality, to intolerable prison or institutional conditions.

In short, when it comes to keeping matters in order within our own country, we have been able to evolve, to change, to permit needed reforms. Certainly we have a ways to go in upholding our ideals; one need merely visit Pine Ridge Reservation or review the evidence in the cases of Rodney King or Abner Louima to determine that. But in the end, perhaps our greatest strength lies in the fact that we are willing to struggle with our own collective soul and slowly work to achieve our proclaimed goals. Apparently, we still believe. In the end it is this same stubborn public belief – that our country can and must live up to its ideals – that allows us to grow and resolve our problems. . .

On moral grounds alone, we should reject torture outright as an official practice. If we cannot bear the photographs, we must halt the reality. . .

It is not too late for our nation to turn back from the brink. The words of Dr. Martin Luther King, decades after his tragic murder, still offer us both eloquence and wisdom: “We can live together as brothers, or we will surely die together like fools.”

### **Sermon:**

Torture is wrong. Can I hear an “amen”? Torture is wrong! [Amen!] And we're better than that, aren't we? The banner out on the side of our building states that “Torture is Wrong.” And I think it is admirable and commendable that we put ourselves on record supporting that assertion. But every time I see that sign, I ask myself, “Why should it be necessary to publicly proclaim such a self-evident truth?”

The sad fact is that there are those, including some in high government positions, who seemingly do not embrace that simple moral claim. They may acknowledge that it is generally true, and that it would certainly hold in an ideal world. But, they assert, in the real world, we can't always afford to be so idealistic. There are larger evils to be considered. There are enemies out to destroy us and our way of life. And so it seems that in the battle to defend truth, justice, and the American way, it may sometimes be necessary to sacrifice truth, justice, even basic morality.

This approach, this attitude is reminiscent of the astute observation by cartoonist Walt Kelly some years ago, that “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” It reflects the danger of becoming the very thing we are supposedly fighting against. It sometimes

seems like we are evolving into some kind of Bizarro World, where you must restrict freedom in order to defend it. Where in order to preserve our ideals, we must sacrifice them. War is peace. Lies are truth. Torture is necessary.

I reject the twisted logic that leads to such conclusions. I agree with the Islamic Society of North America who recently stated that “The argument that transgressing the limits of universally accepted human rights norms is necessary in some cases cannot be accepted. This same argument is used by extremists who have harmed and wish to harm the United States and we reject their arguments.”

The simple truth is that torture is an assault on the dignity not only of those who are tortured, but also of those doing the torturing. Torture kills the spirit of both victims and perpetrators.

I have lived a somewhat charmed and sheltered life. I have not experienced torture myself. Nor have I observed directly its infliction on others. I have seen some very graphic photographs, such as those that came out of Abu Ghraib a couple of years ago, and that has been more than enough for me. I can only speculate about the horror of experiencing such things first-hand.

One person who was in a position for twelve years to observe, often first-hand, the horrors of human rights violations around the world, including torture, is the Rev. William Schulz. Schulz, after serving eight years as President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, became Executive Director of Amnesty International USA in 1994, a position he held until 2006. As he ended that tenure, Bill spoke at a gathering of ministers and others at General Assembly two years ago on the topic “What Torture’s Taught Me.” And so, in order to bring the topic of torture down out of the clouds of abstraction to the reality that it is for so many people, I’d like to share some excerpts from that talk. He says:

[O]f those things that I have seen, nothing has had a deeper impact on me than my exposure to torture – to both victims of torture and perpetrators of it and, not incidentally, to all of us in between. So I want to talk with you . . . about torture but not in a political context . . . I want instead to talk about torture in a theological context and about what it may have to say concerning how we understand god, human beings and the world. . .

The reason Abu Ghraib struck Americans like a thunderbolt is not because prisoners were being tortured – some 63% of Americans say that torture is acceptable at least occasionally when, for example, information about the location of a ticking bomb in a high density neighborhood must be procured quickly. (I don’t have time to explain why the perennial “ticking bomb” argument for torture is itself a red herring but, believe me, it is.) The reason Americans turned ashen at Abu Ghraib was because even the staunchest defender of the use of torture as a means of extracting information could not pretend that forcing naked prisoners to form a pyramid or to masturbate for the cameras or to be tethered to a leash like a dog had any purpose other than sheer humiliation. . .

