

In Retreat

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October 7, 2007

UFWC

Retreat is a word with multiple and layered meanings. Because my chosen vocation is that of ministry, the first image when I hear the word retreat is one of an event that is planned and organized to create a breathing or resting place in the middle of a life filled with tasks. At first blush, retreat to me signals a spiritual retreat for nourishing the soul. Perhaps you think of that as well when the word is mentioned. In the last column I wrote for the newsletter I mentioned that I will be with the district ministers for three days this week, "in retreat." The image is one of contemplative peace. It is a good thing for your minister to be doing—take a deep breath and a bit of time away from all of the busyness of moving and beginning a new ministry. The reality is that my time together with the other ministers in the district will be fully programmed with one afternoon "free" to use as we see fit. We may be retreating from our individual congregations and busy home lives, but we will be fully engaged with the work of our profession, learning new concepts, sharing information, catching up with one another and worshipping together.

Towards the end of August there was another retreat. The leadership of this congregation met with me and Richard Speck, the District Executive, and spent a day in Wilmington trying to lay a foundation for our work together both for this year and into the future. It was a retreat in the sense that we had withdrawn to a place away from our familiar surroundings in order to be able to concentrate on our task without the distractions that we would find here. We arrived with energy and hope and left the same way but with some guidelines and understandings of how we wanted to proceed. We retreated in order to move forward. It may sound contradictory, but it isn't.

The practice of having to back up, regroup, and move forward is one that pervades most of our lives. None of us can be expected to be "on" all of the time, to be constantly present to our own needs and the needs of the people that surround us no matter how much we try. None of us work in situations where everything all the time is full speed ahead. The nature of life, the nature of our physical and mental health requires that we nourish ourselves and rest. Our spiritual lives demand nothing less. As Sr. Joan said through the words of Abba Anthony,

"One day a hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. What kind of spiritual guide was this?

But the old monk said to him, 'Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it.' So the hunter did. Then the old man said, 'Now shoot another.' And the hunter did. Then the elder said, 'Shoot your arrow again. Keep shooting; keep shooting; keep shooting.' And the hunter finally said, 'But if I bend my bow so much I will break it.'

Then Abba Anthony said to him, 'It is just the same with the work of God. If we stretch ourselves beyond measure, we will break. Sometimes it is necessary to meet other needs.'¹

The past two weeks have felt like the arrows have been flying fast and furious. Not because of the work of the Fellowship, though there has certainly been much to do. It has been the goings on in the rest of the world that have felt like an unending burden that gets heavier by the day. Just when you think that the needle is going to explode off the outrage meter, another travesty presents itself. We have had to watch as a bill to provide health care to poor children has been quietly and shamefully vetoed by the President. We have witnessed a hearing into the contracting of a private mercenary force working in Iraq on our behalf, being payed by our tax dollars. The reporting of the network news focused on whether they were cost efficient rather than the fact that they have been killing innocent civilians without being investigated by the government. The congress is set to continue funding a disastrous war with little debate and no timelines to end it. We have discovered via the New York Times that the administration has been issuing classified

memos justifying the use of torture in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions and everything we citizens of this country thought our nation stood for. Facing such travesties, Congress chose to take time to vote to condemn an organization for a newspaper ad. Rather than investigate the laws and the constitution being trampled on, The Senate and the House of Representatives thought it important to take time to condemn free speech. And all of the elected officials that represent us no matter the party joined in. The mind reels.

And then there is Burma. It is hard to know where to start or what to say. The story of Buddhist monks leading a hundred thousand people in peaceful protest of a military dictatorship was certainly an awe inspiring one. It brought with it the hope of a new dawn for democracy only to have it shattered like the skulls of some of those same peaceful monks.

