

Day before Christmas 2007.

This afternoon found it very difficult to meditate; but I tried. Instead of a blank mind, there came a long string of strong memories, images, that I got caught up in. Again...

These days are always hard for me. Many, many years ago, a Christmas Eve I can never forget, and each time around this time flashes of it come back unannounced. With a shock, again I saw the dead bodies carelessly thrown outside of the little church. A 12 year old boy, the last flung down, we heard later. The few people left in the church, after the Germans drove away, continued to sing. I don't know what they sang, maybe Silent Night, a German song originally, but of course sung in Dutch. The few people left after the raid and killing, sang softly, with pauses, sometimes a soft scream perhaps.

There were few men on the streets at the time; too dangerous. The Hunger Winter as it became known, the last December of the German occupation. It was women who came the next morning to cover and then move the bodies to that slope where they were gently put down for all to see. The faces uncovered, if the face was recognizable. In the cold I saw an old women, bent over, cradling a head and shoulder of a dead priest, two young girls each carrying a leg.

The five, no six of us, who had watched in the dark from our perch on the edge of the roof, of a three story house, the afternoon of the "midnight mass" that the Germans had allowed. I had never attended a Catholic mass (then in latin), but the church was near. Probably half the people there had never attended a mass. But we needed something to break the dark of the times. The main priest had his arms lifted in prayer, his back to us, when a young man stepped up, facing us, "we have received word that the Germans are on their way to raid this church. All who do not want to be found here, leave now. Immediately." Half of us slipped out in the dark of a late winter afternoon. I saw women closing the open spaces that now looked obviously abandoned. I had not understood the service, but the feeling was warm, there were a few candles. We sought relief from a never ending oppression, the cold, the hunger, and we were with friends even though we did not know anyone.

I lived only a few houses away. After the two of us ran back, we all climbed to the roof. Witnesses of what we heard and. After the soldiers left, we were so stunned that we could not speak. We slunk back into the cold, cold house. We did not dare look at each other, I think. We each sought a corner to hide in.

I was twenty-two, this was the first time I saw an atrocity happening in front of my eyes, I heard the voices. The forlorn singing... If it had not been for that brave young man who warned us... He was the first to be shot, inside the church. It is not a memory. It is a scar on my soul. In a long life there are other scars, of course, different scars. But that one comes back every year.

And then, in my failed meditation, I thought about Christians, how they worship. What they "believe." I grew up in a Muslim country, and knew early the passion Muslims feel in prayer. A simple ritual, easy to understand: wash your hands, feet, and face, kneel, facing Mecca, praise God with your forehead touching the ground. Praise Allah, praise, praise the All. All life, all of us, all of the world, all the animals, all there is. Of course Christians have passion. But different.

Then I remembered something that Muslims used to tell me (I think it is also in the

Koran) that Christians missed the message, because they were tied (I think is the word) to the bringer of the message. Forget the message for the messenger. I think the word is something like the channel, the path, through which the message come from God to Man. The man is not the message we would say. Muslims do not talk much about Muhammad; he is certainly not deified.

I remember the boy who first told me what Islam was all about. I was twelve perhaps, he not quite a year younger. We were "best friends." He said, "Islam is not difficult to understand. It is simple. God is all, and all is God. That is what we believe." My parents had not given me any information about the religions their parents and foreparents had practiced. The year before, they had sent me to a Protestant and also to a Catholic Sunday school, making sure that I could go from one to the other on the same Sunday. All I remember is that the Catholics went on and on about how awful Protestants are, and the Protestants were indignant about how wrong the Catholics were. I think my education lasted no more than two Sundays.

God is all and all is God, was an idea that I could grasp. My friend and I talked the whole afternoon, I remember. I would point to a scruffy dog. "Yes, that is God, too." A plant, a house, a person, the air, sunshine; yes, all of that was God. So, then God is *everything*. "Of course," he said. "Isn't that what I said?"

