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From Laramie to Baghdad: Dreams of Peace in a World at War

I am sitting by the railroad tracks at the edge of the historic district of downtown Laramie, Wyoming watching the colors of the evening sky move from steel gray to a lazy pink, spreading a warm if faint glow through the frigid dusk air. Previously, I've known Laramie as two things: 1) a stop on my trips from Iowa to Oregon (as a child) and from California to Iowa (as an adult); and 2) the college home of Matthew Shepherd before he was brutally murdered because he was gay. I make a note to watch *The Laramie Project* when I get home.

There is a footbridge across the tracks and as the light fades, I notice the silhouette of the trestles, the railing, and alone bicyclist. I grab my camera with its black and white film and leave the warmth of my car and Garrison Keillor's breathy monologue about the Passion Play in Lake Wobegon. It has not been a quiet week for my family and me. It has been a painful week, a crazy one for a number of reasons. As my soul soaks in the dreary industrial beauty of the train yard in the fading sunlight, my eye views it through the camera lens. It is the first calming action I have permitted myself in the past three

weeks. As I cross the tracks snapping the shutter, I keep my eyes and ears open for the train that pounds past every 20 minutes or so.

I quit reluctantly only when I run out of film. Back to the car and Keillor.

I'm in Laramie with my husband and our 18-year-old son. Matthew enrolled in a diesel technology program at WyoTech here in Laramie and we are going through the utterly, painfully "normal" motions of many families whose kids are out of high school, moving on to the next stage of life. It feels anything but normal to me. As I mentally monitor each day's events, I watch Matt, his father, and myself cycle through a range of emotions. With the aid of a Laramie city map and phone book, we find our way around town. We scour the Salvation Army, then move on to Big-K and the grocery store buying eating utensils, a pillow, storage containers for his closet, cans of spaghetti-o's, and other assorted necessities for Matthew's first attempt at life on his own.

In a grocery cart of food that is high in carbohydrates (Matthew's choices – I'm staying out of the decision-making process), he also placed a bag of apples. I make a note of that, hoping that if even a small bit of our advice on nutrition paid off, maybe some other attempts to inculcate alternative values have also taken hold.

Earlier in the evening when we picked Matthew up for dinner, he told us that his new roommate informed him that he hates gays and Mexicans although blacks are OK, at least the ones he had contact with. "Then he told me," Matthew continued with a hint of incredulity in his voice, "that he's a Christian, that he was raised in a Christian home. So what is the meaning of that?"

I have no good answer for Matthew. There is no sense, no rationality in this. Here in the town of Matthew Shepherd's death there are many loving people, I am certain. But even the most loving among us might struggle to love outside of the confines of our own circles.

As I settle back into the warmth of my car, my cell phone rings. It is a sound that always makes me uncomfortable. We seldom use it, reserving it for emergencies and for trips. Tonight it sounds particularly dissonant in the evening glow and peacefulness that has enveloped me momentarily. It's one

of my brothers from Iowa. Wendell often calls when I'm on a trip, just checking to see how I'm doing. I can hear immediately that there is more to this call.

"Are you sitting down?" Wendell asks. "Is Doug with you?" Everything around me is dimming as the sunlight edges away and the air turns deep blue. I notice a faint hum in my ears, the sound that comes when I strain to detect an external noise but hear instead only the silence of my head. I notice that the streetlight, with its quaint turn-of-the-century pole and light globe, is beginning to glow against the upward slope of the stairway that leads to the bridge across the tracks. I remind myself to get more film and come back at the same time the next night for more photography. It strikes me as incongruent that I can think of such a mundane thing with all that is going right now.

With Wendell's question, I remember the other difficult aspect of the past three weeks, the part that makes all the activities of settling our son into college life seem incongruently normal, perhaps even a bit obscene. The United States has begun a war in Iraq, a war that is being covered by all the television channels and splashed across the front pages of the newspapers in bold print. Baghdad is getting the hell bombed out of it by our missiles.