Over my years at Amnesty I was perpetually dumbstruck by the sheer creativity of modern torturers. . .

*[Schulz describes various methods of torture in graphic detail]*

Practices such as these have no rational purpose at all; they are designed solely to strip another of his or her humanity. If anything deserves to be called unadulterated evil, this does. I tell you about it not to shock you but to ask you to consider a question that has haunted me these past twelve years - is what I say from the pulpit about the world around us, about the nature of God and humanity, about the dynamics of human relationships – is what I preach to the people sufficient to encompass a world in which such coarseness and brutality exists? Or, to put it another way, if a member of my congregation or my listening audience had herself been a victim of such terror, would she find my words, my faith, my theology, naïve and pallid or authentic and satisfying? . . .

So who are the torturers? Are they madmen? Deviants? Hardened criminals? Sexual predators? Almost never. In fact, most police and military units weed out the psychological misfits from their midst because they know such people have trouble taking orders. No, the horrible truth is that the vast majority of torturers are average Joes (occasionally, but rarely, average Janes).

And it is remarkably easy to turn Joe into what most of us would regard as a monster. You put him in a restricted environment like a police or military training camp under the command of a vaunted authority figure. You subject him to intense stress. And then, having created an angry, bitter, but obedient servant, you provide the sanction, the means, the opportunity and the rationale for that servant to take his outrage out on a vulnerable but much despised population. “These are the people who are threatening our country.” “These are the people who are killing your comrades.” . . .

What torture has taught me is that, fascinating as I find my own life, it alone is a cloudy prism through which to view Creation absent reference to the experience of others, the wisdom of community, the demands of tradition, the judgment of history, and the invitation of the Holy.

And it has taught me one thing more. . . the indomitability of the spirit and the mysterious workings of an unfettered grace. . .

*[Schulz closes with some short vignettes, including:]*

Nick Yarris spent twenty-three years in prison for a murder he did not commit – a singular form of torture. When he was released and was asked how he felt, he said, “What are my choices? I could be really devastated and angry and let them continue to own me or I could have fun. [Having fun] sounds better . . . The lowest insult would be if I came out destroyed, a broken man. . . My survival technique was to become a good man.”

Perez Aguirre was tortured mercilessly in a South American prison. Many years later, walking along the street, he ran into the man who had tortured him. The torturer was now among those being prosecuted and he tried to avoid Aguirre’s gaze. But Aguirre took the initiative. “How are

you?” he asked his torturer. The man said he was very depressed. There was long pause and then Aguirre said, “If you need anything, come to see me.” And then, “Shake hands, friend. I forgive you.”

What torture has taught me, what all those brave souls and, yes, even a few of their tormentors, have taught me, is to never give up on the glimmers of grace for not everything is all that it seems. If even survivors of torture can reclaim a sense of life’s bounty, then surely you and I . . . can too. If the torturer cannot fully break the human spirit, nobody can. For we Unitarian Universalists know, out of the depths of our faith and the teachings of our tradition and the succor of our community, that the chess master was right.

Chancing upon a great painting in a European gallery of a defeated Faust sitting opposite the devil at a chess table with only a knight and a King on the board and the King in check, the master stopped to stare. The minutes changed to hours and still the master stared. And then finally, “It’s a lie,” he shouted. “The King and the knight have another move! They have another move!” And that’s finally what torture has taught me – that it is not just the King but the Knight, not just the Queen but the rook, not just the Bishop but the pawn, not just the wealthy but the pauper, not just the fortunate but the weary, not just the torturer but the tortured, not just the powerful but every single person, every single blessed person, until the day we die, every single blessed person on this earth, every single blessed person who has another move. We all have another move.

