

Are We Ashamed Yet?
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October 28, 2007

Readings

from “Locksley Hall” by Alfred Lord Tennyson

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales;

Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew
From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;

Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm;

Till the war-drum throb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were furl'd
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

from the *Tao Te Ching* – Chapter 61 – as interpreted by Stephen Mitchell

When a country obtains great power,
it becomes like the sea:
all streams run downward into it.
The more powerful it grows,
the greater the need for humility.
Humility means trusting the Tao,
thus never needing to be defensive.

A great nation is like a great man:
When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.
Having realized it, he admits it.
Having admitted it, he corrects it.
He considers those who point out his faults
as his most benevolent teachers.
He thinks of his enemy
as the shadow that he himself casts.

If a nation is centered in the Tao,
if it nourishes its own people
and doesn't meddle in the affairs of others,
it will be a light to all nations in the world.

Sermon

A couple of weeks ago, as you know, we learned that the White House had, through yet another secret memo, authorized interrogation techniques that amount to torture. Yet one more reason to be furious at this administration – and to be ashamed as an American, since the administration purports to act in our name. It was as I read about this latest assault on our American values that today's sermon title occurred to me, a title which should probably have the word “yet” in italics and bold. After all, what should it take?

Think of all we have done to alienate most of the rest of the world since 9/11. On September 12, 2001, the world was pretty much united, condemning the attacks, affirming their solidarity with us. Expressions of sympathy came even from Iran!

And after all, too easily forgotten is that citizens of over 90 nations lost their lives in the 9/11 attack. Though American power was clearly the focus of the attack, the case can be made too that it was also an attack on an increasingly interdependent world.

Yet our government – not only the administration, but all too many in congress – with the media in close cooperation – turned the post-9/11 months into a period of hyper-patriotism, coupled with a cowboy Western attitude best summarized in those sadly immortal words, “You’re either with us or you’re against us.”

Were we ashamed *yet*?

Worse, the so-called “war on terror” became a war to eliminate the world of evil – with so little self-reflection as to be ludicrous were it not so dangerous. No realization that, as many more reflective souls have reminded us, the line between good and evil runs through every heart in some measure.

Were we ashamed *yet*?

And as we know, before too long the administration was shamelessly using 9/11 and war on terror rhetoric to stir us up to go to war against Iraq... on criminally false pretenses.

Were we ashamed *yet*?

Then... it only got worse.

Mission accomplished? Hardly begun! And what was the mission anyway? Thanks to the sadly short American attention span, the administration got away far too long with shifting explanations of “the mission.” Was it to eliminate weapons of mass destruction? To end a dictatorship? To create a democracy? Well, maybe just to create a stable, friendly state. Surely not to secure oil resources!

Were we ashamed *yet*?

How about Abu Ghraib? How about our Attorney General declaring the Geneva Conventions prohibiting torture as “quaint”?

I could, sadly, go on.

And there is also the matter of all that we have *failed* to do as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have continued.

Yes, the matter of all we have failed to do, with action in response to global warming at the top of the list. Administration rhetoric aside, it is clear to most everyone else in the world that American leadership on global warming is worse than non-existent. So, it is an open question in my mind as to which failure will be viewed by historians with greater disbelief – our

actions in relation to Iraq or our *failure* to act in relation to global warming... along with so many other interrelated crises....

Are we ashamed yet?!

(Now – of course – by now in our national discourse it should go without saying that even as many of us may feel shame for so much the administration has done, we also affirm our pride in the military personnel who have served honorably in both Afghanistan and Iraq, in the work that so many have faithfully done to try to rebuild those societies in the face of perhaps insurmountable odds. I really am in awe of their courage and good will, even as I deplore the policies of the leaders who have put them in largely untenable circumstances. Last year we heard from a local man returned from Iraq about much of the good that he and those under his command had accomplished. And we continue to have our own Old Ship’s Daniel Camino in our hearts as he faithfully tends to his duties with the Army in Baghdad. We look forward to his return early in the new year...)

Now – a harder question: do any of us have clean hands? Even if we voted for the other guys, send our protesting emails, go to demonstrations? We are at the least like the copilot who, after the first, second, and then third of the aircraft’s four engines went out turned to the pilot and said, “Boy, have *you* got a problem!”

Of course it doesn’t altogether matter why those first three engines went out. The situation has become everyone’s problem.

Not only that, when it comes to our situation, there’s no getting around the reality that the way of life we all share is – at least for now – dependent on resources from dangerous and unstable parts of the world. So we are in some sense, to some degree, complicit every time we drive, every time we turn up the heat. So, a little humility might be in order as we consider the situation in which we collectively find ourselves.

This said... *we* didn’t vote the blank check for war in Iraq. *We* didn’t invent “shock and awe.” *We* didn’t sign memos authorizing what amounts to torture.

Others did... yet in our name.

Okay then. Any good news?

Well... I’ll begin my answer with another question. What, more deeply than the sad the catalogue of administration errors and worse, is the origin of the shame we feel (if we do feel shame – some of you may not agree with my analysis or my opinions, and that’s okay, that makes for the conversation of a democracy as well the conversation in a church such as ours)?