Maybe, probably, it was on another occasion that I asked whether he believed we had descended from apes. "Did we?" he asked. Yes, that's what I learned in school: scientists look at fossils--those rocks with the imprint of dead animals in it--and they can tell that one turned into the other. "I like apes," he said with a great smile. Yes, I did too. At the time we housed a gibbon at our houses, a creature I much admired. Gibbons are trapeze artists, elegant. To me they looked refined, aristocratic. Our gibbon was affectionate, wrapping his arms around my neck, lags around my hips. But he was definitely not a pet. He knew who he was. If you try to force him to do something he didn't want to do, he let you know. My friend told me he learned a lot about animals from an uncle who lived in the jungle, he said. How animals take care of themselves, and of each other. I told him I liked tigers, and that we had gone to a little zoo -- actually just the house and land of someone who loved animals. People from the villages would bring him orphaned animals. One time they had brought a young tiger; the mother killed by hunters. The owner of the place had told us that when the tiger had first come, they had a sort of wild goat who roamed around. The goat (larger than a western goat) had come right up to the little tiger, who was very unhappy. The goat lay down and took care of the tiger. (Tigers love to eat goats, but this little tiger perhaps did not know that yet). Later--the goat was gone--, when the tiger was grown to maybe the size of a very large dog, or a small pony, our family stopped there on our way back from the harbor one time. I sought out the tiger. I looked at the tiger, his face now on the same level with mine. We looked at each other. I remember talking to him, not voice, but inside. I told him I admired his looks, and his calm, but powerful self-assurance, a kind of pride that shone in his eyes. I felt sure he understood me, and I understood him. Suddenly I felt a hand hard on my shoulder, "That's close enough, young man. That is a tiger, well on the way to being full grown, and he is not tame." I turned around indignantly, to see who was pinching my shoulder, wanting to protest. The hand dug more painfully in my shoulder, "The first rule is never to look away from a tiger." I immediately turned back and apologized to the

tiger, thinking to him that I certainly did not want to offend his dignity, but that the man... But the man pulled me back. The tiger looked as confused as I felt.

Oh yes, religion. I have read the Bible, all through. A strange hodgepodge of stories that did not add up for me, The Ten Commandments, which is perhaps one of the center pieces of the Jewish-Christian branch of faiths, seems lucid and clear by comparison. Thou Shall not Kill: what could be simpler. Too simple for Man, evidently: we ignore that Commandment.

I have read two different English translations of the Koran -- all serious Muslims feel that "the Koran" is so holy that the Arabic cannot be translated. A good translation should be called something other than "the" Koran. That too is a book of stories, and I found it often difficult to find the true messages in them. The stories of the Koran were compiled within years of Muhammad's death; The Bible was compiled three hundred years after the Crucifixion, when Christianity had already split into two or three different versions, with different emphases.

I feel I have always learned more from the behavior and the talk of people, ordinary people, in their daily lives. My mother came from a Mennonite background. She never told me much about the life of Mennonites in the Netherlands, but I learned when I lived there. The utter bare-boned simplicity of their worship and their lives appeals immensely to me. And, as I saw it, their emphasis is on living life as Christ suggested we live with each other, rather than on the horrors of his death, or on "sin," a concept I find difficult to understand. The idea that we are all born in sin seems bizarre. The life of Muslims I have known centers around their passion for Allah, the All that is God. I too feel that, it appeals to my mind and it resonates in my heart, my soul (whatever that is). But then, I have never known "martyrs," who we call suicide bombers, and condemn as terrorists.

I have always wanted to feel, to join in, that passion of Muslim prayer. Praise God, praise Life, praise the All. I wanted to feel such self-erasing passion, but my western self, with such an emphasis on control, intellect, reason, prevented me.

