

The Babushka Brigade: What old believers say about torture of human beings

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés | Mar. 3, 2008

When I was a child, our two-bedroom-one-bathtub saltbox in the boondocks suddenly overflowed with arrival of "The Babushka Brigade."

The old women refugees called themselves "old believers" and "last of their kind." Until now, they'd lived all their lives in a tiny farm village in a part of Hungary that some said used to belong to former Romania-Yugoslavia-Transylvania-Austro-Hungarian Empire, but would soon be Soviet.

My adoptive father, an immigrant to America himself, had searched for his large Catholic family in the ruins of post-WWII Europe. He'd say: "War is not over because governments say so." "War is over when enough hearts stop hurting & hating."

Though wounded, widowed, wandering, the old women survivors were able to limp onto black ships that brought them, sick as starved dogs, to America.

In our arms, they began their slow journeys back to a semblance of life that could thrive, not just survive.

Initially, the Babushkas remained silent about soldiers and others who were cruel beyond cruel *durink de var* ? mostly, I think, because many family members misunderstood "falling apart" as permanently breaking down, rather than beginning to rebuild from rubble upward.

It's better if one doesn't try to un-story any person who has suffered, for soul is the preeminent storyteller of all that has occurred. To silence a person's most poignant stories is to silence the soul. Better to make safe time and place for such healing-speaking.

Yet, children have a "Tell me what it was like when you were little," impulse that leaps out despite adult cautions. When we were alone, I began asking my old women to tell me their lives. They'd look at me with that angry-ininitely-tender look on their faces. Perhaps because I was only a child, they'd tell me the once-upon-a-times of their huge travails and small triumphs during wartime.

I sadly learned about predatory humans who somehow became possessed by negative forces that insisted other human beings were not really human. I learned that captives were known only by numbers and by names usually reserved for inanimate objects.

Once unnamed, prisoners were perceived only as units, work joules, not even held as high as animals... but rather seen as wagons, hand trucks made of flesh and bone, made only to be herded, shocked, demeaned, injured on purpose, killed at whim. The old believers said the enemy's real purpose was to kill entire nations by cutting

soul out of each individual, one by one.

. . . Dateline Today. Déjà vu city. CIA director Michael Hayden admitted before the 2008 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence last month, something no senior U.S. intelligence official had publicly acknowledged before: Tortures have indeed been forced upon ?detainees? by the current administration.

ABC reported, ?At the time a presidential finding was signed in 2002 approving use of harsh interrogation techniques including waterboarding, one of CIA?s most senior officials registered his objections to the technique. ? In fact, a number of intelligence professionals, current and former, object to use of the technique.? Others still question the reliability of information gathered in such ways.

We may never know what happened to change the minds of Mr. Hayden and other men previously in accord with his objections to waterboarding back when Mr. Hayden prohibited the ?practice? by CIA agents in 2006.

But, what we do know is that what defines an ?old believer? is a certain kind of stubborn consciousness and conscience. They do not merely ?believe,? their souls *know* the ancient ethical mean that holds out all human life as worthy of humane respect.

The old believers of my family, old believers throughout the world, of which there are legions -- perhaps you, my dear reader, are one of them, as well as many who are ?new? old believers now too -- none would give merit to any further ?discussions? by government officials about what ?might be? and what ?might not be? torture. Old believers just say it straight out. No torture. Not acceptable. Period.

Though I?ve been a U.S. Air Force wife for 21 years, know far better than most the need for strong security and readiness, it cannot be that time-honored gold standards in ethics, social justice, religious imperatives, physiology, psychology -- that *all* hold body, mind and spirit confluences as sacred -- can be allowed to be transmuted back into lead for mere expedience?s sake.

Old believers would not support ?controlled waterboarding,? which seems the latest euphemism for an insane attempt at ?controlled death.? Neither would an old believer support such evils as ?controlled electrocution,? or ?controlled stabbing? of a human being nearly to death.

Some debate whether there are physiological or psychological damages from torture. Some boldly claim not. Yet, one needn?t be a scientist nor psychoanalyst to recognize enduring damages arising from waterboarding. Any soul who grew up on an ocean, the Great Lakes, near any body of water, anyone who nearly drowned in a whirlpool at the jetty knows that torrents of water searing through the mask of the face and lungs not only damages delicate honeycombs of paper-thin tissues, it causes unbearable pain. Drowning causes flashes of one?s entire lifetime to snap before one?s eyes in an instant.

Old believers from another side of my heritage, Mexicano, speak about the spiritual damage violence creates. *Curanderismo* is an ancient healing discipline of Latinos. It was carried from Catholic and Sephardic Old Spain, and intermingled with healing knowledge of Native Americans in the New World. In *curanderismo*, that flashing of one?s entire lifetime in moments of desperate struggle for oxygen, is understood as signal to mind from soul -- that despite all struggle-- sudden death is immanent.

In prayerful *curanderismo*, as in ethno medicine, should a person miraculously recover from purposeful torture during which the body is damaged and soul purposefully and violently cut from the body, the victim afterward is in critical conditions called *Susto* and *Espanto*, meaning sustained physical, mental and spiritual shock from imposed violence, fright and terror.

These require much prayer over the victim, much aftercare to re-call soul back into body again. Time must pass

to piece all back together. This damage and time required to heal is not because the victim was weak. It is because the violence was so strong and relentless. And some would add, so conceived in evil.

Torture: Profound physical assault and battery with intent to murder spirit and sever soul, to do intentional, long-lasting harm to a helpless human being at will.

For these reasons and more, an old believers' answer to treating even enemies indecently, is a resounding No! No driving any innocent body into the foyer of death, then saying, 'Ha, ha, just kidding.' No doubletalk about calling torture a mere 'tickling for truth telling.' No sidestepping ethical issues by waving the crepe, nor by threatening 'OK, then doom will descend because you wouldn't let us torture human beings.' No holding any human being out as an inhuman object, subject, or predicate.

But amongst the old believers: Action, yes. Raise voices; do not stop. Keep issues showing above ground by watering the story seeds over and over again. We never know which grain of story will tip the fulcrum toward goodness. Expose every effort to misdirect attention from the real subject. Note well and name those in power who neither question themselves nor allow themselves to be questioned. Remind gently, forcefully, clearly, sweetly, fiercely, tenderly. Do not abide.

The Babushka Brigade had what some would perhaps call an incomprehensible spiritual practice. Every day of their lives, they prayed that their war tormenters would be redeemed. Thus, I feel certain the old women would say to us in our time now: Pray especially for men and women who torture others.

I admit I struggle. As a child I wondered how we could possibly pray for such bad people. I understood the Babushkas to say that despite revulsion, even righteous anger, to pull a person of cruel acts from the muck of their own hell, we had to step into the mud at least a little to create the necessary traction to help.

In this way, we could pray for someone to grant cruel people a pathway that would allow them to return to their true souls in this lifetime, and, by so doing, though cruel people might have un-named us and others by treating us as less than human, we would not do the same to them in return.

Not because we are 'trying' to be naively good little poppets, but because we are dedicated to being knowingly bad in a big way: bad by defying that other ill conventional un wisdom that runs loose in our culture, one that says humans, once fallen, are forever irredeemable. By soul's light, by old believers' sights, that's not so.

If you would allow me, one of best blessings I know from the Babushka Brigade I'd like to share with you now until we meet again: *Let everything in you that can sing, be sung; everything that can dance, be danced; everything that can heal, be healed; everything that can love, be loved in return.*

So may it be for you.

So may it be for me.

So may it be for all of us.

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