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Terror, Torture and the Banality of Evil

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Every time my cell phone buzzes early in the morning, I get up and reach for it reluctantly, with a sense of foreboding and dread. Nine out of ten times it is BBC, Delhi, London or Islamabad, requesting a comment on some horrible event in the Middle East or in South Asia. Sometimes I am fortunate to reflect on good news, such as Malala’s Nobel Prize, or a safely completed election and peaceful transfer of power, as in Pakistan last year and Tunisia this year. This month however has been an unending conversation about these horrendous events; ISIS in Iraq, The civil rights fiasco in Ferguson, the US Senate report on CIA’s use of torture and the latest atrocity committed by the Taliban.

The US Senate released a 6,000 pages report documenting the extent and depth of the use of torture by the CIA between 2001 and 2006. The fact that the US had used torture in its war on terror was public knowledge after the scandals of Abu Ghraib and from accounts by those who were detained at Guantanamo. The scope and the systematic nature of its sue has only now been exposed. The routinization of evil was shocking and the subsequent defense and justifications from the Bush administration added salt to injury. Coming in the wake of the Ferguson, Missouri controversy that exposed the disregard for lives of black Americans by the American Justice system, the senate report painted a very dark picture of American government today. We are now a democracy with evil institutions. If the champions of human rights are capable of such evil actions

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then what can we say of the rest of the world?

Extremists in Pakistan continue to push the envelope when it comes to disregard for human life. Today, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan attacked a school, The Army Public School of Peshawar and murdered hundred and forty-two people including hundred and thirty-two children. The brutality, the inhumanity and the sheer evil of this attack are incomprehensible. Even though I have commented on the tragedy and now I am penning my reflections about it, I feel inadequate. It demands that one stretch one’s preconceptions of humanity beyond recognition to understand these actions in human terms.

We seem to live in an age when evil has become routine and commonplace.

I answer those phone calls from international media, lying in my bed, with my back to the head post and respond to their questions to the best of my ability. I try to keep my emotions out of my analysis. And in pursuit of ‘objectivity and rationality’, I try to minimize value judgments and provide historical, political, and cultural context to the event. I often explore the global and local implications of the issue at hand. But these days, I find myself answering these questions mechanically; while simultaneously staring at myself in the dresser mirror across the room.

It is a Kafkaesk experience. I have the opportunity to study myself as I engage in global politics through discursive means. It is somewhat like simultaneous translation; I am speaking on the phone while I am also reflecting on what I am doing. My eyes stare at me asking, “What are you doing? How can you be so calm and rational about the slaughter of so many innocent children? How can there be a reasonable or human explanation for the inhumanity that just happened? Have you no soul, man? Why are you not anguished and outraged at the inhumanity of people today?” A Sufi would love this interplay of consciousness. He might call it real time Muragaba – questioning the ethical implications of one’s choices and actions even as one is performing them.

Hannah Arendt, in her celebrated book, Eichmann in Jerusalem, introduced a rather controversial notion – the banality of evil. She argued that evil was not necessarily unusual or egregious. Normal people without the aspiration to be either evil or good, she claimed, were capable of sinister actions without much thought, ideology or evil purpose. Her critics were shocked by this claim. Evil to them was exceptional and egregious and did not come packaged in an innocuous and harmless avatar. I think both maybe right.

Take a look at Dick Cheney, he immediately invokes images of a villain from James Bond movies, deserving of being cast as Dr. No. He has a cruel face, barely concealing the ominous lava boiling below the surface. He went on air to shamelessly defend CIA’s use of torture last week. His voice, his demeanor and his matter of fact approach to torture sent cold shivers of fear down my spine. This man not only oversaw evil but also has the temerity to defend it on moral grounds. Then there is George W. Bush, folksy, inarticulate and even likeable. He looks more suitable for the lead role in Dumb and Dumber. But this innocuous looking man not only chose Cheney as his mate.
twice, but also authorized and was aware of the torture that CIA was using so systematically and routinely. The two of them together are two sides of the evil coin, banal and unthinkable.

The responses from the Pakistani Taliban to their violence are equally incomprehensible. They seem to be completely oblivious to the depth of evil of their actions. They deliberately planned and executed an operation that targeted and methodically killed more than hundred innocent children. Yet they justify their actions on the grounds that it is retaliation for the actions of the Pakistani army and its support for US operations against them. The Taliban have discovered the “justifiable evil” defense! This movement seeks to establish the rule of Islam in Pakistan. One of the most well-known and respected sources of Islamic values is the 42 traditions collection of Imam Nawawi. Wonder if any of these Jihadis have read tradition #32 according to which Prophet Muhammad said – La darar wala dirar – Do no evil, do not respond to evil. How do they reconcile their actions with the values they claim to be fighting for?

We can blame terrorists for their evil actions. We can blame countries for their evil policies. We can express our outrage and assuage our anguish. But the most troubling thought is that, today we can speak, comment and even write reflective essays, which will be read by thoughtful people, about evil actions that should be unthinkable. This is a sad commentary on the human condition.

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2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eichmann_in_Jerusalem