But why shame?

It’s simple. We feel ashamed because in spite of everything we still believe in the very ideals of our nation that we may feel have been so egregiously tarnished. We still measure our nation’s actions against a standard to which we would hold ourselves; and so we feel disappointment at least, and maybe shame when we fail.

Not that this is the first time we have as a nation failed to live up to the ideals enshrined in our founding documents – the list begins with the enslavement of Africans and the near-genocide of the native peoples of this continent – but it doesn’t end there. Jim Crow, Vietnam, a list too long...

Which is *not* to say that we are more evil than others; only that we, too, like everyone else, are human; that we, too, fail more often than we would like, fail to live up to our own ideals. But... those ideals of liberty and equality and democracy *are real*; the ideals remain, ideals that have inspired not only Americans but people around the world for generations, remain.

Ideals that are and must continue to be our shared moral plumb line.

It was the biblical prophet Amos who gave us this evocative image – Amos, who preached against the corruptions of *his* time many centuries ago. He said that he had seen God “standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.” The meaning? That God was measuring Israel against a standard of upright behavior, and Israel, symbolized by the wall, was in danger of crumbling because of its own corrupt behavior.

But there is good news within this prophetic image. Then as now: there *is* such a plumb line!

The *source* of this plumb line? Our conscience (which some would say is a gift of God and others might affirm is a result of evolution, but whatever the source, most would agree is present in most of us to one degree or another). And then... our collective conscience is expressed in human institutions and documents – in our time and place documents such as the Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

So, the United States of America in which I take pride rather than shame is not the nation that invades others preemptively, and surely not the nation which affirms the freedom to shop as our highest pursuit, but is rather the nation that affirms a deeper freedom, a freedom (as philosopher Jacob Needleman reminds us in his book *The American Soul*) to seek that voice of conscience, so that we might live according to our better lights, our high ideals.

So, what now? If we are, finally, or have been for a long time, ashamed of too many of the deeds of this administration perpetrated in our name, knowing, too, that we also bear a measure of complicity... what now?

Well, we can experience this shame not only as a reminder of the ideals against which we have fallen short, but also (as theologian Thomas Berry encourages us to do) as a source of energy.

Again, we wouldn't feel shame if we didn't have high standards to which we *aspired*. We wouldn't feel shame if we didn't *care* and care deeply about our own integrity, about truth, about fairness, about peace. And there is so much energy there – aspiration, inspiration, passionate caring about our nation and the world. So, couple shame with deeper clarity about our values and ideals, along with... a vision of how things could be if we lived more closely aligned with those values and ideals... and who knows what might come of it.

All of which is perhaps another way of expressing the sentiment we heard in the second reading – that a great nation behaves with humility, acknowledges mistakes and corrects mistakes, strives to live according to the *tao* to use the Chinese word – and one could say that one expression of the *tao*, the eternal way of life, is in terms of such values as integrity, truth, fairness, peace.

All this said, then... yes, I *am* deeply ashamed of all too much that our government has done in our name... but I am not without hope. For our ideals do remain. The moral plumb line does remain. American and human creativity remain. The *energy* represented by our shame remains. The energy represented by our vision of how things could be remains – and not just concerning Iraq, but concerning... everything...

So, surely the headlines are filled with news that often breeds despair. But that's not all...

For every grim headline there is something in another spirit (and I'm not just talking about the Red Sox...):

Did you read last week about the meetings of Irish and South African activists and politicians with Iraqis, meetings designed to inspire through example and practical advice healing work within Iraq?

Did you hear about the Solar Decathlon (sponsored by President Bush's and our Department of Energy!)? Teams from twenty universities around the world competed to build the most efficient and livable solar homes – and they put them on the National Mall in Washington. What a sight – a vision! – solar homes on the National Mall!

And I hardly have to ask whether you heard about the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet though most of the attention has gone to Al Gore, I would draw *our* attention this morning to the fact that half the prize went to a United Nations sponsored effort, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They work in our name too.

The United Nations. Founded over sixty years ago this week. For all the criticism it receives, some justified, some not, I continue to be inspired by the United Nations and all of its related agencies. I still recall my first visit as a child to UN headquarters in New York, to this place where leaders from just about all the nations of the world sit down to talk instead of shoot. Of course the UN is no more perfect than its member nations. But I shudder to imagine a world without the UN or something like it, an institution which can – however imperfectly – hold a moral plumb line for all of us on this planet we share (whether about Iraq or Darfur or terrorism or global warming), so that we continue to feel shame when we ought to feel shame, and so that we will be inspired to use the energy of shame coupled with the energy of our vision of a better world, a world more aligned with our ideals, to ever seek more peace, more justice, life more abundant.

So may it be.

Benediction

May we be among those who bring:

A little more peace, a little more love, a little more kindness...
each day, to each person we meet,
That the circles of peace, love, and kindness grow ever wider.

So may it be.