I come from a family with a long history of pacifism. My mom and dad's stories of being conscientious objectors during WWII were the stuff of my growing years. If pressed, I can almost repeat them word for word. I am only now beginning to recognize just how those stories, experiences that pre-date my own brief existence, have shaped my life.

With this war, however, things are different. This time I know someone in Baghdad. My oldest brother Weldon is there, not in the military but as one who intends to "wage peace" with as much intensity as our military leaders intend to wage war. I can scarcely watch the images of bombs bursting over this country of the Fertile Crescent. I know someone there and this person, my brother, tells us about the people who live there, people who are crying over their children with war wounds and burying their parents who died in the rubble. In a way, these people have become quite real to me.

I know, even before another word is said, that this call is about Weldon. I have known that with each bomb (bombs that reputedly target only military installations and government buildings) my brother could be a victim along with Iraqi people. It is more than I can bear but that is exactly what Weldon

wanted. If life is anything but normal there in Baghdad, he intended it to become anything but normal for us here at home, too. In ways I barely describe, it has.

So Weldon “walks with Iraqi people” in an attempt to live peace. I alternate between feeling honored and proud that my brother can care so intensely that he’s willing to follow his call and “lay down his life”, and resenting the fact that our family is left at home to worry. It may seem like a small concern compared to the many families whose children (and many of them are barely beyond childhood in my opinion) are part of the military or to the many Iraqi families. That makes our pain no less real although it does provide a bit of perspective.

My parents in their 80s, fasted and prayed much of this week, saying that it’s out of their hands and that they were turning it over to God. Today, despite all their assurances that they were doing alright, they were crying when I talked to them. I can scarcely take the pain of hearing their fear and grief. At the end of my conversation with them, we hung up the phone without the usual, “Goodnight, I love you,” because we could not speak through our tears.

And yes, the call is about him.

“Weldon was in an accident and is in the hospital,” Wendell tells me. “He has numerous broken bones and we’re not sure what all his injuries are. He’s doing OK but that’s all we know.” I can breathe again. In fact, I start to laugh. After all, he’s no longer in Baghdad.

The Christian Peacemaker Team, of which Weldon is part, was expelled from Baghdad. On the road from Baghdad to Amman, Jordan, they were traveling rapidly in order to get through the bombing area as quickly as possible. The car hit some shrapnel, blew a tire and rolled. A doctor in Rutba, Iraq treated them, then sent them on to Amman.

My reaction of laughter is as surreal as everything else seems to be right now. I remember when my college T.A., a guy from England in the University of Iowa’s International Writer’s Workshop, explained surrealism to our Freshman English class. “If you open your oven and find one work boot sitting there on a cake pan – that’s surrealism,” Russell taught us. My laughter is that boot. All I can feel is relief that Weldon is in a hospital in Amman and no longer in Baghdad. I know that my worries are shared and

multiplied many times over by other American and Iraqi families. I know it's true but right now, I'm just happy that my brother, at least, is no longer there.

I've been keeping a journal while Weldon is gone but I have felt reluctant to record mundane activities in a world where people have been torn from their normal daily schedules. Today I write that Laramie is growing on me but that isn't entirely true. I've always been a bit intrigued by this western town although I'd be hard pressed to explain. I am simultaneously repulsed, an equally inexplicable reaction.

I have planned trips so that I could spend short bits of time here. When we moved from Ithaca, New York to California's San Joaquin Valley in August 1998, (a mere two months before Matthew Shepherd died in Laramie) we stayed in this town overnight. We walked around downtown, ate at a vegetarian restaurant, and took in the western ambiance and stunning view of distant mountains. Although I cannot pinpoint the exact locus of my intrigue, it consists of both the history and the location. Tonight I am aware of the flip-side of both the history and the location and it leaves me uneasy, restless. I know that the European settling of the west was not a grand experience for many people, particularly the Native Americans who lived here previously. I also am remembering a trip through this state in 1985, with an African-American friend. We hurried through, not comfortable enough to stop unless the gas gauge demanded it. More recently, there has been the torture of Matthew Shepherd, a young gay man who was bound to a fence and left to die.

