

REFUSING TO BE COMFORTED

We have a choice on how to approach this 28th day of December. On the one hand there is the continuation of the festivities, and we can sing in *The 12 Days of Christmas* that my true love sent to me three French hens. Or we can take a more somber look that comes from early Scripture and extends through our own time into the future.

First let us consider the story from Matthew's Gospel. Evil King Herod heard from the wise men that there was born in Bethlehem an infant "King of the Jews." Not wanting any rivals for that title, Herod sent troops to kill all the male children under the age of two in that region. Did this really happen? I rather doubt it, but the slaughtering of innocent children is something that has been with us for a long time. Matthew quotes a poignant verse from the prophet Jeremiah (31:15),



*A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and loudly lamenting;
it was Rachel weeping for her children,
refusing to be comforted
because they were no more.*

In 16th century England, the Taylor's Guild in Coventry performed a mystery play we now remember mostly from the Carol *Lully, Lullay*. It contains the line, "Then woe is me, poor Child for Thee" — which warns us that even the child whose birth we joyfully celebrate will face the tragedies of the human condition.

This is a question that all who have walked the human life, including Jesus of Nazareth, have and always will, wrestle with. I, together with many others, was unexpectedly thrown into this quandary by the AIDS pandemic, as I recorded in the memoirs *Morning Glory Babies*, and *Childsong, Monksong*. But I was to learn that my experience with AIDS was only one small facet of the continued wall encircling the human condition



Madeleine L'Engle asked in her *The Irrational Season*, "How can a God of love stand by and let Anne Frank die?" Occasionally there are brief experiences that have an everlasting impact on our lives. Such was my September 2000 visit to the Children's Memorial at Yad Vashem in the Holocaust Remembrance Center near Jerusalem.



The Children's Memorial is hollowed out of an underground cavern. As I entered the darkness I began to hear names. I was later to learn that these were the names of 1 1/2 million Jewish children who we know perished in the Holocaust. The names grew louder as I edged along the path. There was a name, the age at which the child was murdered, and her or his country of origin. Many of the children whose names I heard were born the year I was born, 1931, and of course there is a story behind each name. Eva from the Netherlands, Monia from Lithuania, Oro from Greece. Baroukh-Raoul from Algeria. In a different time we could have been in the same class at school.

There were candles along the path that flickered. The names. The story. And in my heart, a whispering “Remember Me.”

Other names I remembered from recent news reports, came into my mind. Amina in the Sudan died when a hospital she was in was bombed in an air raid. Dzem from Bosnia was caught in crossfire while shopping with his mother. Nouran from Gaza was shot by a soldier at a guard station when she came out of school for recess. Hakim in Iraq was killed by a suicide bomber while taking candy from an American soldier. And thinking back, I remember Sadako in Japan who died from leukemia brought on by radiation from one of our atomic bombs.

Will Rachel ever stop weeping for her children? Hopefully all of us will keep caring and trying to help these children with whom we share this planet.



A TV journalist recently asked a nine-year-old girl from Guatemala who had been apprehended and detained as an unaccompanied minor crossing our southern border, why she had taken such a dangerous trip. The girl put it very simply. She said if she had stayed in Guatemala she would have been killed, as her parents had been. She said she preferred to die trying to escape, trying to stay alive — “If I have to die I want to be able to choose which way I am killed.”

Jakelin Caal Maquin is the name of a seven-year-old, also from Guatemala, who died while she was in the custody of our border patrol. She had been traveling with her father. Eight hours after they were taken into custody Jakelin began having seizures and vomiting. She had a temperature of 105.7. She had to wait 90 minutes before there was any emergency medical care. It was in those 90 minutes that her future was determined. Later she was flown to a hospital where she died. It is unclear what, if any, steps the Border Control took in response to her health condition. Erroneous reports were put out that she suffered from dehydration but her father vehemently denied those reports. The White House was quick to respond that they had no responsibility for her death. They said that the father, Nery Gilberto Caal Cruz, was entirely responsible by having attempted to bring Jakelin into the United States. A final



report is yet to appear. But Mr.Trump’s position on compassion seems quite clear. He is perhaps more fuzzy on the national and international laws concerning how migrants should be treated. In any event, Jakelin will be remembered.



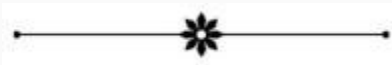
In a recent column, *NEW YORK TIMES* writer Nicholas Kristof introduces readers to Abrar Ibrahim, a 12-year-old girl in Yemen who weighs 28 pounds. She is now fighting for her life. I have read that close to 85,000 children have died from starvation in Yemen. Abrar is one of almost 12 million Yemenis who are on the brink of famine. That's very sad but what does it have to do with Americans? A lot!

In many ways the present administration has backed the Saudi Arabian war in Yemen. In fact, Saudi Arabia is one of our best customers for weapons of war. The White House has made it very clear that profit in this matter outweighs humanitarian concerns.



Earlier this month the United Nations brokered a cease-fire in the Yemen war. It is still questionable that the cease-fire will hold but it did allow the major port to be opened for humanitarian aid. UNICEF says that every 10 minutes in Yemen a child dies from preventable causes so this is a situation where literally every minute counts.

Our Senate voted to withdraw American military assistance for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. Unfortunately the House of Representatives scuttled the measure. Again every minute counts. Kristof quoted a Yemeni citizen who said, “I just hope some life returns so we can live peacefully at least for a little while.”



A young person who works with me says that she also often thinks of the parents of shooting victims in the United States. For a brief time the world sends their thoughts and prayers but after the media frenzy people move on. She points out, “The parents are still angry, devastated and grief stricken.” And she asks, “Why do we move on collectively, as a country so quickly from such deep losses?”

Yes, Rachel is still weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted. Is it not about time that we listen?

Brother Toby

PS. Sadly after the above was written a second child died while in the custody of the border control. 8 year-old Felipe Gomez Alonso died just before midnight on Christmas Eve in an El Paso hospital. His father was with him. They had traveled from Guatemala. Felipe will also be remembered.