

A Flicker of Hope in Conflict's Moral Twilight

Matthew Bolton

HURTLING OUT OF THE SKY in a tight corkscrew spiral—the so-called “Mogadishu Landing”—our U.N. Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) C-130 cargo plane bumped unceremoniously onto the runway of “Hawler International Airport,” consisting of an airstrip, two forty-foot containers, a gravel parking lot and, evidently, big ambitions.

I was finally in Iraq. Reality hit me as I stepped onto the asphalt, blinking in the brightness of the subtropical sun. U.N. trucks bustled around like ants, although it was unclear what exactly they were doing. A couple of sand-colored Humvees, guided by unshaven American soldiers sporting Ray-Bans and deep tans, whizzed by while I clutched my backpack, feeling sheepish and out of place.

The flight had carried the same motley bunch of expatriates I have seen as an aid worker in other “transition countries” like Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Clad in “aid-worker chic”—khakis and shirts with thousands of pockets—smoking heavily, and carrying kit bags decorated with U.N., donor, or NGO (nongovernmental organization) logos, they exhibited the humanitarian’s

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uniquely odd mode of conversation as they compared the myriad stamps in each other's passports: cynically dark humor mixed with world weariness and earnest idealism.

Gathering our belongings, we all boarded a U.N. bus and drove to Ainkawa, a suburb of Erbil, the de facto capital of the primarily Kurdish northern Iraq. Ainkawa is home to a massive complex of U.N. buildings that has taken over whole city blocks and cordoned off roads with barbed wire, concrete planters, and armed guards. Sitting on the bus, surrounded by such surreality, I began to reflect on the life journey that had brought me thus far.

It was as I waded through the sewage, stagnant in the streets of one of Africa's biggest slums—Mukuru, Nairobi, Kenya—while on an assignment with the Community of Christ-sponsored WorldService Corps in summer 2000, that I was first struck by the enormity of the world's problems and the horrifying conditions faced by the majority of its inhabitants. It was a deeply troubling and difficult summer for me, but I was seized by the challenge, the intensity, and the adventure that is aid work. Since then I have worked with nongovernmental aid organizations in Nicaragua, the Philippines, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and now Iraq.

My work itself is quite mundane. I am, in effect, a writer, and my job is to conduct social research and assessments of the situation within the country. I also do a great deal of public relations writing—compiling reports for donors, writing press releases, and assisting with webpage development. However, while my day-to-day tasks are not so different from those of a writer in any other part of the world, the places in which I am situated confront me with many disconcerting realities.

One of my recent assignments was researching disability issues here in the north. Iraq has a disproportionate number, caused largely by combat and a mine-riddled landscape, of disabled persons. Less dramatic, but also key, was the deterioration in nutrition and health care caused by the economic sanctions. As a result, many humanitarian organizations have set up prosthetic limbs centers, often staffed primarily by patients themselves. I have visited several. It was haunting to see rows and rows of plastic limbs and leg braces lined up on work benches, waiting for their new owners.

Recently, I visited Koya District, one of the earlier towns to suffer the use of chemical weapons in the Ba'ath regime's 1988 "Anfal"

("spoils") campaign—a systematic effort to destroy Kurdish society, which left over 100,000 persons killed or "disappeared." This campaign culminated in the horrific gas attack on Halabja, but chemical weapons had been used earlier in the campaign in places like Koya on a smaller, but equally brutal, scale. All the villages surrounding Koya had been razed to the ground. Hundreds of males of military age were "disappeared."

I visited several "Anfal families," as they call themselves, as part of a study of the conditions for displaced persons in the region. Some mothers still make the bed of their missing son, hoping that one day he will return. One man had been driven insane after watching his brother snatched away, never to be heard from again. Another family told the story of an infant who survived the massacre of a whole village. They said she lay in the midst of dead bodies for three days until people from a neighboring town rescued her and took her to a mosque in Kirkuk. Putting her arm around the girl, who is now a teenager, her aunt told me she had visited the mosque and recognized the necklace around the infant's neck as a gift she had given the family. Since then she has raised the girl as her own.

And Iraq is not the only place I have confronted such heartbreaking situations. In my work I have seen children a knife's edge from death at the cruel hands of malnutrition, knelt at the bed of an emaciated woman dying of AIDS, become friends with a former guerilla, shaken the hand of a former hit man, looked into the eyes of men bent on killing each other as they fought with machetes and jumped over trenches next to a mined airfield—seeing the discarded boots of soldiers and the "artillery roses" filled with shrapnel.

While these experiences have helped me to grow and mature as a human being, they have also been profoundly disturbing. I am angry that people still have to live and die this way. I am angry that any child must learn to survive in such a terrifying and morally ambiguous world. Throughout my childhood, my parents, educators, and Sunday School teachers all taught me the values of truth, integrity, honesty, fairness, justice, morality, and ethics. And I feel cheated when I see that these values are more often the exception than the rule.

It deeply disturbs me that known war criminals run free while people are executed then posthumously found innocent. It infuriates me that the former concentration camp in Brëko, the town where I used to live in Bosnia, remains unmarked, while there is an enormous monument to the troops who were at least partly responsible for the town's "ethnic cleans-

ing” and while graffiti on my apartment building extolled the greatness of the vicious gangster, war criminal, and profiteer Arkan.