I have to admit that I knew little of the history or sequence of events that led up to such a dramatic tale of hope and despair. Yes, I vaguely knew the name Aung San Suu Kyi and knew of her Nobel Peace Prize and her house arrest, but I didn't really know the story. So I did a bit of reading in order to better understand it myself. Burma is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia and shares borders with China, Tibet, Laos, Thailand and has a 1200 mile coastline in the Bay of Bengal. In it's most recent history it was part of the British Colonial Empire from 1886-1948 and was an active part of the trading enterprise with India, another British colony. It was a major front in the Southeast Asian theater of the second world war with active fighters on each side of the conflict—some working with the British and some with the Japanese. In 1948 the country achieved independence from the British empire becoming the Independent Republic of Burma. It was a democratic republic until 1962 when a military coup took over the government. It has endured military rule since then with major uprisings attempted in 1974 and 1988 both of which were quickly suppressed by the ruling junta. The 1988 uprising was a peaceful one led by students, Buddhist monks, educators, civil servants, medical workers, people of all walks of life. It was ended in one months time by violence that has yet to be thoroughly documented. Soldiers shot their rifles into the peaceful crowds killing thousands. As it happened in 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of a revered general who had been educated in England returned to her native Burma to care for her ailing mother. By virtue of her name and heritage she was looked to for leadership. Aung San Suu Kyi co-authored a letter to the President stating that, given the rapidly deteriorating state of affairs and people's total lack of trust in the government, an interim government should be formed.² In 1989 the State Law and Order Restoration Council changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar, a name not recognized by the democratic resistance, the US or UK governments. In 1990 free elections were actually held with Aung San Suu Kyi and her party garnering 82% of the parliamentary seats. The vote was annulled by the ruling generals. Suu Kyi was prevented from taking her rightful seat as Prime Minister and put into house detention. The struggle for democracy went underground and she became the face of peaceful, passive resistance. In 1991 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. One of her sons accepted the award for her as she was not allowed out of her house or her country. In the acceptance speech he said:

Although my mother is often described as a political dissident who strives by peaceful means for democratic change, we should remember that her quest is basically spiritual. As she has said, "The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit", and she has written of the "essential spiritual aims" of the struggle. The realisation of this depends solely on human responsibility. At the root of that responsibility lies, and I quote, "the concept of perfection, the urge to achieve it, the intelligence to find a path towards it, and the will to follow that path if not to the end, at least the distance needed to rise above individual limitation... ". "To live the full life," she says, "one must have the courage to bear the responsibility of the needs of others ... one must want to bear this responsibility." And she links this firmly to her faith when she writes, "...Buddhism, the foundation of traditional Burmese culture, places the greatest value on man, who alone of all beings can achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood. Each man has in him the potential to realize the truth through his own will and endeavour and to help others to realize it." Finally she says, "The quest for democracy in Burma is the struggle of a people to live whole, meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world

community. It is part of the unceasing human endeavour to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his nature."³

What is happening in Burma appears on the outside to be a political struggle, but it is more than that. The Buddhist tradition that undergirds everything important in that country provides the grounding and the strength to continue the struggle for freedom and democracy. Last week, the journal the Independent UK printed this report:

The keepers of the soul of Burma – the Buddhist monks – have risen up for the nation by staging peaceful demonstrations in Rangoon and other major cities at a time when the ruling junta appears to be on top. Not long ago, no one dared to think that the thoroughly cowed people of Burma would have the courage to defy the military authority even by means of a smirk.

But it has happened again like it did in 1988 when the people of Burma showed their displeasure at the ruling power with nationwide protests and paid for it with their lives when thousands were killed as a result of the uprising. The situation in the country didn't change, and on this occasion the success or failure of the protests will depend on how well organised and determined the monks are.