One source of encouragement in the battle against torture as official government instrument is the increasing willingness of America’s religious community to make its move - to stand up and speak out against it. Our own Unitarian Universalist Association has gone on record against torture a number of times. Most recently, at last summer’s General Assembly, we passed an Action of Immediate Witness called “Stop U.S. Sponsored Torture – A Religious Call to Action.” I’d like to share some excerpts from that statement:

WHEREAS torture violates the basic dignity of the human person that all religions hold dear;

WHEREAS torture shames us all and erodes the character of the nation that tortures; WHEREAS the United States has adopted torture and unlimited detention as an official policy; . . .

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the 2007 General Assembly reject torture by anyone for any purpose under any circumstances without exception;

BE IT RESOLVED that the 2007 General Assembly stand in opposition to all U.S. sponsored torture, secret prisons, and rendition for torture;

BE IT RESOLVED that the 2007 General Assembly stand in support of full U.S. compliance with the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Convention Against Torture; . . .

BE IT RESOLVED that the 2007 General Assembly urge Unitarian Universalist Congregations to oppose and speak out against U.S. sponsored torture wherever and whenever possible.

And we are not alone. Locally, the Central Pennsylvania Torture Awareness Committee has brought together people from a number of faith groups to work on this issue. On a larger scale, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture is doing similar work. I'd like to share with you from their website a statement about why people of faith are working to end U.S.-Sponsored Torture:

Tens of thousands of people of diverse faith traditions, including evangelical Christians, mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Quakers, Unitarians, Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs, as well as representatives of over 130 religious organizations, are working together to end U.S.-sponsored torture. Notwithstanding points of theological difference, these groups share a basic understanding and affirmation of the inherent dignity of each individual which includes:

- A conviction that all individuals are created in the image of God and therefore are endowed with a basic dignity;
- Some variant of what is commonly referred to as "The Golden Rule": That which you would not want done to yourself, do not do to another.

Each of these traditions also share ethical principles that people of faith are called to practice:

- People of faith are called to compassion - to not only care when people are degraded or hurt but to take action: to stand for, and with, those who are abused, oppressed, and among the most vulnerable.
- People of faith are called to pursue justice to assure that all people are treated fairly - as Martin Luther King once noted, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
- People of faith are called to be faithful - to be constant in their defense of each individual's dignity, humanity, and honor.
- People of faith are called to hospitality - to welcome those who are marginalized, ostracized, and perceived as Other.
- People of faith are called to make peace - to facilitate reconciliation and to create a culture of peace.

Religious institutions are called to embody these values and to engage in these tasks because of the authority they bring to issues of morality. Religious traditions emphasize ethical behavior as a demonstration of faith in action. They also provide leadership in secular society, playing an important role in influencing issues of morality at the national, state, and local levels. Furthermore, the infrastructure they provide supports the millions of people who covet justice and peace for all of God's creation.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian, politician, and observer of 19<sup>th</sup> century America, observed that "America is great because America is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." It is important for people of faith to impress upon Americans and our leaders in Washington that America's goodness, and hence its greatness, is seriously compromised by the practice of torture, or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatments of detainees.

We're better than that, aren't we? And so what moves will we be inspired to make? One of the first things you can do right now, today, is to stop at the table in the Social Room that will be staffed by Brenda Black, Ellen Arginteanu, and Jan Perison, representing the Central Pennsylvania Torture Awareness Committee. They have information and handouts to share. They also have petitions to sign, for both adults and for children, calling for an end to torture with no exceptions. You can also visit, or even volunteer to help with the 24-Hour Guantanamo Reach Out Vigil at the State College Municipal Plaza to be held on June 20-21. Also, a debriefing and discussion of the vigil will take place here at UUFCC at 7:30 pm on Sunday, June 22. All are invited.

When faced with situations like U.S. sponsored torture, a situation that does damage to the soul and spirit, of our nation as well as to our individual spirits, it is tempting to take the path of denial (oh, it's probably not really that bad) or of resignation (what can we possibly do about it) or ineffectual righteous anger (how dare they?). But we're better than that, aren't we? If we are to pride ourselves on taking a reality-based approach to life and religion, then we must acknowledge the reality we encounter – the bad as well as the good – and discern what small steps we can take to move things in the direction of justice.

May we finally heed the words of Edward Everett Hale:

I am only one  
But still I am one.  
I cannot do everything,  
But still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

May it be so.