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Who will weep for the cemetery of innocents?

Joan Chittister | Jun. 10, 2006 From Where I Stand

I read one Memorial Day speech after another this weekend, from one end ttof this country to the next. Every one of them was incomplete. One question ttwent unanswered, in fact, unasked, in all of them: What are we supposed to do ttwhen the numbers of war dead continues to climb? How does a person handle so

The macabre list is growing beyond belief. It touches every part of the ttpopulation, and in slithery, menacing ways touching even those seemingly ttunaffected by it as well. Day after day the stories come in.

More than 20 civilians killed in a brutal massacre in Haditha. Not by ttthem but by us as U.S. Marines turned on civilians -- women and children among ttthem -- to avenge the death of one of their own, to compensate for their ttaccumulating frustrations and losses.

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Two more journalists join the more than 120 reporters and commentators ttalready killed in Iraq, another headline reads. And this, in a country where, ttwe were told, the war had ended, the mission -- whatever it really was -- was tt“achieved,” and the people were “liberated.”

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Almost 18,000 U.S. soldiers wounded, the government finally tells us, ttmore than 10,000 of them “seriously” -- meaning “disabled for ttlife.”

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Almost 2,500 U.S. soldiers have died while their children wait at home ttfor fathers to return, while their wives are pregnant with the children the ttfathers will never see, while their parents find themselves bereft of sons and ttdaughters they never dreamed they would outlive. And all of them with nothing ttbut a triangulated flag to cling to for comfort, for the future.

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Thousands and thousands of anonymous Iraqis -- whom no one counts and no
ttone names -- shot, bombed, missing, gone. Some of them under the rubble. Many
ttof them in the graves. Unending files of them fled from the cities they loved
ttwhile just as many more are left in their villages or city centers helpless,
ttunemployed, simply waiting for the next act of insurgency, the next massacre.
ttBy somebody. Anybody.

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Indeed, the traumatized stare into space on both sides. They have had
tttoo much stress, too much horror, too much loss, too much unending, relentless,
ttagonizing fear to go blithely on in the face of such horror, pretending that it
ttdoes not exist.

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Those symptoms have a name, of course, to denote the scarred and
ttshattered and dead of soul. Posttraumatic stress disorder they call it,
ttmeaning, of course, the agony that comes from having seen the inhuman, having
ttdone the inhuman, having been part of the inhuman.

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Like the young soldier assigned to carry the little girl with the
ttbobbing head to a body bag while, he reports, his comrades cleaned up the
ttevidence of the massacre in which she had been killed and her brains dripped
ttdown his fatigues and spattered his boots.*

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Then the emotional crippling comes. In the dark this time. Where they
ttwill suffer alone all the rest of their lives.

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And what about the rest of us?

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We have three choices, it seems.

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First, we can become totally desensitized to the mayhem around us and
ttthe devastation it has left in its wake.

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Dinned day and night by TV replays of real life war strikes, life
ttbecomes one large unending Nintendo game for us. Reality becomes just like the
ttsoftware we buy so our children can shoot at digital figures who never bleed,
ttnever cry, never look us in the eye before we shoot them.

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The second choice, of course, is simply to turn away from it, simply
ttunwilling to engage with it anymore. After all, in the end, when all the talks
ttare finished, all the petitions are signed, all the political campaigns over
ttand the votes tallied, it is out of our hands. Better to watch a soap opera,
ttbetter to drown our conscience in situation comedies. Be positive. Be hopeful.
ttTrust.

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But there is a third choice, more true to the spiritual tradition that
ttbred us, more cleansing of our psyches, and, in the long run, more effective.
ttWe can, with the second century monastics of the desert, rediscover the power
ttof “the gift of tears,” the sense to recognize and unmask the tragedy
ttof evil in the society around us and the sense of powerlessness within us that
ttenables us to ignore it, to take it for granted, to accept it.

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We can, as Christians, begin to regret, to repent, to decry, to grieve
ttthe evil.

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“The beginning of compunction is the beginning of new life,”
ttGeorge Eliot wrote. Remorse is not nothing. Grief is not useless. It changes
ttthe heart of a people. It cautions them to think better, to think in new ways,
ttbefore they are once again tempted to bomb and beat a people into submission,
ttinto “freedom.” It makes them new -- and eventually the society with
ttthem. One person at a time finally learns to feel. It’s called
tt“soul.”

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It’s possible that we are now approaching the margins of the human
ttcondition. We are drowning in insensitivity. We are escaping into escape.

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We have lost the capacity to weep ourselves into the fullness of our
tthumanity.

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From where I stand, it seems to me that until we are willing to face
ttwhat is happening in our name in this society, to regret it, to own the agony
ttof it, it will go on. We will go numbly on, totally unaware of the diminishing
tteffects of this culture of violence on both them and us.

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We will go on in our time heaping up a cemetery of innocents and, on
ttMemorial Days to come, call ourselves good for having done it.

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* From a **ttHREF="http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/05/29/marines.haditha.ap/index.html">**
CNN
ttinterview with Susie Briones, mother of Marine Lance Cpl. Ryan Briones.
ttRyan Briones told the
ttHREF="http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2006/05/30/marine_tormented_by_memories_of_ca
Los
ttAngeles Times that he took photographs of the of Iraqi civilian
ttvictims in Haditha and helped carry their bodies out of their homes as part of
ttthe cleanup crew sent in after the Nov. 19 killings.

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