As soon as reports came out of the UN Security Council's decision not to take any direct action but just to urge the junta restraint against the protesters, a friend of mine phoned me from Burma to express his feeling. "We don't want our country to become another Rwanda," he said with a deep sigh. It seems that his fear might yet come true, as reports of violence, injuries and deaths are continuing to emerge as I write this. "I hope I am still alive by this evening," my friend said before he put the phone down, and I could hear the determination in his voice.⁴

The current uprising began because the military junta raised the price of diesel oil by 500% to cover the budget deficit that occurred when civil servants received salary raises. It became impossible for the poor to afford the basics. Some well known dissidents started protests and were joined by hundreds and then thousands of Buddhist monks as they quietly marched. The protests grew until 100,000 people surrounded the monks in Rangoon. The eyes of the world were upon these people of deep faith who had had enough of military rule and subjugation. Hope grew, hope for the Burmese people and for their sequestered leader. But then, as in 1988, the soldiers arrived. I am haunted by visions of peaceful unarmed demonstrators and saffron clad monks being shot at and bludgeoned to death because they want to live freely. And now the Burmese people and their spiritual leaders are "in retreat." They have had to pull back and regroup, tend to their wounds and begin to plan for the next step in their struggle.

These reports, this story coupled with the news of the lies perpetuated by our own government sanctioning torture behind their own iron curtain of secrecy are almost enough to leave me despondent. The highest leaders of the land are violating not only the laws of our land and our Constitution, perpetrating high crimes and misdemeanors, but also committing crimes against humanity. And the Congress debates sanctioning MoveOn for the audacity of placing an ad that makes a pun on a general's name! It is not only Burma that needs a revolution. We have been living as a nation in fear because that is all that the leadership has to offer. We have been in retreat from all that is sacred and holy in our lives, in our principles. Though we need to step back and nourish our souls from time to time, that can never be enough. My favorite Benedictine nun, Sr. Joan takes from my own tradition saying:

"In Jewish spirituality, for instance, two concepts dominate and are intertwined: The one, *devkut*, translates as "clinging to God" or contemplation; the other, *tikkun o'lam*, translates "repairing the world" or the work of justice. One without the other—contemplation without justice, clinging to mystery without repairing the real world—is unfinished, the tradition teaches, is dark without light, is grand without great, is soul without body."⁵

So I am deeply troubled and saddened by what has transpired in Burma and the world's "official" reaction to it which so far has been little and late. But it has helped me to find new strength from a single woman living in isolation surrounded by daily tragedy. Aung San Suu Kyi wrote an essay, "Freedom from Fear." Here is an excerpt:

"The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation's development. A revolution which aims merely at changing official policies and institutions with a view to an improvement in material conditions has little chance of genuine success. Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces which produced the iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration. It is not enough merely to call for freedom, democracy and human rights. There has to be a united determination to persevere in the struggle, to make sacrifices in the name of enduring truths, to resist the corrupting influences of desire, ill will, ignorance and fear.

Saints, it has been said, are the sinners who go on trying. So free men are the oppressed who go on trying and who in the process make themselves fit to bear the responsibilities and to uphold the disciplines which will maintain a free society. Among the basic freedoms to which men aspire that their lives might be full and uncramped, freedom from fear stands out as both a means and an end. A people who would build a nation in which strong, democratic institutions are firmly established as a guarantee against state-induced power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear."⁶

There is much work to be done to liberate our minds from apathy and fear. We liberate ourselves as we take action and stand up for peace and justice. This weekend has been designated as a time in Burma for prayer and remembrance of those who have died and a time to rededicate to the struggle for freedom. For us, it is a time to engage with our elected representatives as we struggle for the soul of our country. The children need health care. The war needs to end. Torture must stop. I ask you one and all to call, fax, write to those whose votes are counted. Do it now. We can no longer afford to retreat from our responsibilities as citizens.

¹ Chittister, Joan, OSB, **Wisdom Distilled from the Daily** Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today, (N.Y.: Harper San Francisco: 1990) * pp. 96-98

² <http://www3.soros.org/burma/Voices88/index.html>

³ http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1991/kyi-acceptance.html

⁴ The Independent (London): The West must confront Burma's supporters - Pascal Khoo-Thwe Sept. 27, 2007

⁵ Chittister, Joan, **In the Heart of the Temple** (New York: Blue Bridge Books, 2004,) p. 56

⁶ <http://www.dask.com/contents.php?id=416>