Several times in my life I have made efforts to understand Christians, and Jews, from being with people who lived their faith. Christians think of their faith as monotheism, One God, but there are so many: Jesus, Mary, the Holy Ghost (or Spirit), saints. And I cannot feel a passion for the torture and killing of a man, or for sin. There are a thousand other religions, a few I have studied, lived, experienced. Now, at the end of my life, I have simplified everything, including my beliefs. The bottom line, for me, is that I am part of this earth, the Mystery as some Native Americans call it. I deeply feel the fantastic inter-relatedness of all Life forms and the rocks and air, wind and rain, fire and storms, of this planet. I see, what others call God perhaps, all around and in me. I experience the Oneness. I love plants, trees, animals. And I cannot imagine that "I" is important in this wonder of Oneness. I cannot accept that we, humans, are more important than a frog or a tree.

It disturbs me profoundly that we, homo sapiens, Man, seem to have lost any understanding of that Oneness that is the planetary ecology, the biosphere of which we are born. I see that forgetting as the origin of the wrongness I see all around me today. Friends remind me, and of course I know, that there are wonderful people everywhere, and that they do wonderful things. But I cannot see them without also seeing the immense effect our stupidity and greed are having on the Oneness that is the Planet and

all Life on it. We are attacking, insulting, what some call God, I feel. Through our actions, one hundred and fifty species (that is not individual beings, but a whole class of beings) disappears from the Whole each and every day, that is a loss that cannot be recovered. How dare we? When I see how our greed, our addiction to material things, is changing the face of the planet, I mourn.

Even in this season of Peace on Earth we are waging wars, all over the planet, we are killing, torturing our fellow man. And by "we" I do not mean only Americans, or westerners, or white people, but all people, everywhere. People are starving by the millions, children are dying, many people everywhere are losing their homes, their livelihood, their health. "News" has become the story of politics, where ideas are drowned in words. Our lives seem to be about acquiring things, then throwing them away in order to be able to buy more things. What are we doing to ourselves?

In this country, it seems to me that the fear we are being told we ought to feel has destroyed what I thought was the essence of America, that used to be "hope." Fear is anger, hatred. Hatred is an aspect of fear. We think we hate who or what we fear. Fear what? Ghosts, illusions, what I imagine you did to me? Or what I am told you want to do to me?

The animals I know understand my intention extremely well. If I am irritated, angry, frustrated, when I feed them twice a day, they know. They shy away from my negative feelings. Needless to say I am learning-- not to hide my feelings, but not to have those feelings. I cannot hide from animals. How is it we can hide from each other? I learned early in my life, in my childhood, that the worst that could happen to me is that I would die. And I understood that I would die anyway, so, what is there to fear?

Yes, pain. Torture. I find it repulsive to even think about torture. How can beings deliberately inflict severe pain on a fellow being? Supposedly to wring information out of people. But even a moment's thought makes it clear that if you torture me enough I will confess to anything at all. Surely that is worthless as "information?"

What happened? Where did we go wrong? Because that we are on the wrong path seems altogether evident to me. I KNOW that we, humans, are not hateful, hard, angry, violent, by nature. We learn that ifrom our civilization, through the so-called Media, government propaganda. Why don't we talk to each other? What if we invited a group of Muslims to our homes, lived with them for a while, got to know them and allow them to get to know us. Would we not be able to talk to each other?

But we don't talk. Shock and Awe is what we do. When ground troops need help we send bombs from the air, and obviously we do an awful lot of damage and obviously we kill innocent people. If a hundred and fifty thousand troops cannot do it, send in another twenty--actually it turned out to be thirty--thousand. Build concrete walls. And bribe people to be on our side. Why would we want to impose our ways on other people? I don't get it. I just don't get it.

We call it bringing "democracy" to the "troubled Middle East."

A Middle East that just happens to sit on billions of barrels of the oil that we need to power our destructive so-called civilization. Crazy, insane.

That is who I have become at the end of a rich life: a wonderer. Wondering how, where, we got off on this crazy path. A species that pushes with all its considerable might to destroy the earth we are part of, is insane. Like eating our own flesh, our neighbor's flesh. Can't we see where we are heading? Instead of a healthy bio-diversity, we are creating a planet impoverished, reduced, denuded as the land is here when developers develop. Bare lava rock, flattened horizontal, featureless, , not a tree in sight, not a blade of grass can grow on rock (at least for a long time)..