I am sure that Laramie does not want to be known as my personal pit stop, as a place where some people are not welcome, or as the location of Matthew Shepherd's horrendous death. It is, as is every place, so much more than any of these things but this, too, is part of our collective reality. And, to be honest, Laramie is not so different from most other U.S. towns, places that have many loving people but also places filled with distrust, anger, and hatred born out of a particular economy and history and people.

Laramie consists of a myriad of people who live ordinary lives together throughout ordinary days in an ordinary town. It is a place of uncommon and barren beauty, a place where snowstorms can close the interstate as late as April and as early as October. (It has happened twice in the five days we've been

here in early April.) And it is a place where people find faith and hope but where they also nourish their anger, their fears, and their hatred.

Here in Laramie farmers and ranchers live beside oil workers and college professors. People wait on tables at local restaurants while others write novels. In this town, there are those people who give their time to protest the war and others who write on their windows and cars that they support the U.S. troops in Iraq. Some volunteer at the Salvation Army and some work with the Sierra Club. They drive Ford F250 trucks and cross country ski. I have seen flyers that tell me there are women in this town who organize "Take Back the Night" rallies. Judging by the incoming class at my son's school, women here also study diesel mechanics at WyoTech. Each one of these people harbors hopes regarding the world in which they live, the future society in which their children will grow up.

Doug and I drive to Matthew's new apartment to take him to dinner again. Over dinner he tells us that he has already learned (in just two days here) that the University of Wyoming students hate the WyoTech students and vice versa. It was one of the first things his new neighbors told him in their orientation for him, sandwiched between telling him who throws good parties and where to buy a cheap DVD player.

Knowing college towns, I had warned Matthew about this yesterday. He laughed and asked if I was trying to tell him that Laramie had gangs made of the technical school kids and college kids. I told him he could laugh at me if he likes, but I understand a thing or two about small college towns and about the human propensity to create a wall between "us and them", keeping away all those who are not like us.

I prefer not to dwell on the part about knowing who the good party-throwers are, so instead I think aloud about the tendency of people to segregate themselves by some unexamined-but-fully-understood system of criteria. Matthew doesn't always respond to what I say these days (although I'm grateful that he's past the eye-rolling stage) but he responds to this particular bit of musing.

"A person alone can be good," he states, "but you put several people together and something almost always goes off the rails."

I tell him that his observation is not entirely new. In 1895, Gustav Lebon published "The Crowd", a sociological study of what happens when people get together. College classes still study this book even

though parts of it are in dispute. Historians, psychologists, and sociologists have long tried to describe and explain the behavior of crowds, mobs, and vigilantes. Crowds, according to LeBon, are always unconscious, intellectually inferior, and unreasonable. However, he adds, a crowd can as easily be heroic as criminal. It depends on “the nature of the suggestion to which the crowd is exposed.”

So I remind Matthew, it is also in groups that people can do their greatest good. They can come together like the Danes did, when they defied Hitler and smuggled Danish Jews out of the country to safety. People come together to build houses for Habitat for Humanity. They have risen up and demanded their right to vote. Together, they can press for an end to war. These are things that an individual cannot do alone. We need groups, need to be part of collective action to get many things done. Hopefully, we find community where “the nature of the suggestion” follows the best of our human impulses.

At some level, I believe that we are all redeemable but this desire to cover Iraq with bomb craters after ten years of sanctions that turned a thriving country into a place that can barely be called “third world”, makes me wonder. Back home in Reedley, California, our peace rallies bring out an opposition crowd that is at times unbelievably, frighteningly angry at our dissent, and this is a country that was supposedly built upon the right of dissent. We have been told to love the country or leave it, admonished to support the troops. We have also been told to “go live in Iraq. You deserve it.” We’ve been called names and given the one-finger salute with all hatred coalescing in that one small body part.

And here in Laramie, university students live at odds with tech school students. Maybe Matthew is right. I make a mental note that Matthew is more of a loner than a joiner and for one time, I hope that this tendency will pay off. I want to tell him about our study of Walter Wink’s book *The Powers That Be* but I can see that for now, that will be pushing it. He has already turned off his desire to listen to another one of my points. Perhaps another time.

