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Journalists & Bravery

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

I am not a courageous person and my job entails little in the way of personal risk, unless you count getting cold hands waiting for the bus to take me to a conference or seminar downtown. Most mornings, the dust and dog hair in the study are the only threats to my health as I sit at my computer, read the emails, check out the key websites and pen my blog posts. For me, a tough day is one in which I have to change out of sweats.

Some fellow journalists, however, are courageous. Three of them – NBC correspondent Richard Engel, producer Ghazi Balkiz, and cameraman John Kooistra – were freed yesterday after being abducted by militia forces loyal to the criminal regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. The militiamen had been trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which is a formal name for a group of thugs. They intended to negotiate a prisoner swap for four Iranian agents and two Lebanese Shabiha members held by the rebels. (Yes, while the U.S. sends words into Syria, spoken from the safety of the State Department briefing room, the Iranians are sending in agents.) The militia men killed one of the rebels driving the NBC crew on the spot, and took the rest, including two unnamed members of the crew, to a series of safe houses where they conducted mock executions. “I made good with my Maker,” said Kooistra. “I made good with myself. I was prepared to die many times.” The group was held captive for five days.

Engel and his crew are enormously courageous. They endured these dangers turned into horrors to bring the outside world news of what is going on inside Syria. They are not alone. Each year, dozens upon dozens of journalists give the lie to that characterization of the “lame stream media” by enduring these or similar dangers to bring the rest of us the news. Each year, dozens are killed.

I sent an email to a friend the other day who is a foreign journalist with this kind of courage. (I shall not

reveal her name for reasons that will become obvious.) I asked where I should send her Christmas card. She emailed back that she was in Tunisia covering the post-Arab Spring adjustments in that county, was then headed to Yemen, and would be back in Europe in the New Year. A westerner who goes to Yemen is a courageous person. None of this surprised. Back in the 90s, my friend was in Sarajevo during the siege. This occasioned one of the more bizarre moments in my life. She was staying with the rest of the foreign press corps at the Holiday Inn in Sarajevo, a building that was often targeted by Serb snipers. She told me to call. I had never called into a war zone and was not sure what to expect. I certainly had never expected what I got. The phone rang just twice before a cheerful-sounding voice picked up and said, "Holiday Inn, Sarajevo. How may I direct your call?" The normalcy of the greeting in such a situation tempted me to ask, "Do you have a pool? The kids won't come without a pool."

Another time, she was expelled from a country and told she would be put in jail if she ever returned. She said she had always been wanting to write an article about the prisons in that country and so she grabbed a flight that landed there and then continued on to other airports of call before returning three days later. She spent those three days in jail, was put on the return flight, and wrote a powerful story about women's prisons.

I am unworthy to count myself a colleague of such brave people. But, as a citizen who tries and stays informed, I am enormously grateful for those members of the guild we share who are braver than me. Much braver. There is much to criticize about the press, much of which was on display in the reporting in Newtown, most of it tied to the valuing of speed over meeting the most basic reporting standard, answering the questions: Who? What? When? Why? How? But, then there is Richard Engel and his crew and my friend who is headed to Yemen. We should all be humbled by their bravery and very, very grateful for their reporting.

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