

## **Worship and Action Letter, 9/9/04**

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Sometimes events seem to occur with such rapidity and ferocity as to challenge our ability to synthesize and integrate all that is happening. The past two weeks have been filled with both affirming experiences and difficult developments; and the pace of our encounters with public openings seems to be still quickening.

In this light, we want to sit today with some reflections on recent events even as we plan our next steps.

### **EYES WIDE OPEN – THE HUMAN COST OF WAR IN IRAQ**

On August 28, the American Friends Service Committee's "Eyes Wide Open" exhibit arrived in New York City. The exhibit highlights the human costs of the Iraq War through the display of pairs of empty combat boots tagged with the names of U.S. soldiers who died in the Iraq war – which had risen to almost 1,000 by the end of the exhibit on Labor Day, September 6th – and a 24-foot "wall" of names and incidents identifying Iraqi civilian deaths (now known to exceed 16,000 persons). In connection with the Exhibit in Central Park on August 28, a press conference was hosted by Elizabeth Enloe, Director of AFSC's New York Metro Region Office. Linda Chidsey, Clerk of New York Yearly Meeting, participated in the press conference and offered this meditation on the Exhibit and Friends' perspective on war and peacemaking:

I am acutely aware of the use of faith language in these times to advance a political agenda, so it's with care that I share the Quaker perspective on war and peacemaking.

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is one of the historic peace churches. This means that as a community of faith, we do not support the use of violence to resolve conflict. Many hear the word "pacifist" and think "passivity" or the unwillingness to take a stand. I once heard someone in a high office say, "I wish I were a pacifist, it would be so easy". Not so. Peacemaking is an extremely strenuous endeavor.

The desire for peace lies deep in the human heart; we can feel it here today as we view these empty combat boots and read the names on the wall. As pacifists or peacemakers, we want to pay attention to that longing for peace at the same time we engage the faculties of the mind.

We need to look at these boots, this wall, and ask ourselves, "Is this truly what we want – for ourselves, our children, our

grandchildren?” Is there really no other way? As peacemakers, we say, “Yes, there is another way”. And we can point to instances where a non-violent approach to extremely complex situations has been effective.

Rather than continuing to study war, we need to study peace in a far more rigorous fashion. As Friends, we take seriously the biblical injunctions to “love your enemy” and to “resist not evil with evil”. These are touchstones for the pacifist.

So what does this mean? It means having the courage to walk into, what for many, is new territory. It entails studying and recounting stories of successful peacemaking – stories left out of the more popular, “culture-of-war” anthology. It means experimenting with new methods and adapting time-tested methods to new situations. It means acknowledging our deep connectedness, even as we confront real differences. In short, it’s an invitation to inhabit a “new city” where, instead of acting out of fear, we act out of informed and responsible love.

### **NEW YORK CITY GATHERINGS THE WEEK OF AUGUST 29**

The week commencing Sunday, August 29, saw New York City awash with actions for peace and with Republican conventioners. Many Friends joined with friends in spirit for the massive march for peace on Sunday; and to line streets of Manhattan on Tuesday evening, August 31, to light up the sky with flashlights for the Ring of Hope; and to visit and help with the Eyes Wide Open Exhibit and the Boston-to-New York Stonewalk. On Tuesday evening, one Friend, John ElFrank-Dana (an attender at 15th Street Meeting), got caught up in a collision between demonstrators and police while on his way to 15th Street Meeting to work in its homeless shelter. He was arrested with the demonstrators, taken to the makeshift prison at Pier 57 and later to the city jail, and held for over 40 hours with the other approximately 1200 persons arrested during the week until his release on late Thursday afternoon after being fingerprinted, photographed and appearing in court. Here is a part of his reflections on the experience:

The experience only strengthened my resolve .... I could feel that the cops were being ordered from on high to clear the streets in time for Bush to get into town. (If that’s not acknowledging the power of the demonstrators I don’t know what is.) As we were cuffed and put into police wagons it was heartening to see hundreds of neighborhood people across the street in Union Square chanting “Let them go!”, “Let them go!” Most of these people did not look like demonstrators but people coming home from work.... The people I met while incarcerated (including two Quakers and a Catholic Worker) and whom I shared cells with,

sang with, clapped hands with, demanded with, played soccer using paper cups with, and discussed politics and spirituality with, were totally inspiring. They were young and old - artists, students, workers, teachers, and lawyers, in all shapes, sizes and colors.... We were covered in grease and grime from head to toe. We smelled as you would expect. However, everyone's inner beauty shined right through it all.... I met bystanders who weren't political but were just swept in who said this event opened their eyes and ignited their spirits to now get involved.