While the three of us eat, it starts to snow and blow so hard that for twenty minutes, we can barely see across the street. Once again, we hear that Interstate 80 is closed between Laramie and Cheyenne, a road that rises from Laramie’s altitude of 7200 feet to cross a pass and level off east toward Cheyenne.

CNN informs us that south of Baghdad, the wind is blowing the sand, obscuring the view and slowing the troops.

Doug and I leave Matt with his roommates and go get a cup of hot tea at a downtown Laramie coffeehouse before heading to Motel 6 out by the Interstate 80. Sitting there I try to put words to the nagging thoughts that plague me. Our family (Doug, our two children, myself) firmly straddles two separate socio-economic segments of society and I wonder whether it is possible to bridge a gap that I can scarcely find the words to describe.

Our kids arrived in our home and in our hearts when they were partly grown. They had already seen a side of life that entailed more violence and pain than I can allow myself to even imagine. And, equally important, they have seen life from the viewpoint of a different social strata. As they get older, these differences are played out in many ways each day of our lives. Some days the differences make no difference to any of us, but many days they matter.

The complexity of our family merely mirrors the enormous complexities and the deep divides of our society. These few days in Laramie have pointed this out to me with a renewed clarity. Beyond an uncomfortable awareness, however, I realize that it is, at least in part, integrally connected with the U.S. presence in and war on Iraq. I also have a sinking feeling that the divide is hopelessly insurmountable. I hope that's not true but my gut tells me a different tale.

Are we, I wonder aloud to Doug, doomed to a world of divisions that, on the one hand, appear to be superficial and, on the other hand, permeate the very fiber of our society. These divisions define, describe, and proscribe. They shape our beliefs, our view of the way the world works, our relationship to each neighbor, and, ultimately, what we choose to believe about our presence in Iraq. How can we (or indeed, *can* we) hear or see each other through the mists of our reality? Much of our language contains phrases specific to our own group, our ideals do not coincide, and we have a difficulties moving outside of our own daily certainties. So where does that leave us? How can we communicate across these divides? I believe its possible but I'm not always sure how it can be done.

I think then of Rusty, the man who came to the candlelight vigil for peace in Iraq that we hold weekly in the park of our small California valley town. Rusty spoke up during the vigil. "I came here," he told us, "to join the [the counter-protesters] at the other end of the park. I came to show support for the troops and to tell you that you are wrong. But I looked at the two groups standing at opposite ends of the park and I decided to join your circle. I do that, not because I agree with your theology or your politics but because I believe in your right to be here. This is what our flag stands for." Many days, I long for hope and often I find that hope surprises me, as it did that night when Rusty spoke.

Now, in Laramie, I look around the coffee house at the posters on the message board and under the order counter. "Not in our Name" declares one flyer. That sentiment is echoed on the "No Parking" sign outside the front door where a "NO WAR" sticker almost obliterates the "No Parking". The décor inside is remarkably similar to that of a coffee house on Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue or in Takoma Park, Maryland. There are some black and white art photos of local scenes by a local photographer, an old television set from about 1970 with a sticker plastered across the screen reading "Kill your TV", and a pile of vintage *Life* magazines to browse through. The sounds, the conversations that we can overhear, the clothing, and even the smells are all familiar. If I stood up and began a diatribe about our current president or our policy on Iraq, I could be assured that most people would nod, maybe even applaud.

And yet if I went to buy a drink just a few blocks away, I would have to order an American beer and sit under a flag with a notice that "these colors don't run". There I would be afraid to get into a political discussion and, more to the point, I would be out of my personal zone of comfort. So I stick to my coffee house atmosphere, which keeps me warm and where I know what is acceptable and what is not and where I am clear just how much I would be willing/able to risk there. And this place, due to various circumstances, would be uncomfortable for my children.