Can't we see that it is God we are destroying? Can't they see God in the trees that managed to grow on lava, the bushes that grew in the shade of trees, the plants that make soil? The whole process of a live ecology that is based on variety, richness of plant and animal life, large and tiny. Often I think that I would like to show some of those developers what the land could look like, show them the land here, where I live. Thick with hundreds, maybe thousands, of kinds of plants and animals. Tall trees, colorful leaves, flowers. The more variety the healthier it is, That is the truth, I know from experience. Flowerbeds do not work here, nor does a neat garden with straight rows of all the same vegetables: a feast for whatever bug loves that particular vegetable. But if there is one broccoli here, and a tomato plant there, and a tree in between, some bare rock over there--that thrives.

Evidently, developers and buyers do not see trees as alive, a jungle as rich. They see dollars. Do buyers want to live on a rock if, with a little care and attention you can live in a garden? And now half or more of those empty acres, with empty houses on it, stand empty. Poof went the illusionary dollars for which the all too real plants and animals were sacrificed.

I must stop this lament.

Christmas day.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/25/us/25school.html?ex=1199250000&en=4f24c601f455e8fc&ei=5070&emc=eta1>

Quote of the day:

The fact that we don't have anything in common is what we all have in common."

SHELL RAMIREZ, a parent with two children at the International Community School, an eclectic community, well-off and poor, of established local families and new refugees who collectively speak about 50 languages.

Christmas day. This morning very early I read the beautiful story of a school in Georgia started by some insightful people designed to help children of refugees to get to know this land that must be very strange to them. Imagine a child who has never seen letters, who is not used to symbols, scribbles to mean a sound. Imagine a child who has never seen a book, but she has witnessed atrocities that we cannot even imagine. A child who is accustomed to be beaten in school. The wonder of that school is that there are local white and black Americans who understand that it is a great opportunity for their own children to learn something about other people, other cultures. As one of the

men quoted, a veteran from the Gulf war, said: "Instead of my boy having to go off to war to meet foreign people, he can do it here in town."

Many of us know that children are better at cross-cultural communication, and even cross-cultural understanding, than many adults. I know from my own childhood, and from seeing my own children get along without speaking a word of each others' languages. There is more to communication than words.

And I cannot help thinking, Is it not obvious that wars never solve anything, certainly they do not help us understand other people. We must learn to talk to who we call "terrorists." Not war, certainly not torture. To talk we must learn, accept, that we may be different, but not necessarily "better." All humans, everywhere, have always adapted our life styles to the place we found ourselves in. We had to learn what grows, what is food, how to build shelter, how to get something to cover ourselves if is cold. And, above all, we have learned how to live with each other in a village, a family. Sometimes an individual rebels. Maybe individuals can even help the rest of the village to slowly learn something new, a new way to grow things, a new way to live. But it has to grow out of the community. Efforts of neighboring tribes to force their ways on us never worked, and still do not work. Why imagine that "obviously" (to us) our way of organizing the world is the best? Why assume that everybody would want what we call democracy. Is it not obvious that democracy--as we understand it, government by and for "the people"--can only grow from inside, cannot be imposed. Certainly not by people from the other side of the world, who have never learned what the Middle Eastern people know, believe, how they live....

It is good to know that here and there, probably all over the world, there are small groups of people who reach out a hand in friendship. People who want to understand others, rather than just reject them out of hand. I know there are buds everywhere. I hope we have enough time for these buds to blossom.

Have a good new year

robert wolff, © December 2007, on the island called Hawai'i

Henry van Dyke writes: "Are you willing ... to own, that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness ... to make a grave for your ugly thoughts and a garden for your kindly feelings ...? Then you can keep Christmas."

YES.