One young demonstrator at the Pier prison (Gitmo North I called it) took the paper cups given us and tore them up into fragments and carefully laid them out across the concrete floor of our makeshift prison. It read - "The spirit has no cage." Another group took the miniature cereal boxes thrown at us from over the fence (like it was feeding time in Mogadishu) to create an enormous peace sign with the words "Peace" and "Freedom" on its seal.

For those who snicker at, as they see it, the "naïve altruism" of the demonstrators, I have no doubt many of them would have "seen the light", as the others have, if they were in our shoes. Indeed, the inner light has no cage.

### **THE 1,000TH SOLDIER KILLED IN IRAQ**

This week saw continued violence throughout Iraq and so the inevitable continuing deaths and maiming of US (and other nations') soldiers and of Iraqi fighters and bystanders.

Tom Rothschild (Brooklyn Friends Meeting) commends to our attention thoughts of David Batstone, a weekly columnist for Sojourners online magazine ([www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net)). From a hospital room where he and his wife are attending to the care of their ill 11-year-old son, David Batstone writes of how news of the death of the 1,000th US soldier broke through his "self-imposed bubble" of private space "precisely because I am attuned to how much a father feels the suffering of his son":

My thoughts immediately went to the parents of those young (in most cases) men and women who lost their lives. I am sure that those parents feel proud for the sacrifice and bravery that their children demonstrated, putting themselves in harm's way in service for their country. I am equally sure that those parents feel unspeakable grief once the phone call came that their beloved one would not be returning home.

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Modern warfare ceases to be war once it becomes personal.... As a father, the campaign trail leaves me cold. The presidential candidates trip over themselves to convince me that they are more warrior than the other.... For my part, I want to hear how the candidate will be a peacemaker. How will they contribute to a lasting peace in Israel and Palestine? How will they stop the violence in Sudan? How will they end the hostility that pushes us toward a clash of civilizations, Christian vs. Muslim? How will they build bridges that terrorists will not aim to blow up?

I take peace personally; I do not want to see my children grow up with the imminent fear of a terrorist attack. I wish the next president of the United States would take war - and peace - personally too.

David Batstone's complete essay can be read online at [www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=sojomail.display&issue=040908#3](http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=sojomail.display&issue=040908#3)

Anita Paul (Schenectady Friends Meeting), who lives in Scotia, New York, shares her witness of public weeping for the deaths in Iraq:

**How do I show you a thousand?** How do I show you one thousand dead Americans. If I outlined them on the street next to my house, 6 across, 2 feet apart, they would stretch a quarter mile. Surely I would be arrested before I completed that task. How to show you one thousand? Certainly our leaders find these deaths unremarkable, un-remark-able, as they speak of 'sacrifices' but not of 'Jason and Keith and Cheryl', leaving the dead unnamed. Where would you look in the Gazette to read their names each day in order to honor them, if only for a moment? (The New York Times prints the names each day, where they were killed and their hometowns.) But the Washington Post reminds us that 38 American civilian contractors have died as well. Each of these dead, civilian and military, must have at least 30 people who loved them enough to cry at their funeral, lovers, parents, grandparents, step-parents, sibs, cousins, friends, enough heart-broken people to fill Scotia 4 times over. How far would the sound of their cries carry? Far enough to change our government's policy? Far enough to change the minds of those who still think this war in Iraq in anyway makes us safer?

How can I not weep for the 12,800 or so Iraqis dead, almost all civilians, and the civilian contractors from other countries, most recently 12 from Nepal, whose only 'crime' is to be so grindingly poor that driving a truck around a distant country looked like salvation for their families.

