From Mystic Voice to Activist Voice

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MYSTICISM

I'm not sure what a mystical experience is. If it is understood to refer to a deity with the characteristics of a human being – who hears, sees, judges, grieves, or takes corrective action – I have not experienced that.

Perhaps I have had experiences one might term "mystical" but they have had little to do with "voice." They have tended to be framed not by speaking but by listening. For three years in our twenties, from 1954 to 1957, Alice and I lived in the Macedonia Cooperative Community in the hills of northeast Georgia. Macedonia was what was later called a "commune." At the time we thought of it as an "intentional community."

The years at Macedonia were, for us, what Catholics term a period of "formation."

Maybe it was mystical when, most mornings, I got up at 5 a.m. to do the morning milking. The community was located in a bowl of hills. As the cows heaved themselves to their feet, and formed in single file to trek toward the barn, often the sun would appear over the dark line of hills. Everything I could see seemed part of a good way of life we were creating together.

One day my mystical experience with cows took a different form. Some visitors had talked to us about the laughing Buddha. I made my way somehow to the Atlanta public library and took out a collection of Buddhist writings, edited by Professor Daisetz Suzuki. It was winter, and the little twigs on the trees were encased in ice. As the cows led me back to pasture after they were milked, I trailed behind, thinking weighty thoughts. Suddenly I stopped. There on the path, just ahead of me, was a newborn calf.

What may have come closest to a mystical experience at Macedonia had to do with our group meetings. Initially we were a group of about a dozen adults. None of us, at that time, were Quakers but we sought consensus in what can fairly be called gathered meetings.

At the home of one family we often sat around a fire. After a person spoke there would be a silence. You heard the logs pop and sizzle, and begin to settle as they burned through. Then a few more words, and another silence.

Outside the home of another family, after a meeting we would hold hands in a circle and sing: "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us/Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us/Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us."

I have a vivid memory of singing the same song with Clarence Jordan on the grass at Koinonia Farms in southwest Georgia. He sang ". . . fall afresh on **me**," and was intrigued that we had substituted "us." I think this was going on all over the South in the 1950s and 1960s. As a Movement began to emerge, gospel songs about what would happen to "I" began to be replaced by songs about "we."

It seems to me that the fundamental mystical proposition of Quakerism is the notion that spiritual truth makes itself known through a horizontal process like that which we experienced at Macedonia. Except in the case of certain latter-day prophets – such as Martin Luther King and Pope Francis – truth does not arrive through a minister or pastor, still less through successively higher levels of vertical religious authority. In the experience of Friends, we must seek truth and enlightenment through a circle of seekers who have no way of knowing in advance through whom the Spirit will make itself heard on a particular occasion.

ACTIVISM

Alice and I moved to the Youngstown, Ohio area in 1976. We became lawyers for the federal program called Legal Services that provides representation in civil cases to persons who cannot afford to retain a private attorney. Soon after admission to the bar I served as lead counsel for plaintiffs who included several dozen individual steelworkers, four local unions, and our Republican Congressman, in a suit that sought, unsuccessfully, to reverse U.S. Steel's decision to close all its local steelmaking facilities.

In 1996, we retired from Legal Services. At roughly the same time the powers that be in Youngstown began to substitute prisons for the steel mills that had shut down. When the Mayor of Youngstown learned that Ohio would build its first super maximum security prison in Youngstown, he told the media that the city had hit a home run.

Staff members of the American Friends Service Committee asked Alice and myself to monitor conditions of confinement at the new prison. We had never practiced criminal law. Supermax prisons were sprouting all over the country, like poisonous mushrooms, but they had existed for only about twenty years. Alice invited members of the anti-war and pro-labor groups in the area, such as they were, to join the two of us in exploring the question: What is a supermax prison?

We held a public forum at a small church within sight of the cranes that were building the new supermax. We invited (among others) Jackie Bowers, the sister of a man who had been sentenced to death for his alleged role in helping to lead an eleven-day uprising at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, Ohio in 1993.

When the supermax opened in 1998, Jackie's imprisoned brother, George Skatzes, was transferred there. Alice and I arranged to visit him. It was the first visit to a prisoner at the supermax. George sat in a compartment separated from us by a sheet of some heavy transparent material. A guard sat outside the locked door on the other side of his cubicle. He was handcuffed behind his back for the duration of our visit.

Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew instructs us that we are to "come unto" those who are imprisoned. In Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Luke we find an account of what happened when Jesus arose in the synagogue at Nazareth "where he had been brought up," and read aloud to those assembled the words of Isaiah Chapter 61: "the Lord hath anointed me . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound."

The prison is to be opened not just for those who are innocent, nor only for those who have completed their sentences, but for all those who are "captives," for all those "that are bound." Jesus is calling for the release of all prisoners. He is demanding the abolition of prisons. No wonder that when he finished speaking, those who heard him were, according to the King James version, "filled with wrath" and sought to throw Jesus headlong from a high hill at the city limits.

Of course he also opposed the death penalty. In John 8, Jesus confronted those who had gathered to stone to death a woman caught in the act of adultery. He said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." The lynch mob slunk away.

Quakers have a special calling in this regard. Early Friends spent a great deal of time in prison themselves. Some were put to death. Margaret Fell spent time in prison as a volunteer and is said to have stood beside young men on the scaffold as they were about to be hanged. What she acted out was more than advocacy, and more than organizing. It was what Archbishop Oscar Romero called "accompaniment": walking beside others who faced a terrifying future.

Before patting ourselves on our collective backs too readily, we should recall that Quakers also invented the penitentiary. To be sure, it was apparently proposed as an alternative to public practices

like confinement in the stocks, whipping, or branding. But the penitentiary imposed solitary confinement. Prisoners were forbidden even to speak to each other.

This false start is not a thing of the past. The essence of a supermax prison is confinement alone in your cell for twenty-three or more hours a day.

What Alice and I have experienced as lawyers for supermax prisoners, and as teachers at another, less restrictive prison in the Youngstown area, is the possibility of using time behind bars as a period of spiritual retreat and community formation.

Of course, prison will never be only that. At the Trumbull Correctional Institution, most prisoners are said to belong to gangs. One of the gangs calls itself the Heartless Felons.

I wish I knew how to convey the contrasting experience of our so-called honors class. The chairs are in a circle. However the conversation is begun, before long on a good day Alice and I are listening as the men talk with each other. They do so much as we did at Macedonia, listening before speaking, showing each other the respect that society has denied to those it considers "the worst of the worst."

II

You may be feeling, you should be feeling, that I have not yet addressed the issue of economic inequality that the Occupy movement forced into the national conversation. Pope Francis has stated with passion that until there is economic equality it will be impossible to put an end to violence. Dr. King, in his last years, said much the same thing. In his April 1967 speech coming out against the Vietnam war, Dr. King declared:

> We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

I agree. I have been some sort of socialist since I was fifteen, seventy years ago. I am presently excited by the possibility that workers as seemingly different as adjunct college teachers and Starbucks *barristas* might discover that they face very similar challenges at work, such as insultingly low pay and arbitrary scheduling.

But Alice properly reminds me that until the coalition of my dreams begins to become a reality, it is not yet time to say more about it.

III

Let me therefore say something more about how we can create what the Zapatistas call *un otro mundo,* another world. To begin with I shall draw on the Lynds' twenty years' experience with prisoners. Then I shall attempt to show that this approach may have some realistic hope for success even among soldiers.

Efforts to bring about fundamental social change must expect to confront the violence of local vigilantes and, ultimately, the armed forces of state and national governments.

Prison insurrections at Attica in 1971, Santa Fe in 1980, and Lucasville, Ohio in 1993 did not achieve change commensurate with the number of lives lost. Beginning in 2011 prisoners in the United States launched a new strategy: nonviolent direct action accompanied by wide-ranging litigation in

support. It is noteworthy that this same combination of tactics characterized Dr. King's most successful campaigns. In Montgomery, the policy of segregated seating was abandoned after an economic boycott that lasted for many months followed by a favorable federal court decision. In Selma, Dr. King delayed the march until a federal court assured the would-be marchers of injunctive support.

In January 2011, three men condemned to death housed at the Ohio supermax in Youngstown began a hunger strike. Hunger strikes anywhere in the United States had almost always failed. At the Ohio State Penitentiary, however, after about a week and a half the warden signed an agreement with the inmates. What was achieved might have seemed trivial to an outsider but for the prisoners it was a very great deal, leading to the opportunity for contact visits with relatives.

