

Religion leads me to reject all fanaticism

In May 2004, when I wrote a column expressing disquiet over the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, I received numerous e-mails asking why I was so concerned with the torture perpetrated by our own soldiers and not outraged by the beheading of American Nick Berg, "because he's Jewish, like you."

I found it hard to understand why 1) my critics linked the two events, as if being outraged at one precluded outrage at the other, and 2) why they thought Berg's religion would make me any more outraged than if he'd been of another faith.

After attending a lecture last week by Dr. Judea Pearl, I've come to understand that my faith did make a difference in how I perceived those two events, although for a completely different reason than my critics believed it should.

Dr. Pearl's son, the late Daniel Pearl, was a Wall Street Journal reporter kidnapped Jan. 23, 2002, in Karachi, Pakistan, while researching a connection between "shoe bomber" Richard Reid and a Pakistani militant. A month after his abduction, as the world watched in horror, his cold-blooded captors released a videotape of Pearl's gruesome murder. The Nazis tried to hide their crimes. These Islamic extremists are proud to display their murderous ways.

Given the heinous nature of his death, it would have been understandable if the Pearl family took the path of the critics of my Abu Ghraib column: believing that "they" are evil, therefore "they" don't deserve to be treated humanely.

Yet when asked if they seek revenge, Dr. Pearl responds: "Yes, we do! Hatred killed our son, and hatred we will fight for the rest of our lives, with vengeance and tenacity."



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Within weeks of their son's death, his family formed the Daniel Pearl Foundation (<http://www.danielpearl.org>) to "promote cross-cultural understanding through journalism, music and innovative communications." As Dr. Pearl explains, the goal is to create a new paradigm for human interactions defined along lines of decency and understanding, rather than nationalism and religion; to form a "Coalition of the Decent."

Rather than falling into the trap of blind hatred of all "rag heads," the Pearl's are attempting to address the root causes of their family's tragedy, using the principles that defined the character of their son Daniel, a man who "traveled the world with a pen and a fiddle." Principles such as "objectivity and integrity, tolerance and respect for people of all cultures; unshaken belief in the effectiveness of education and communication; and the love of music, humor, and friendship."

Changing the world doesn't happen overnight; hatred is conquered one mind at a time. But from the rubble of suicide bombings we begin to hear the voices of the decent. We hear it in the words of bereaved bridegroom Ashraf al-Khaled, who lost both his father and his father-in-law on his wedding night in the bombing of the Radisson hotel last week in Amman, Jordan. "The world has to know that this has nothing to do with Islam," he said.

Daniel Pearl's last words were, "I am Jewish." In the eyes of his murderers, that was enough to kill him. But for me, it helps to explains everything.

The people who condemn me for criticizing the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, who don't feel any moral apprehension that the CIA is holding detainees at "black sites" in Eastern Europe, who support the efforts of Vice President Dick Cheney (someone who resembles Emperor Palpatine more by the day) to exempt the CIA from an amendment by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., that would ban torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners should know this:

"To be Jewish is to recognize that every person is created in God's image, and thus worthy of respect. Being Jewish ... is to reject fanaticism everywhere."

These are the words of Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and thus had every reason to be embittered and filled with hatred. Instead he believes that "to remain indifferent to persecution and suffering anywhere ... is to become an accomplice of the tormentor."

That's why I wrote about Abu Ghraib, and why I will continue to write about the morally bankrupt policies of this administration; because "I am Jewish." That means accepting responsibility for Tikkun Olam, for repairing the world, to make it a more humane place. This not in spite of the tribulations my people have suffered, but because of them. And because, as Elie Wiesel so correctly said, "To remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all."

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