Matthew's roommate has already told me that where he comes from the women stay in the house and the kitchen. I questioned him cautiously, inquiring whether anyone asks the women what *they* want. Matthew is uncomfortable with Josh's statement but doesn't want me to voice my objections too loudly either. "I have to live with him, Mom," he implores when we get outside. "Please don't make it hard for me." I remind him that Josh's viewpoints on women and Mexicans (as he puts it) make it difficult

for others to live. Matthew recognizes the divisions in society, as I do, but we each struggle to find appropriate and compassionate ways to respond.

I believe that a well-placed question can do more than any sermon although it would be easier to lecture. In reality, however, the questions seem feeble and are usually misunderstood or ignored. Real and deep understanding, it seems, happens infrequently and in slivers that are far too small. And that is in the best of times, when communication happens at all. As I look at the posters and feel the ambiance here in this place, I recognize in that split second that the pro-war/anti-war sentiments run at such a buried and subconscious level that we may never find ways to approach each other in these differences.

I am sitting in my room at Motel 6. It's 3 a.m. and I cannot sleep. My effort to clarify any of this for myself has only left me with a heartfelt sadness and a deep-rooted worry. I send out a prayer for hope and faith and peace; for Weldon's healing; for the young people in our military and their families; and for the people of Iraq who are beaten by their own leader, by ten years of U.S. sanctions, and now by our bombs. I begin to write by the street light that shines through the window. Despite my efforts, Doug awakens, disturbed by my need for a sliver of light. He turns on the television and I write with CNN babbling in the background.

It seems like it should be simpler than we make it but we live in such complexity. Our history and our theology and our mythology have created the stories by which we live. I live by the stories of conscientious objection, others by stories of lives given for freedom. I wonder if the reporters and the anchor people realize how they are part of perpetuating the myths that persist in our society. They say that they are doing their job as objectively as possible but my ears pick up phrases that get repeated over and over. These phrases seem meaningless to me, but they hold great importance to others.

We seldom watch TV news at home and don't get cable so I'm glad for the chance to hear CNN reports if only to know what news most people hear about the war in Iraq. Right now, at this early morning hour, the reporter is talking about the terrorist-style of fighting by the Iraqi soldiers and how horrible and uncivilized it is. The scrolling marquee at the bottom of the screen reports that the Pentagon says that the war is going as planned, right on schedule. Then it asks the viewers, "How long do you think

the war will last? Cast your vote at www.cnn.com." I find it strange (once again a bit surreal), that they talk about being uncivilized when at the same time they conduct a straw poll on the length of the war.

A lone voice among the interviewees asks why we are surprised and outraged at guerrilla tactics. Whenever they talk about the loss of civilian lives, the phrase gets tossed around, "This is war, what do we expect?" Guerrilla tactics are also part of wars, part of the tactics of countries under siege, and yet they don't accept that explanation at this time. CNN shows the rallies around the world, rallies in favor and rallies against. They talk about "hearts and minds", echoing WHAM from the Vietnam days.

In the many conversations among my brothers and sisters in the past several weeks, the question has been raised of what possible good can come from Weldon's presence in Baghdad. "How can this help the Iraqi people? It doesn't save them from our bombs." Someone else wants to know why Weldon wasn't there, caring for and walking with Iraqis during the Iran-Iraq conflict. "Why now?" she asks. We find a general consensus on one point, that we don't get truth from our own government. Someone poses the question regarding how we know that the stories coming from other sources (for example, from other world media or from Christian Peacemaker Teams) are true. How do we ever know what or who to believe?

My fears run high as the reality of the war comes to me through Weldon's eyes, through my knowledge that he is there. As the bombs drop and fires engulf Baghdad, my brother will no longer be in danger, but someone else's brother will be hurt. Along with all this thought comes a range of responses. I move from questions to anger, disbelief, worry and tears. I move into and out of moments of quiet reflection, prayer and a deep-rooted pride that one of us cares so much. And all these emotions can come within the space of a few minutes. It feels vulgar, oblivious, crude to continue doing my quotidian tasks. While doing these things, I pray that the lives of Iraqis may return to normal soon too.