Prisoners at Pelican Bay in northern California, a prototype of supermax prisons in the United States, launched a much larger hunger strike in early summer. The core group was primarily Hispanic, but with significant African American and white participation. They were held in solitary but in the same so-called "short corridor." The ideological impetus for the action was attributed by a participant to Tom Paine, Howard Zinn, Irish hunger striker Bobby Sands, the Mayan calendar, and the success in Youngstown. The essential demand was for an end to the indefinite solitary confinement that for some of those involved had lasted more than twenty years.

The strikers suspended the strike after several weeks on the basis of promises from the authorities, then resumed it in September and October. There was dissatisfaction with what had been accomplished. A year and a half later, in 2013, a new hunger strike was launched that lasted about sixty days, more or less the limit of what even a young hunger striker can endure without risking serious organ damage or death.

This time, however, when the prisoners ended their strike they could point to a class action law suit by the Center for Constitutional Rights. Preliminary rulings have been hopeful. Trial is scheduled for this coming December.

I believe passionately that in such situations it is both wrong and self-defeating to consider policemen, prison guards, or soldiers as enemies. In the late 1960s I publicly condemned calling police officers "pigs." My attitude was and is that ways must be found to appeal to the hearts and life circumstances of the armed agents of the state, to ask that they refuse to use their weapons against us, to call on them, in words we often used in the 1960s, to "join us." When Alice and I go to the Youngstown supermax to visit a prisoner, we occasionally meet a man or woman in uniform who says to us, "Remember me? I used to work in the mill or drive a truck, and I was your client. This is the only job I could find."

But is there any realistic hope of a nonviolent approach succeeding with soldiers? The news from Afghanistan and Iraq, as before that from Vietnam, and from the offices of dedicated doctors who confront what has come to be called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, is the following.

It is common knowledge that in the late 1960s and early 1970s American servicemen in Vietnam stopped fighting what they had come to see as a meaningless and futile war. They refused what they perceived to be suicidal night patrols. They declined to go out on assignments that predictably would be ambushed so that the United States Air Force could know where to drop bombs. In short, there was widespread mutiny.

The Pentagon diagnosed this problem as the war weariness of a conscripted army, as the mutiny of men who had been drafted. The draft was done away with. Henceforth, the military of our country would consist of volunteers. Surely, those in authority assumed, men and women who chose to run the risks of military combat would not refuse to fight.

Guess what? The incidence of symptoms associated with PTSD seems not to have decreased in the volunteer army, especially among those subjected to repeated deployments. Just as was the case in an army of conscripts, suicides are disproportionate when compared with the suicide rate among

civilians. Indeed, in an army made up of volunteers there may be added bitterness because of a sense that what they had been promised or led to expect has been betrayed. What the evidence suggests is that most of those who refuse to fight do so not, primarily, because they regularly went to church or heard the Bible read as children, but because of what they experience in basic training or in combat.

Dr. Jonathan Shay, a Boston psychiatrist who has listened to the anguish of a great many veterans, has proposed a term to describe severe chronic post-traumatic stress disorder of a particular kind. About a third of Vietnam veterans experience PTSD. A smaller number are afflicted by what Dr. Shay sometimes calls "complex PTSD." For this aggravated form of stress he also proposes a term that Alice and I find to be rapidly gathering adherents: "moral injury."

The symptoms of ordinary PTSD are somewhat familiar to the general public. The veteran struggling with that mental state is fearful. If a car backfires, he may throw himself to the ground. If he eats at a restaurant, he will likely insist on a location permitting him to sit with his back to a wall and a good view of patrons moving in and out.

Those who suffer moral injury, in contrast, are not so much concerned with present danger as they are haunted by what they did, or saw, or failed to prevent, in the past, and the shadow the past casts over any conceivable future. Camilo Mejia remembers an occasion when he and others posted on a rooftop saw an Iraqi adolescent apparently preparing to throw a grenade. They fired. The boy fell dead. Mejia still wonders whether it was one of his bullets that hit the boy and, if so, whether it was fatal. He also recalls that the boy was so far away from the American soldiers that the grenade could not possibly have harmed them. Mejia failed to return from a break between deployments, and served a prison term when his application for conscientious objector status was rejected.

