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Collateral Damage

Lee Bona

The last week of May, or so, Jay Lavelle sent an email to a whole group of our members and asked if we'd lead one of the services this summer. I was on the list and I thought it was really an honor that I was asked so I responded immediately that I'd love to do that. I didn't give a thought then as to what I'd do for a theme or sermon. Early June we got an email asking us to decide on a theme for whichever service we'd be leading.

Well, early June is a special remembrance time for me so I knew immediately what I'd want to talk about. "Collateral Damage." And, let me just say up front, if you assumed I made that decision simply because this service fell over the July 4th holiday weekend and therefore I must be a peace-nik, then you're thinking much too simply. Without a doubt, there are far better ways to keep the peace and to encourage the inherent worth and dignity of all beings and the democratic process than by killing or maiming each other. And yes, without a doubt, our service members, who sometimes spend years killing or being killed, come home damaged even if they have never been shot or become the victims of roadside bombs.

However, I'd have to honestly say that, if all else failed, there are times when I would be willing to use force – maybe against the ruin of genocide, or invasion, or for self-protection. And I should also tell you honestly that I possess a Class A 'license to carry' and have been a responsible gun owner since 2005. I live alone in a not so great area. Crime has happened to my neighbors and I choose to have that weapon between me and any potential murderer or rapist who might invade my

home. I'm willing to discuss everything I just said but for the time being, you should know that's where I'm at.

This morning, I'll start by defining Collateral Damage the way Websters Dictionary does: 'Any damage incidental to an activity.... Unplanned or unintended results of our actions.' But I know from personal experience that "unplanned" and "unintended" is a little too simple and black and white. Life is complicated and full of grey areas and sometimes we know full well what damage or results are possible or probably or will definitely result from our actions before we even do anything.

I chose this theme because every year, I take time to recall personal experiences which have been life changing in their results for me, to this day. And I want it to stay that way. I want to stay changed. You might say they are anniversaries I celebrate that Hallmark doesn't make cards for. I think many of us probably anticipate a day or two like that in our lives each year. I've lived long enough to have a handful at the ready but I'll just use two for today.

Anyway, one occurred the second week of June, 2007, when I was sitting in my recliner watching the evening news on t.v. The news was reporting a big firefight in Afganistan involving coalition forces just after hundreds had been killed in a Taliban attack on innocent civilians. The camera was following soldiers as they ran down a street in pursuit of the bombers and the sound of gunfire was everywhere.

And then something happened which completely threw me. Beyond the image of the running soldiers was the image of a little baby boy – no more than two years old – squatting down by the side of an obviously dead woman. And his tiny left hand was gripping a piece of her robe for dear life. His eyes were glazed and he was staring straight ahead – at ME - in sheer

shock and terror. But worse than that – the thing I fixed on - was that his teeth were chattering. Chattering! It had to have been a hundred ten degrees in the shade over there and his baby teeth were chattering. He was only in that frame maybe a couple of seconds when a man ran in, scooped him up, and ran back away and he was gone. But in that one instant of connection, my boundaries *exploded*. Into dust. And I was utterly unsettled by the recognition.

During the moments before the suicide bombings, that child was probably happily holding on to the only god he ever knew or needed to know – his mother. He was so young that he was probably still at the "mommy" stage of relationship with her – completely trusting in her love to be there, to guide him and to provide him with all that he needed, including a sense of security and well being – especially in times of trouble or hurt. Sort of like Jesus' "Abba" moment on the cross. But then this woman, this mommy, was torn away; destroyed. And the person he had been was also destroyed. And his baby image of god was also destroyed. And in that one moment of my connection, my unexamined understanding of collateral damage as an exercise in intellectual empathy was destroyed. Forever.

I was left with many questions and concerns for that boy....was there others who could teach him to love and trust again? Or did he grow into anger and hate? What was his image of god and the world now? What could I do to make things better for him and all the other victims of adult unexamined decision making? "Collateral damage" stopped being a concept and became a person who needed me. And that has made all the difference in how I approach the issue and decision making around it and what actions I take.

Also because of that experience, I have come to believe more and more that we need sacred space. We need a place where we can explore

our highest ideals and potentials and then apply them to our decision making processes. Doing that alone at home is not adequate by and of itself (for me) since I have a tendency toward believing that when I think something, it must be right! I'm also very practiced and pretty darn good at navel gazing! But the issue is really a serious one and we need to *make* the space which values and encourages diversity and tolerance and free exploration of ideas and the arts. Which understands the need to forsake separateness and to welcome the "other" in....other people, other experiences, other ideas and opinions, etc.

At least as UU's, I don't think we should just choose to throw pebbles into the pond and accept whatever consequences come with the resulting ripples. My experience in 2007 imprinted the fact that outcomes have real life effects on people and animals and environments. We need a space, and leaders, to help us be our best selves by getting beyond nonchalance or apathy or defensive detachment from consequences. We need to remember that we are not only responsible for the pebbles but also for the ripples and I'm lucky that I get reminded on a regular basis in this church space.

