



Those Who Try

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After a while you become aware that, your whole life long, you've been surrounded by people who ... well ... people who've given their best for you. If Providence has been generous, you've grown up in a loving family in which parents and siblings have extended themselves and at least tried to make the breaks break your way, and kept you in their embrace when they haven't broken your way.

As circles widened and the world became more complicated, there multiply cameo snapshots that keep flashing into your mind of special people who have given you a leg up, who've broken trail for you, who've been there when the need was pressing, who've healed you, who've actually *loved* you, or who've simply given you what they had to give. And when you finally feel grateful, perhaps that's when you know you're at last growing up. You have, then, finally learned about gratitude, and can drink the milk of human kindness with relish.

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In the Middle East these are not days of thanksgiving. They are days of flashing anger, of oily and poisonous bigotry, of slashing vengeance, of adolescent vindictiveness, of choking frustration, of smothering despair. ... These are really *bad* days. These are blood-drenched days. Death stalks the streets. Fear is everywhere. The devil's barbed tail flails around and, like a stepped-on stingray, spits vitriol. Everyone's becoming a victim. And those who should know better only do their worst. At every intersection there's a panic sign, and another that pleads, 'Call off the werewolves!' The ones who can won't; the ones who would can't. And there's none there who can or will do that.

Yes, it is true that George W. Bush's "...animating idea has been that the peoples of the Middle East can be bombed into democracy and terrorized into moderation." (Jonathan Freedland, Wednesday, July 26, 2006, *The Guardian* (UK) It is also true that "The very creation of Israel required an act of terror. In 1948, most of the non-Jewish indigenous people were ethnically cleansed from the part of Palestine which became Israel." (Oren Ben-Dor, July 26, 2006, *The Independent* (UK) Uri Avnery observed in an interview with the BBC in July (as he often has in his own media, especially *Gush Shalom*) that the reduction of violence in the Middle East must begin with Israel's admission that it has prolonged (and still does) the suffering of the Palestinian people, and that seminal barbarity is the generating point for much of the Middle East's misery. Then, finally, there is the former Israeli mayor of Jerusalem, Meron Benvenisti who, in an editorial entitled 'The Turnabout Will Come Quickly' (*Ha'aretz*, Wednesday, July 26, 2006), observes, "Only people who unabashedly exploit primitive urges allow themselves to personalize the war and focus it on the annihilation of their enemy, Hassan Nasrallah.

Only those who are convinced the war will bring down a smoke screen over any cynical or hypocritical act can brag that they are assisting in an international humanitarian activity after they themselves brought about the catastrophe.” He concludes, “Very soon everything will return to what it was before — apart from those who sacrificed their lives and those who were killed in the shellings and bombings. And the major loser will be the people of Israel who, by an unmeasured reaction to a provocation, established their position as a foreign element in the region, as the neighborhood bully, the object of impotent hatred.”

There is a whole host of Israeli and Jewish voices speaking the same message that Americans never hear. They harmonize with many measured and rational Arab voices, also maligned, marginalized and ignored. These are thoughtful, moral and observant people who speak with profound integrity and desperate concern. They are surely numbered among *those who try*, and American voters must demand of their commercially controlled media that they hear these voices and then they must listen up, because, to the tune of at the very least \$3 billion a year one way or another, the American voter finances this whole ghastly slaughter.

Condoleezza Rice expresses the American administration’s supposed intention to address the ‘root causes’ of the current crisis on both its ‘hot’ fronts — Gaza and Lebanon. Although she is unquestionably intelligent and has a talent for absorbing and analyzing information by the truckload, she is also preeminently a political animal who has been well trained. She performs as her managers direct. When she speaks of ‘root causes’, therefore, she is deliberately and *knowingly* engaging in misdirection. She is addressing idiosyncratic and superficial symptoms and not causes at all. In fact, well trained as she is, she will avoid the real ‘roots’ like the plague. As a political optician, the lenses she’s grinding for Americas and trying to sell to the world at large are horribly scratched and warped. Professionally, that makes her a liar, but then that’s this American administration’s hallmark from top to bottom.