Dr. Shay, in his first book published in 1994, finds an additional element in the narratives of troubled veterans. It is "the moral world of the soldier...and the betrayal of that moral order by a commander." He illustrates what he means by the following story.

A reconnaissance patrol in Vietnam identified three boats that were unloading on the shore of a bay at night. "The word came down [that] they were unloading weapons. And we opened up on them . . . . It seemed like no one ever ran out of ammo." Then, "Daylight came. [Long pause.] We found out that we killed a lot of fishermen and kids."

Let me offer one last piece of evidence in support of the proposition that volunteer soldiers can say No to further military service. It has to do with drones.

In the course of writing up her discoveries about moral injury, Alice came upon the story of a drone operator named Brandon Bryant.

Bryant was based in New Mexico. His attention was directed to a flat-roofed house made of mud, with a shed used to hold goats. Over a period of days he witnessed two men going in and out of the house and the shed.

He received an order to fire, pressed a button with his left hand and marked the roof of the hut with a laser. The pilot sitting next to him pressed the trigger on a control column, causing the drone to launch a Hellfire missile.

With seven seconds until impact there was no one to be seen on the ground. Bryant could still have diverted the missile at that moment. Then it came down to three seconds. Diversion was no longer possible.

Suddenly a child walked around the corner of the hut. There was a flash on the screen. Part of the building had collapsed. The child had disappeared.

Bryant turned to the man sitting next to him and asked, "Did we just kill a kid?" Together they wrote into a chat window on the monitor, "Was that a kid?"

Someone they didn't know, who had observed the attack on a screen in another location, answered, "No, that was a dog."

Brandon Bryant and his colleague reviewed the scene on video. They asked each other, “A dog on two legs?”

Doctors at the Veterans’ Administration diagnosed Bryant with PTSD. He isn’t with the Air Force any more.

Bryant is not alone. On June 23, 2015, forty-four veterans released a statement urging United States drone operators to “refuse to play any role in drone assassination [and] surveillance missions.”

The forty-four signers include U.S. Army Colonel Ann Wright, who resigned from her State Department post in 2003 over the U.S. invasion of Iraq; former Marine Captain Matthew Hoh, who resigned his State Department post in Afghanistan in protest over U.S. strategic goals and policies there; former U.S. Army Captain and CIA official Ray McGovern; former U.S. Navy Lieutenant Barry Ladendorf, president of Veterans for Peace; and former U.S. Army Sergeants Aaron Hughes and Maggie Martin, co-directors of Iraq Veterans Against the War.

The statement says in part that refusal to participate in drone missions is in accord with Principle IV of the Nuremburg Tribunal:

> The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him of responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible.

Nick Mottern, coordinator of KnowDrones.com, added that the letter asks drone personnel to abandon activity which is “wracking their own ranks with moral injury and PTSD.”

Besides issuing its mission statement, the campaign has aired fifteen-second commercials near drone intelligence and control centers in Las Vegas, northern California, and upstate New York near Syracuse and Niagara Falls.

Especially moving to me is the fact that the forty-four signers of the statement include thirty-two veterans of Vietnam and twelve of Iraq and Afghanistan.

IV

When we experience moral injury, what is the part of ourselves that is offended? Whence comes the sense of right and wrong to men and women who may never have gone to church, for whom the Bible is an unknown source of authority, whose young lives may have been passed in an atmosphere saturated with violence?

The authors of another book on the psychic effects of military service have a name for the place where a sense of right and wrong originates. Their book is called *Soul Repair*.

Soul? We Quakers claim some knowledge of that entity. We call it an “inner light.” The theistic among us say it is “that of God in every person.” Note, please, “every person,” including policemen, prison guards, and soldiers..

The inner light is why we must oppose not only the death penalty but also life without parole. Human beings can change. There is something in all of us that we can never give up on.

Here, also, is the place where mystic and activist voices can come together. Above the platform of the Ethical Culture School that I attended from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade were the words: “The place where we meet to seek the highest is holy ground.” Approaching activism in this spirit of modest mysticism, many “ways will open.”