But we fail so often anyway. And besides, too many times, we don't have the luxury of having to choose between two goods, or even between one good and one bad or the time to weigh and measure every decision. And this brings me to my second experience (which actually led to my final break with the Catholic Church). It was a simple thing, really.

I spent many years as a community organizer in Brooklyn, NY. At one point I was doing adult leadership training and housing development and new organizer mentoring in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn and my young crew shared an office in the basement of a church rectory there. The housekeeper and cook for the priests was an old portly polish lady in her 70's who had been working there 30 years. She never seemed like a happy

person but she was kindly and would feed the troops now and then so we all appreciated her. She and I spent a good amount of time chatting with each other during the day.

One evening, one of the young organizers mentioned to Mrs. J that his college class had just read about the Katin Forest Massacre in Poland during WWII and did she know anything about it? (about 50 years before....Nearly 22,000 men and boys were marched into the Katin Forest, executed by the Soviet Secret Police, and their bodies dumped into mass graves....) She instantaneously looked *staggered* by the question and her eyes filled with tears and she turned and practically ran from the room. No one expected that reaction and we were all stunned into self-conscious silence for a few seconds.

Well, I sent the young people down to the office and I followed Mrs. J out to the kitchen where she was sitting at the table *sobbing*. I put my arms around her and asked her what was wrong. She just kept sobbing, "I'm so sorry; I'm so sorry," over and over again – half the time mumbling in polish! So I sat there with her saying nothing and eventually she just stared at the table and spilled out her story. (She's dead many years now so I don't feel I'm betraying her confidences.) It seems the Secret Police came into her small village – as to other villages - looking for the men and boys. Everyone knew what had been happening in other villages so, except for the old men, most men and boys and the village priest had gone into hiding.

The Secret Police gathered the women in the church and told them that all their children would be killed including the baby boys with the girls if the women didn't disclose the whereabouts of the men and older boys. At first the women refused but two of the remaining children were actually pulled from homes and shot right in front of them. The police left them alone with each other and gave them 15 minutes to decide. And they did

decide. The women gave up their older sons and husbands in order to save the rest of their children. For Mrs. J, it was giving up two sons and her husband to save two daughters and a baby boy. For some, it was giving up their entire family to save children from the other families. And now, she sobbed that she was old and would die soon and what would her two sons and her husband say to her? Would they condemn her to hell? Would God condemn her to hell? She was so very afraid.

To say the least, I was speechless in the face of the horror I was hearing. Can you even imagine being faced with a decision like that? Can you imagine making that decision when you knew what the results would be? Can you imagine having to bear the burden of that decision and the collateral damage done all the rest of your lives?

I asked her if she had talked to one of the priests and, believe this or not, she had never told them about that horror....in confession or otherwise. Many women from her village were living in the same area of Brooklyn, attending the same church, going to the same social clubs, etc., so I asked her if they had fears of death like she did. And she said that no one ever talked about it – not one word – with each other or anyone else. Then the scariest thing happened. I think I happened to not blink in time when she looked up at me and our eyes met and – BAM – I was rocked - I just KNEW her agony for that second and I also knew she was waiting for me to say something. That she needed to hear words from me right then and there.

Well, I said some things to her that I'm sure sounded *really* trite about how suffering for fifty years was enough and she needn't worry about hell. About how God was bigger than her worst shames and fears. About how, if we don't understand much more when we get to heaven than we understand now, why bother? That all the dead knew what happened and why it happened and probably forgave her years ago. She just kept saying, I hope

so; I hope so; and please not to tell anyone else there. We never spoke of it again even though tried to I give her openings whenever I could.

Later I was angry. At the priests because how do you work all day for 30 years for the same people and no connection has been made which would allow them to know this person was in such pain? And at God because how do you save Isaac but not the the boys buried at Katin? Were those women to give up their 'only begotten sons' to effect some concept of the world? Who was God – Who should he have been – Who could he have been? When I heard she died, many years ago, I couldn't help but wonder if it was in trepidation or with some comfort and confidence. Whether her religion ever helped her experience a deeper understanding or acceptance of those questions much more effectively than I ever did. Who knows.

The point of all this *rambling on* is that I think that we have a fine grounding in connections and community going on here in this church, in this religion. Those gifts are informing our lives, our decision making, our work and even our art. I suggest we should celebrate our gifts but never be complacent in them because, I would suggest, it's really all about the next step anyway which is a call to action. Both the experiences I mentioned here were pebbles in the pond experiences for me. And I can tell you from my own limited experience, there's all kinds of surprise consequences attached when you focus on them there ripples! But, I can't complain too much and just maybe some good has come of it now and then. In any case, whenever I think of those individuals, I repeat my favorite passage from Isaiah: "I will never forget you....I have carved you on the palm of my hand," and then I add, "You made my boundaries explode."