

MANNA *in The wilderness*

Spring 1991

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A Call to Grieve

By Julia Occhiogrosso

"I am going to kill someone today," he warned as his eyes scanned our breakfast line for a worthy target. Ron stood close to six feet tall and was stocked with sufficiently lethal layers of bicep muscle. Our first encounter took place three years ago when I interrupted his plans to assault someone with a tire iron. Since that time, there have been occasions when Ron has slipped into decent conversational modes. I am intrigued by how often he insists on taking me on an emotionless tour of his scars—pointing to marks on his legs, arms and face. It is never clear whether he is sharing to invite sympathy or as a form of intimidation in testimony to what he can endure.

Still, his consistent display of violent provocation casts a spell of anxiety about his presence. And on this particular morning I was unwilling to call his bluff. I followed him like a magnet. He pushed in full body block form into an innocent bystander. Getting no response, he pivoted around in search of his next victim, while I continued my feeble efforts to persuade him to engage in more acceptable early morning discourse. In a desperate plan to distract him I took his hand and kissed it. Bewildered, his adrenalin slowed down for about 15 seconds. Instantly, he returned to his violent intentions. And I was ready for my final, yet most reliable, course of action—prayer. I prayed that

Ron would leave without causing any harm. A short time after, he could be seen walking away down the street.

A few days later Ron was arrested. He spent some time in prison. I did not see him until several months later when he returned to our soup line.

It was the early evening of January 16. A line of homeless men and women were beginning to gather outside St. James Church for our Wednesday dinner meal. I stood outside as a presence to the waiting crowd. A moving vehicle slowed down and the driver announced that the war had begun. My heart sank. We had given so much of ourselves, praying, fasting, raising voices of resistance to the war. We had hoped against hope for a miracle. As I listened to the war talk rumble from person to person on our food line, a numbing sensation gripped me. Thoughts of the massive bombing, slain bodies and the tremendous suffering to be inflicted was all too much for me. If I was to succeed at the task of serving the 300 or more people standing before me, I could not let myself think about the war. Mechanically, I would go through the motions of getting the job done. The plan was working until Ron arrived. He was outside, injured and wanting a plate without waiting in line. Roselee brought him a plate, and I was pleased he would not pose a threat to anyone.

Later, I went out front to check on the situation. Sitting in the dark, head down, was Ron. As I drew near, I noticed his shoulders trembling. His breathing was irregular. I touched him, he looked up and I could see he was weeping. Indeed, his entire body lamented and groaned as if it were finally given permission to express the accumulation of wounds that have plagued him since birth. He had a minor injury to his side. I assured him he'd be okay. My palms cradled his chin as I bent over to kiss his forehead. The tears continued to flow. The walls of violence and hatred crumbled and through the fractures of grief and brokenness God's presence was revealed. With new eyes I could look upon he whom I had feared. My numbness was pierced. I thought about the war again. And with stark clarity, I could feel what the Iraqi people had in common with Ron. Vulnerable victims of hatred and violence, they would stir the eternal image of the Lamb tormented and spat upon by the world.

The Lamb of God is spat upon and mocked by the dominant culture, which has hardened its heart to the suffering realities of the poor in this country. The Lamb of God has been sentenced to death and crucified by the coalition forces which waged a criminal assault on the Iraqi people. While the mob waves flags and hails chants of approval, those in seats of power wash their hands of the crime. Clearly, most Americans accept uncritically the ideological venom conveyed on the evening news. It enters our bloodstream and causes hate and violence to pulse in our veins. We become trapped inside our own needs, desires and personal tragedies. Spiritually crippled, we grow numb to the suffering which our government policies and actions inflict. Affluent and comfortable, we have for-

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A CALL TO GRIEVE, *continued*

gotten how to grieve.

Certainly the role of prophet has traditionally been to call the people to public grieving for their sins and the sins of our nation. Grieving helps us to know our own sin and in turn gives us new strength to have mercy upon those who sin against us. If we do not grieve, it is easy to continue in our self-deception and sinful ways.

My heart grows weary from the violence of war and poverty. We are powerless against the momentum of the war machine. Yet, as Walter Brueggemann suggests in *The Prophetic Imagination*, grieving is a form of profound criticism against the ruling powers. "I have been increasingly impressed with the capacity of the prophet to use the language of lament and the symbolic creation of a death scene as a way of bringing to reality what the king must see and will not. And I believe that grief and mourning, that crying in pathos, is the ultimate form of criticism, for it announces the sure end of the whole royal arrangement."

The Catholic Worker, in the face of the violence of

war and poverty, has responded to the Gospel mandate of standing with the suffering ones. We show compassion to make it clear that the unjust suffering is not acceptable and ignores God's yearning for true peace.

In my years at the Worker, I have been broken and changed by those whose backgrounds are similar to Ron's. In the most unlikely places, the Incarnation is revealed. Perhaps this is why I reject the demonization of whole peoples at the convenience of political and military strategists. I refuse to be numbed to the truth of who we are in the eyes of our Creator.

We will roll into Kuwait victorious and convinced that we have saved the world from a treacherous threat. And I imagine lying in the rubble of a collapsed building will be some severely injured, but still living, Iraqi soldiers. I hear the voice of one crying out in his pain, "Allah, why have you forsaken me?" Another prays softly before he dies, "Father into your hands I commend my spirit." And still another speaks gently from the heart, "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do."



L.V.C.W. SCHEDULE

Monday - Saturday, 6:30 a.m. - 7:30 a.m.

Serve breakfast at E and Washington St. (new location).

Wednesdays, 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.

Dinner Meal at St. James the Apostle Catholic Church, 821 N. "H" St.

Thursdays, 4:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Prayer vigil in front of the DOE building.

Fridays (1st and 3rd week), 5:30 p.m.

Mass and potluck dinner to follow at St. John the Baptist House, 500 W. Van Buren.

Do you have a piano you are not using? Our community would like to fill the St. John the Baptist House with beautiful music. If you can help, please let us know.

WE ARE NOT TAX EXEMPT

All gifts to the Catholic Worker go to a common fund which is used to meet the daily expenses of our work.

Gifts to our work are not tax-deductible. As a community, we have never sought tax-exempt status since we are convinced that justice and the works of mercy should be acts of conscience which come at a personal sacrifice, without governmental approval, regulation or reward. We believe it would be a misuse of our limited resources of time and personnel (as well as a violation of our understanding of the meaning of community) to create the organizational structure required, and to maintain the paperwork necessary for obtaining tax-deductible status. Also, since much of what we do might be considered "political," in the sense that we strive to question, challenge and confront our present society and many of its structures and values, some would deem us technically ineligible for tax-deductible, charitable status.

LAS VEGAS CATHOLIC WORKER

St. John the Baptist House

500 West Van Buren

Las Vegas, NV 89106

(702) 647-0728

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N. Las Vegas, NV 89030**

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