

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 of this country to the next. Every one of them was incomplete. One question went unanswered, in fact, unasked, in all of them: What are we supposed to do when 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 population, and in slithery, menacing ways touching even those seemingly unaffected by it as well. Day after day the stories come in.

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

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

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Almost 18,000 U.S. soldiers wounded, the government finally tells us, more than 10,000 of them "seriously" -- meaning "disabled for life."

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Almost 2,500 U.S. soldiers have died while their children wait at home for fathers to return, while their wives are pregnant with the children the fathers will never see, while their parents find themselves bereft of sons and daughters they never dreamed they would outlive. And all of them with nothing but 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
tone 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 the devastation it has left in its wake.

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Dinned day and night by TV replays of real life war strikes, life becomes one large unending Nintendo game for us. Reality becomes just like the software we buy so our children can shoot at digital figures who never bleed, never 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 unwilling to engage with it anymore. After all, in the end, when all the talks are finished, all the petitions are signed, all the political campaigns over and the votes tallied, it is out of our hands. Better to watch a soap opera, better to drown our conscience in situation comedies. Be positive. Be hopeful. Trust.

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But there is a third choice, more true to the spiritual tradition that bred us, more cleansing of our psyches, and, in the long run, more effective. We can, with the second century monastics of the desert, rediscover the power of “the gift of tears,” the sense to recognize and unmask the tragedy of evil in the society around us and the sense of powerlessness within us that enables 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 the evil.

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

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It's possible that we are now approaching the margins of the human condition. 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 humanity.

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From where I stand, it seems to me that until we are willing to face what is happening in our name in this society, to regret it, to own the agony of it, it will go on. We will go numbly on, totally unaware of the diminishing effects 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 Memorial 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">](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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