**How do I show you a thousand?** Certainly not with anything of value for we are not treating our dead as valued as they are returned home unphotographed, unnamed. Not, then, a thousand pennies, for some of us will still pick up a penny. No, I would have to show you a thousand with something we discard, something we treat as of little value and easily replaced, like a plastic grocery bag.

**That's it, one thousand plastic bags, a product appropriately made from oil. A thousand empty bags to show the empty place where a vibrant life should be; a thousand empty bags to show the gaping hearts of the grief stricken; a thousand empty bags to represent those who thought up the empty policy of this war, the empty minds that supported it. A thousand empty bags to show the empty souls that believe that our safety is more important to God than someone else's, that war leads to peace, that lies can serve truth, that God calls us to anything higher than sacrificial love.**

A thousand empty bags on my fence in Scotia.

### **LETTER TO FRIENDS IN RUSSIA**

This past week also saw more acts of violence against uninvolved individuals, including children, in ongoing battles between states and non-state groups. Linda Chidsey today sent a letter to Friends in Russia:

We write to reach out to you in love and to let you know that our prayers are with you in this time of outrage and unspeakable grief. The tragedy at the Beslan School is almost beyond one's imagining, and follows so soon upon other atrocities you have endured in recent days.

Dear Friends, although we cannot know the particularities of your suffering, please know that we join with you in your present experience of suffering and loss. We urge you to draw close to the God who is ever with us – the God who sustains us, gives us comfort, promises healing. Stand firm in your faith and all that you know to be true. Draw courage and strength from the teachings of scripture. The gospel of Jesus is a gospel of peace and peacemaking. Uphold one another in the living out of these words. Persist in prayer.

And know that we will continue to hold you and your country in the Light in the upcoming weeks and months. We pray that you may know first hand the sustaining and healing power of the Living Presence among you.

Friends and peacemakers throughout the country are gathering in the coming days to witness to the unending crises in Iraq and Sudan, and to remember our anguish on September 11, 2001. Some of these events include:

- The Win Without War coalition and Sojourners invite people of faith to gather in candlelight silent vigils this evening, Thursday, September 9, at 8:00 PM, in mourning for the accumulating death toll in Iraq. For more information and locations of vigils in your area, go to [www.winwithoutwarus.org/](http://www.winwithoutwarus.org/).

- Friends in NYYM are planning vigils and open worship for this Saturday, September 11, to remember the deaths at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and aboard a hijacked jet, and the dying and hurt in Iraq. These include:

  - Brooklyn Meeting (110 Schermerhorn Street) will be open on Saturday from 8:00 A.M. until noon for silent worship.

  - Flushing Meeting (137-16 Northern Boulevard) also will be open for extended silent worship on September 11, beginning at 2:00 PM, followed by a simple potluck dinner at 6:00 PM, and a walking vigil through the streets of Flushing and a standing vigil in front of the Meetinghouse at 7:00 PM. For additional information, contact Naomi Paz Greenberg at 718-358-9636 or via e-mail at [naomipaz@nyc.rr.com](mailto:naomipaz@nyc.rr.com)

  - A Silent Peace Vigil will be held on Saturday, September 11, from 5:30 to 6:30 PM, at the Northport Post Office on Main Street in Northport; together with an opening of an Art Exhibit in Northport commemorating 9/11 at the Village Hall, next to the Post Office, from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. Friends are urged to “wear black, bring a candle”. Additional information is available from Charlotte (“the Peace Crone”) Koons at [shegoat75@earthlink.net](mailto:shegoat75@earthlink.net)

- The National Council of Churches sends word of a rally to end the genocide in Sudan that will be held this Sunday, September 12, at 2:00 PM, at Dag Hammarskjold Park at the United Nations Plaza (at 47th Street in New York City). The rally is being organized by the American Anti-Slavery Group and will feature Gloria Steinem, Curtis Sliwa (Guardian Angels founder) and Alan Hevesi (NYC Comptroller). Additional information is available at [www.iabolish.com/Sudan](http://www.iabolish.com/Sudan).

Through worship together, may Friends find peace and clearness to corporate and individual witness during these tumultuous, troubling days.

In care,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer, Lu Harper  
NYYM Worship and Action for Peace working group