

A LARGER VIEW

*A Commentary On How Current Events Reflect—
Or Not—Our Spiritual Search*

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An Ordinary Look

I recently sat for hours in the halls of Los Angeles County Family Court while giving support to a friend there for her grandchildren since they were being removed from their mother's custody. The halls were full, with just about every seat taken. I looked at the people, ordinary faces, no great anything stood out, no great beauty, no great ugliness, they looked as ordinary as any group could. Yet, some among them were offenders, had abused or neglected children. Others were there like us picking up the pieces and taking care of the children others had in some way hurt. The thing was, it wasn't possible to tell who was who. Looks alone didn't give any clue.

Later I read an article about Kaing Guek Eav, a 67 year old former Khmer Rouge member known as Duch who had been in charge of a notorious Phnom Penh prison and who is being tried for his crimes. The author compared him to Adolf Eichmann, the former Nazi put on trial by Israel in the 60's, since both were not only ordinary people, they also looked ordinary.

What it all said to me was that evil may look ordinary, and that's something many already know, but what we often forget is that good too looks just as ordinary.

Who's The Better American?

College campuses, especially in Florida, are engaged in a new movement, fighting for the right of students who are here illegally for a number of years to stay in the United States. They have been organizing formally and in some cases demonstrating. United We Dream is an example, it is a network of current and former such students. Carlos Saavedra, its national coordinator, describes the issue this way, "maybe our parents feel like immigrants, but we feel like Americans because we have been raised here on American values." Being here illegally, such students are subject to any of the laws and problems of others also here without proper documentation.

Many legal immigrants come to the United States for a better life, motivated by economic rather than philosophical reasons. Many still feel an allegiance to their home country and some do not choose citizenship because their status as legal immigrants enables them to better enjoy the benefits of both countries.

As we decide what to do with these young students who may be deported unless laws are changed, we need to ask ourselves: Who's the better American, who will make the better citizen, someone who already has a stake in the country, or someone whose allegiance is based on self-interest?

Banning Landmines

Four countries are now land mine free, Albania, Greece, Rwanda and Zambia. That is no small accomplishment, but many more need to join the list. Landmines destroy many lives and show a lack of respect for human rights. The 1997 International Mine Ban Treaty was ratified by 156 nations. And yet key players on the world stage have not yet ratified it, countries such as the United States, Russia, India and Pakistan. It was hoped President Obama would take the opportunity to have the treaty signed since the agreement is up for renewal, but so far the administration has let the status quo stand, refusing to take steps to have it signed and ratified. No doubt there are political considerations for the lack of action. Sometimes, though, humanitarian grounds should prevail. Banning landmines is one of those instances.

They Could Be Us

I read about a Somali truck driver who sold his land to pay for a journey out of his hopeless conditions. He traveled through Kenya and Tanzania to Mozambique. There he paid a trafficker \$1500 to get him on a ship to Sao Paulo. From Brazil he went to Columbia and then by boat to Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and ended in Guatemala where he is asking for asylum.

Most of us live sedentary lives. We might be born and die within the same state, certainly within the same country. Not so for the millions who seek jobs wherever they may be, for those who are displaced by wars and economic crises, for those in countries where there

are no opportunities, no way for them to be able to earn what they need for basic necessities. Conditions such as these have led to a whole class of people who live without a kind of security we take for granted. I know where I can get mail. They don't. We tend to look down on those people, they're the subject of news reports on makeshift camps in Spain, they're a group unwanted in Italy. In Germany and France they're trying to pass laws against them. In the U.S the whole issue of illegal immigration has stirred up the passions of many. And yet they are people, struggling like anyone else to survive the best way they know how. I can't help think they could easily be us.

Peace Is More...

"Peace is not just the absence of conflict," said former President Clinton speaking at the American University in Dubai not long ago, "it is the presence of opportunity and cooperation and a sense of justice and fairness and movement." It's far from a new thought, I remember it from graduate school many years ago. But when someone with the stature Bill Clinton has come to have says it, it ceases to be academic and begins to become real, and in context of his speech, makes the meaning that much more undeniable. "What leads people to suicide bombings?" He asked in the same speech, and then answered his own question. "They believe they have more to gain in the next world than in this one." He went on to say that he saw this feeling as what he called the major danger in front of Palestinians and Israelis.

Whether Mr. Clinton's thoughts help solve the Middle East crisis or some other crisis is probably open to question. What is important is that these thoughts now become part of the diplomatic vocabulary and arsenal.

Competitive Yoga—an Oxymoron

There's a new trend. It's called competitive yoga. Rajashree and Bikram Choudhury who are the owners of the Bikram yoga studios are also behind the movement, although the couple do not want the two confused and have begun their own non-profit to promote the idea. Though right now there is a series of competitions which will hopefully go from local to regional to national, the goal is to make it to the Olympics, maybe by 2020. I must admit that I am among those who doubt the whole idea, not because it isn't doable, or that the Choudhurys will succeed, just that competitive yoga is an oxymoron. Yoga is an old Sanskrit word meaning union, union with the divine. That implies partaking of a world where cooperation reigns and competition does not. It speaks of values unifying the two aspects of who we are, the outer and the inner. It addresses how to bring the inner into the outer. For any one with knowledge of the inner-self, of the spiritual world of which it is a part, it is difficult to see how yoga can be made competitive without making it devoid of its spiritual underpinning.

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To Ponder On

"In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."

Albert Camus (1913-1960) French Writer

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