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Kathy Kelly: A Valentine message from Afghanistan

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It's Valentine's Day, and opening the little cartoon on the Google page brings up a sentimental animation with Tony Bennett singing "why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart."

Here in Dubai, where I?m awaiting a visa to visit Afghanistan, the weather is already warm and humid. But my bags are packed with sweaters because Kabul is still reeling from the coldest winter on record. Two weeks ago, eight children under age five froze to death there in one of the sprawling refugee camps inhabited by so many who have fled from the battles in other provinces. Since January 15, at least 23 children under 5 have frozen to death in the camps.

And just over a week ago, eight young shepherds, all but one under 14 years of age, lit a fire for warmth on the snowy Afghan mountainside in Kapisa Province where they were helping support their families by grazing sheep. French troops saw the fire, and acted on faulty information, and the boys were all killed in two successive NATO airstrikes. The usual denunciations from local authorities, and Western apologies, followed. (Trend News, February 10, 2012).

So I'm thinking about warmth, and who we share it with and who we don't.

This is an unexpected trip for me. I had first planned to spend this week at home in Chicago, and then, rather suddenly, agreed to join a group of informal human rights observers traveling to Bahrain for the one year anniversary of their brutally repressed "February 17th Revolution" (please follow events there, and demand that the U.S. cease arming Bahrain's dictatorship, at witnessbahrain.org). Bahraini authorities declined to issue me a visa, and so I asked the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers if I could change my plans and spend the coming week with them.

My friends tell me that the apartment where I?m headed has been without electricity for several days in a row. The pipes have frozen, so there will be no running water. But in spite of the cold, it?s an especially good time to visit them because twelve of them will be there, on winter vacation from school, including two 14 year old boys I couldn't meet during my last visit who spent much of the last year away from the others, back home in Bamiyan province, in their mountain villages, supporting their families.

One father left the family to find work elsewhere and is now living in Iran. My young friend doesn't hear from his father much, but I wonder what he must think as war threatens to move there. The mother launders clothes to help make ends meet, but with one weak arm due to a history of polio, she can't earn enough for the family's food. Her son is an excellent student, but she's had to ask him to give up school and start adult work full time. Older members of the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers have worked hard finding him odd jobs in various shops, hoping to put off the day when he will have to start full time work as a shepherd.

I've just, by coincidence, read the story of another young man, training for work in the mountains: the article

reaches me from friends I have just left in Colorado Springs, and begins: "Pfc. Josh Harris pulled the charging handle of a grenade launcher on Thursday, leaned back and peered through the sights. His orders were clear. ?All right,? said Spc. Michael Breton, moments earlier. ?There is an ice cream truck out there. So shoot it.? Pressing down with his thumbs, the MK-19 ? a machine gun equipped with grenades instead of bullets ? launched four training grenades 300 meters down a Fort Carson range." (www.gazette.com/articles/gis-133359-through-peered.html) This is last-minute training before shipping out with the Fort's 4th Brigade Combat Team. "By March," the reporter continues, "he?ll likely be watching grenades sail into the hillsides of eastern Afghanistan."

Everyone knows that these attacks will kill civilians - will kill children. If you fire enough bullets where there are children you're going to hit them. A few days back filmmaker John McHugh described his twelve day stint embedded in the U.S.' "Operation Mace" in Afghanistan's Nuristan province: ?Over the course of my stay on Mace, I witnessed the truly awesome firepower that the U.S. military brings to a fight. Between their helicopters and jets they had dropped 19 bombs, fired two Hellfire missiles, 205 rockets, 500 rounds of 20 millimeter, and 210 rounds of 30-millimetre cannon. They also discharged 3,750 rounds of 50 caliber machine gun ammunition. And yet, only once, could they confirm that they had killed a single Taliban fighter.? McHugh wrote this for Mideast-based broadcaster Al Jazeera (?The Winter War,? February 9, 2012). Would a Western media outlet have bothered covering the story?

It?s hard to fathom the vast indifference of Western observers to what their militaries are doing in Afghanistan - to the lives lost, the futures broken, the families and friendships and loves torn apart - all of which will occur in the next country we collectively agree to demolish, and the next. Our apathy surely makes it easier for military and political elites to wage multiple wars. They count on us to look out at a world that we have been told is barbaric and feral, addled (unlike ours) with terrifying fundamentalism driving them (unlike us) to incessant violence.

We lull ourselves into a comforting delusion that we're waging humanitarian wars, and then wonder why people aren't more grateful. Thinking of ourselves as exceptionally noble, we're lost in denial masked as civilizing virtue as we hum along with Tony Bennett?s puzzled lyrics:

"I tried so hard my dear to show that you're my only dream
Yet you're afraid each thing I do is just some evil scheme.
A memory from your lonesome past keeps us so far apart.
Why can't I free your doubtful mind, and melt your cold, cold heart?"

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