

“MY IRAQ”, BY GENNARO BUONOCORE

Who was the first one to invent those horrendous weapons? How cruel and heartless he must have been. Albius Tibullus ancient prose could not be more actual: “*Quis fuit , horrendos primus qui protulit enses, quam ferus et vere ferreus ille fuit.*”



Last August, I left my adoptive home, the USA, to go and serve for the Military Corps of the Italian Red Cross in Iraq. I left with a deeply troubled mind. I was leaving to uphold a peace I believed in yet I knew that our peace was just a myth bearing the scars of human history. Peace, the greatest myth of all, with its full weight of eternal contradiction. The only myth that drives all of the world’s forces in its eternal quest

and, at the same time, the most elusive, false and misperceived mirage in human existence.

My soul was troubled but certain that by going I was doing the right thing.

It was definitely the right decision.

Iraq profoundly changed me, in the short time I was there, I was humbled by its paradoxical mix of charred flesh and purity, of overbearing chaos and sublime poetry.

I have, now, come back by far more appreciative of what I have.

I have drank the dregs of war and come back from it with unexpected inner peace.

I have witnessed misery and injustice and I return with a deep sense of self-love.

I had left knowing that I was going to be a peace-keeper in a world wrecked by what I believed was the final showdown between radical extremism and western rule and democracy. I was wrong. Yet I feel much better about myself, my life, my world.

A massive conflict does exist, its combatants can be clearly identified: the secular against the religious, the “have not” against those who “have”, the pure against the promiscuous, tradition against progress, starvation against Christmas spending sprees, spirituality against materialism, feudalism against imposed democracy.

This sublime conflict constantly reminded me of an ancient Somali proverb:

“Me and my nation against the world. Me and my clan against my nation. Me and my family against the clan. Me and my brother against my family. Me against my brother”
I, now, add: *Me against myself.*

That familiarly internal struggle I have finally witnessed on the field.

Greatly magnified to embrace the world.

Amplified to the extreme to bring all of us to the edge of the abyss,

Those that I called extremists are just like us, they have mothers, fathers, siblings, wives, children of their own. The great difference is that they have little more to lose, their life becomes a symbol of their defeat and it is better to sacrifice it for what they believe is their final glorious act to cleanse an unjust world.

Death is their way out of anonymity to the stardom. Martyrdom as a ultimate act of defiance. Light against darkness. Most of them do not fear death.

They have seen enough of it to believe it is just a glorious path to final peace.

We have to learn from it and understand that true Peace can only be received.

Peace cannot be given. It cannot be enforced. The struggle for peace is only counterproductive because it has always ended up creating other unstable forms of balance and ultimately more wars.

History is the witness.

Peace might be deserved but it is surely not given nor won.

Iraq definitely taught me that there cannot be “outer peace” without first achieving “inner peace”.

Our “war” becomes to find peace and balance within ourselves and then within our own society to finally be able to donate it to the global family.

How could we help solving other people’s conflicts and dilemmas if our own go unresolved and keep raging within our souls?

I realized we are a profoundly fearful society. We are afraid to lose. How can we love if we are afraid? How can we make peace if we do not love?

Flavius Vagatius Renatus motto: “Qui desiderat pacem praeparet bellum” (Those who wish peace should prepare for war) could have not been more wrong. It still reigns ubiquitous on the regimental insignia of some of my comrades yet it could not be more anachronistic. Preparing for war might mean victory, but victory does not mean peace. Not even pacifism can lead to peace.

Most of my friends have asked me to recount a few episodes that I believe important to describe the “situation”.

I have two curiously connected stories. On our way to An-Nasiriyah, I noticed two little children walking, holding hands, on the side of the dusty road. They might have been no more than three and four years old respectively. Poorly dressed and incredibly dirty, with big smiling eyes, they were singing and showing off their new tiny red backpacks probably donated by the Italian Civil Affairs battalion.

They looked so happy and serene in sharp contrast with the monstrous metallic shapes of our Centauro tanks.

I suddenly felt very worried for the well being of this two little cubs and I asked an interpreter who these kids might be. He told me they were Bedouin children walking their daily five kilometers (one way) trek to the closest school, which happens to have no running water nor electricity. My thought flew to my own children.

They would never be allowed to walk that kind of distance to school despite living in one of the most affluent and crime-free areas of the USA.

Full of parental concerns I asked the interpreter whether their parents were afraid of child molesters. He looked at me puzzled and asked me what a child molester was.

Their parents, he added, were fine with it. The kids were too light to trigger the anti-personnel land mines because, even if they stepped on one, their weight would not be enough to push down the cap and spark the explosion.

Tiny angels flying over death with their smiles and their little new red backpacks.

A few weeks later and back in the USA, I found myself volunteering for the Homeland Security Crime Prevention program of my local police department.



I was briefed, given an unmarked car and assigned to guard an intersection in one of the most exclusive areas in the world. The President was in town and his motorcade had to be protected. At my assigned post I met a patrolman from the neighbouring and much larger police department. I introduced myself and offered him a bottle of the water I usually carry in great quantity with me, while on duty.

A few minutes later, the officer approached me and abruptly asked me to leave.

His threatening manners and stern looks had to be confronted with immense calm and an interminable sequence of security checks. After the powerful motorcade had finally passed I asked this man the reasons for his sudden change of attitude towards me.

He had become suspicious of my accent, believing it was middle eastern and he had thought I was trying to neutralize him with poisoned water.

To whoever harbors any belief that we might be “winning this war” by taking counsel of our fears I say with infinite love: “Rejoice because we have already lost it!”

Now, as St.Francis would say: “Let go create peace in the world and lets start with our own!”

Gennaro Buonocore

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