This anger sometimes surfaces at the most unexpected times. I will be sitting typing in my office and suddenly a lump stops up my throat, and I am filled with utter hatred for the people who allowed thousands of Kurds, Shia, and other minorities to die over the last two bloody decades in Iraq—especially while Saddam was still considered a “friend” of the United States and Britain. I want to imagine a world where we really, genuinely, believe that we have the power to change things. Where warlords, criminals, and corrupt politicians do not seem invincible. Where the poor, the refugee, the sick, and the dispossessed hold their heads high with the dignity that comes only from controlling one’s destiny. Where the strong do not rub salt into the wounds of the weak, and where the embittered weak do not lash out in furious vengeance at any symbol associated with their oppressors.

I want to imagine a world where people live without the gut-wrenching fear that comes when whole villages are razed to the ground, where disturbed minds no longer prey on the naiveté of innocents, where airplanes don’t smash into buildings. But sometimes, in the midst of the world’s complexity, I forget how to hope. I lose the will to love the world in spite of its problems. We aid workers almost inevitably become hardened to the terrible suffering we see on a daily basis. Sometimes I am horrified to realize that I am no longer emotionally affected when I see a malnourished child. Instead of letting my anger out (which would not be wise, given the political contexts in which I work), I bottle it up inside. It manifests itself in a lack of empathy for people’s “lesser problems.” I don’t like the person I am becoming at these moments.

This emotional toll has cost me my faith—at least in the sense that most would see it. Theodicy—the problem of evil that I have faced so starkly in my work—has shaken my belief in God to its very core. This was a painful process, for the Church meant a great deal to me. I grew up a devout member of the Community of Christ, my formative years shaped and molded by its stories, doctrines, and concepts. My grandfather is a former Church leader; my father is a Church employee. I was baptized at the age of eight and studied religion at the church-sponsored college, Graceland University.

It is perhaps because of this background that I cannot deny that I still find a mustard-seed-sized flicker of hope in the stories and myths that

shaped my childhood. I would describe myself as a religious agnostic rather than an atheist. I find the stories of Jesus's birth and death particularly moving.

Although it is traditional to read the whole of Luke's Christmas narrative during the advent season, we often seem to forget the context Luke gives. This baby boy, Jesus, was born in the context of a brutally repressive regime—and at the bottom of its pile. Ponder for a moment the familiar words at the beginning of Luke 2, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. . . . All went to their own towns to be registered." Can you imagine everyone in the whole country going back to the town of their ancestors? Just think of the chaos that would have caused. What do you think would happen if President Bush decreed that all the people in the United States should go back to the hometowns of their great-great-great-great-grandfathers to be "registered"? There would be a public outcry. Clearly this Augustus was not concerned about "people-centered governance." Or consider the brutality of Herod, who, upon discovering that a new king was born in his territory, ordered the slaughter of all the young boys in the land. Or finally, the injustice of Mary having to give birth in a dirty cattle shed with no birth attendant or midwife.

From these passages, we see that the Christmas story is not a sugary fairy tale. It is a story that cries out from the depths of a people's despair, "Enough is enough!" This story does not focus on the comings and goings of the celebrities of the day. It is a story about a God who so loved the world, who so cared for the lowly, the poor, the forgotten invisible people of this world that s/he took on their wretched form and dwelt among them—among us. It is the story of the King of All Creation, the Most High God, being born into a humble family in a dirty stable, next to the animals, and being put to sleep in a feed trough. It is the story of a poor humble teenage girl, visited by angels, chosen by an Almighty God to bring into the world its greatest hope. She sang of a love so sublime that her words would echo through the ages from the mouths of story-tellers, preachers, mystics, and poets. It is the story of three great wise men, the mysterious Magi of the East, kneeling before this child.

The story of the end of Jesus's life is just as powerful. Once again, having heard the story so many times, we tend to decontextualize it and gloss over its deeply disturbing nature.

Here is a story of an innocent man, thrown to the will of the mob,

whipped viciously, nailed to a wooden frame, and left to hang until he dies. This treatment makes the electric chair appear humane. Implicit in this story is a stinging condemnation of torture and the brutality of unchecked empire. It is an indictment of state terror, a cry for justice from the downtrodden.

Left at that, the story would be very depressing. We have all heard stories of the innocent crushed by the powerful, but what makes the gospel so unique is that the victim rises again—shattering the cold chains of death. In a world where militaries paint skulls on their airplanes, where paramilitaries collect vulgar trophies from their victims, and where we put our faith in the hope of our enemies' demise, the resurrection calls us away from the worship of death and toward an embrace of life's fullness.

On the main road out of Kirkuk, Iraq, a disabled tank stands in the central meridian. Children have painted it with bright flowers and messages of peace—a powerful symbol that, though their formative years were racked by poverty, conflict, and displacement, they may be the new generation that can lead this country out of the years of oppressive rule and foreign intrusion to a new life.

In scenes like these, I see the hope embodied by children, like the baby Jesus, and the possibility of societal resurrection. It is this hope that acts as a beacon, guiding me through the moral twilight of our fallen world. The gospel—that great ode to the humble—tells me that it is possible to rise from the ashes of war, poverty, and moral depravity and begin again, bringing reconciliation to those torn by division and healing the wounds of conflict. My dream is that, through my work, I can play my small part in ensuring that this flicker of hope does not go out.