Initially, I tried to share Weldon's story but found it difficult. Reactions seem to be at one extreme or another and neither extreme fits anything I know or feel right now. I detect notes of condescension in some responses, tones that convey a belief that Weldon is naïve for doing what he is doing. Others find his sacrifice to be so noble. I am furious with both types of responses. The circle of my anger spreads to include Weldon and the organization of which he is part. I am upset with those who

cannot understand, but I'm also unable to speak about it with people who *do* understand. The resulting loneliness is excruciatingly painful, beyond anything I've ever experienced.

Most of my reactions seem to make little sense and that realization also fills me with tears and with a desire to throw a chair through the window. In a way, none of us seem capable of dealing with the complexities even when we recognize them. I want to hide from everyone. As I watch television shots of refugees walking down Iraqi roads with their children I wonder if any of us can ever really understand without being there, as Weldon is, and seeing for ourselves.

My thoughts have become an incessant and obnoxious staccato in the midst of CNN's reports, my own thoughts, and my memory of slogans chanted in recent days and years. Only ten dead so far. Human shields for Saddam. War is not the answer. Love it or leave it. Go live in Iraq. No blood for oil. Support the troops. Killing for peace is like fucking for virginity. Freedom isn't free. God bless America. God bless the Iraqis. The price of freedom is written in blood. A kinder and gentler nation. A thousand points of light. We DO support the troops – we want them home.

It builds to a crescendo, a cacophony of meaningless words. I don't expect to sleep tonight.

I could stop here but as my family will attest, I can sermonize pretty well when I get started. Except that this time, I have no answers.

There is a brutality in our world that needs to change and we barely know how to begin. Its not just what we're doing in Iraq. At our core, we all feel some of the helplessness and powerlessness that fuels cruelty. Change can only begin if we are willing to walk in the pain, accept the ambiguities, and lay down the fears that make each one of the six billion of us rage at times. Unfortunately, we cannot or do not readily lay down our fears. It is fear that keeps us from seeing the humanity and witnessing the fear in others rather than understanding that we each, in our own way, are searching for hope. It is this story, the story of our fears and hopes, which led Weldon to Baghdad. Behind my own fear and anger, I see and believe in Weldon's intention and purpose.

You see, ultimately I believe that the Iraqi doctor who treated Weldon's wounds that afternoon in Rutba, Iraq is right. When Weldon and the CPT team thanked the doctor for caring for them even

though his clinic was short on medical supplies, he waved away their thanks saying, "Its ok. We're all part of the same family."

But this family has so many differences. Our cultures vary. Our beliefs differ. We are born into many different towns and families and societies and races. We fear and dream in similar ways and yet so differently. We only know that life cannot go on in the same way once we have known the pain, shared the anguish. But we also know that they are Not Us and there are some things that we will never share. With that knowledge, we walk along, at times in fear and anguish, at times in hope and love.

We want things to fit but they don't. We want answers to be simple and they aren't. We desire coherence when dissonance and ambiguity rule the day. We run from loneliness. We try to eat our way out of sorrow. We look for answers in a myriad of places. We declare this God or that one to be the right one and we cling to the claim that god is on *our* side. We are sure that our answers will cure, will solve problems if only people will listen. When the world doesn't offer or accept answers, when we struggle to feed our children, when the world beats us down, when the war begins, when society refuses to hear our concerns, when any of those things happen, we look instead for the certainties of a religion, a flag, a country, or an ideology.

Most important, however, we *all* look for that certainty, even as we discard old ways of living and systems of belief. When we look closely enough, we see that we too have patched together a system of beliefs based on our own circumstances and history. We have our blind spots. We deliberately omit those things that we deem irrelevant. We strive to make our way in a frightening world.

Life is messy and full of pain but in that chaos and uncertainty resides a faint glimpse of hope. I am grateful for people like Rusty or Weldon who have, in one way or another, moved beyond their personal zones of comfort, embraced the mess, walked in hard places. And maybe my own part (for now) is simply this: that I look for the ways to embrace the pain and step out of my small circle of comfort.

It won't be easy, but then, why should I expect that it would be.