There are those who struggle to speak the truth and come close to that goal. Their road is torturous, narrow and difficult. Others intend to manipulate power and find truth inconvenient. Their path is broad and easy and, as Jesus predicted, it leads straight to perdition. It is with deep sorrow that I find the current American government (both Congress and Executive) on this broad way. A more war-like administration America has rarely seen. This has *got* to stop!

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But that’s not the intended burden of this meditation. I want to focus upon those who, in the teeth of barbarity, risk their lives and substance to help the victims. In gospel terms, it is the good news of the redeeming Remnant — *those who try*.

These are days when, among others, I give thanks for my friend, Su‘âd al-Hâjj Nasîf, an elegant, gracious, well-educated and articulate lady as only Lebanon’s upper middle class can breed them. But she is breaking unacknowledged records to bring relief to people in southern Lebanon. Why? Well, the ‘why’ is a very complex thing for her, I expect, but it probably boils down to a sense of vocation. This is just the sort of thing that

Su'âd *does* and *has done* for years ... she and her colleagues in the Middle East Council of Churches' Inter-Church Network for Development and Relief (ICNDR). While other people cower in shelters, Su'âd and those whom she leads (and she leads by example) are out there in the middle of the Israeli-wrought devastation that has overwhelmed Lebanon. She ... they ... are *those who try*.

Apart from the MECC's ICNDR folk, there are any number of NGO staff and personnel of the UN's agencies who risk life and limb to alleviate the suffering of their fellow human beings. We tracked the seven-hour ordeal of a UN convoy of humanitarian assistance from the port of Beirut to the beleaguered southern Lebanese city of Tyre. Had the Israelis not bombed out the road system, it is a trip of an hour and a half. But what is important here is that every person in that convoy could have died. The ten trucks made it through but they could very well have been bombed into smithereens by the Israeli air force. The Israelis have paid no attention to blazoned Red Cross emblems on ambulances, nor to white flags on convoys of civilians fleeing the South at Israel's own urging. Knowingly they've hit vehicles clearly marked as 'TV' and quite deliberately killed UN observers on their border. Now evidence is mounting that they are using experimental chemical weapons in Gaza developed for the American Department of Defense. (And that's a nice touch, isn't it?)

I've long since come to the conclusion that Israeli military has no notion whatsoever of anything called 'International Law'. The berserker Israeli military (now on unfettered rampage and, with a flabby Olmert government in office, in full control of Israel) confidently feels itself to be well beyond the law. Besides, the American Pentagon developed the 'experimental weapons' they're using, and the American 'Military-Industrial Complex' benefits directly from the data returned from the field. It too, as Dwight D. Eisenhower warned Americans forty-five years ago, operates outside the law.

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But let's back up a moment. The modern barbarians who control and promote today's terrorism — whether they occupy the White House, the Pentagon or the Israeli military's central offices; whether they shelter in the shadowed recesses of dark and abandoned buildings mumbling so-called Muslim mantras about vindication, vengeance and victory; or whether they take to the 'air' in bloody-minded and so-called Christian broadcasts calling for a '*jihâd*' against Islam — are not the focus for hope. On the contrary, their currency is despair; their substance is the stuff of corruption. But they must not ... and they *will* not prevail.

At a mere fraction of what they've paid out for death and devastation, American taxpayers have finally been permitted to contribute (if only a relative pittance) toward life and healing in these days. The relief ships are beginning to arrive in Lebanon (if not yet in the even more needy Gaza). But the people who put their *lives* (not merely their dollars) on the line are overwhelmingly Lebanese and Palestinians, some Israelis, Afghans, any number of other nationalities (at least one Chinese, and even a few Americans and other westerners) — Muslims, Christians and Jews, secularists and atheists, humanitarians of many stripes and colors, united under one banner that has no color or logo (nor much funding). They are simply human beings. They at least are *those*

who try. And I think of them all as having the face of Christ.

And there's glory in that! ... if *only* that! And that is glory enough. And for them — for *those who try* — let the mature among us return thanks to the Father of light.

And I greet you from the lands of the morning.