

Guantanamo Bay Reflections: Spiritual Readiness and the New War

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The catastrophic events of 11 September, 2001, ushered us into a world very different from the one we knew even the day before. Our military forces quickly positioned themselves to fight an illusive enemy, and all of us waited daily to hear that those responsible for the numbing death and destruction had been captured or killed. The early military efforts in Afghanistan garnered a few hundred detainees. We now hold about that number at our Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (GTMO).

When the decision was made to send detainees to GTMO, United States Southern Command (SOCOM) activated Joint Task Force (JTF) 160 to guard and interrogate them. JTF 160, in turn, requested a Special Psychiatric Rapid Intervention Team (SPRINT) to train JTF 160 personnel regarding stress management, suicide prevention, and spiritual self-care. I was part of the SPRINT team that arrived on 22 January. As soon as we arrived, we were training, evaluating, and making recommendations to the JTF leadership about morale, quality of life, and the psychological/spiritual issues affecting the servicemen and women involved in the operation.

We paid particular attention to military personnel in direct contact with the detainees: US Army Military Police guards, US Marine Corps perimeter watchstanders, and US Navy medical personnel. I conducted training on "Spiritual Readiness/Self Care." My goal was to show how, in this new war, we are confronted with spiritual issues that we must address to understand our present enemy properly. I emphasized that, ultimately, the "real" enemy is not a single religion or nation, but *evil* personified.



Islam shares with other major religions the problem of adherents convinced that their God directs (or at least condones) acts of evil inflicted upon the innocent. Evil is an age-old reality, yet we cannot ignore its destructive power in the present era. At the detention site in Cuba, our service-members are confronted with people who have been consumed by a misguided, delusional spirit of evil. Many of the troops wondered how they were to respond to the detainees, who were so very devout in their beliefs.

Our troops also wanted to know how their own faith traditions could provide an effective source of meaning and an explanation for the blatant ideological and spiritual disparities in that environment. The troops knew that the men they were guarding at Camp X-ray were dangerous, and that the detention process was a necessary part of our war on terrorism. And yet, they also saw these same people reverently bowing in prayer five times a day and spending hours reading the Koran, the sacred scripture of Islam.

Navy Chaplain Abuhena Saiful Islam was sent to GTMO to provide religious ministry to the detainees and advise the JTF Commander. The introduction of an imam to the operation demonstrated that the conflict could not be defined simply as a struggle with the tenants of Islam. The detainees' commitment to the goals and actions of terrorism were based on an evil misappropriation and manipulation of their religion. Ultimately, as President Bush has pointed out in numerous speeches, America is fighting evil in our world, not any particular religion.

And if our struggle is with evil, there are spiritual elements that call for a spiritual response. We keep our bodies strong through proper physical exercise and diet. We strengthen our mental capacity through challenging academic pursuits. But what of our spiritual strength? We must exercise our spirituality in positive and healthy ways on an ongoing basis, or we will find ourselves helplessly vulnerable to the “wiles of the evil one.”

Positive spirituality incorporates positive spiritual imagery and language. Its focus is helping others rather than hurting them. It is humanitarian in content, and not given to gross exaggerations or extremist beliefs. Positive spirituality utilizes the precepts and ideals from spiritually healthy, faith-based belief systems and institutions, which hold in common the admonition to show respect to others at all times.

Our spiritual development starts with our families of origin, our communities, and exposure to the traditions, culture, and religion in which we were raised. Given the diversity of the cultures and religions represented in America and the world, we can still recognize spiritual values that are shared by all. Evidence of the “golden rule” in the religious codes and standards of all the world’s major religions and cultures is an instructive example of this. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is not limited to a particular faith tradition, but expresses a common value shared by many. There is something transcendental about this universal rule that resonates in our spiritual core. I believe it confirms our connection to the primal source of all creation: we were created in the image of God, and it is in Him that the totality of our existence—body, mind, and spirit— finds ultimate purpose and meaning.

Spiritual development must then be cultivated through our commitment to an intentional regimen of self-care and deliberate action. This involves connecting with others who feel as we do about the importance of spirituality in every aspect of our life and work. It can be enhanced in events such as participation in worship, scripture study, workshops, open discussion and meditation. Spiritual readiness requires that we make time to explore these options, as we develop a healthy spirituality.

It is important that we listen to the signals within our spiritual being, for to neglect our spirituality is the same as a marathon runner who neglects his

physical training but still expects to win the big race. Or, it is like a student who desires to ace her examination but makes no effort to devote any time to study in preparation. In GTMO, as a part of my presentation, I encouraged the troops to be informed about their spiritual traditions and to practice their faith, as it can make a positive difference in all that they do. My words were met with great enthusiasm. Many of the soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Coast Guard personnel asked about having scriptures available to read and inquired daily about the various worship services conducted at the base chapel or at remote sites throughout the base.

As special religious and cultural advisor to JTF 160, Chaplain Saiful Islam provided invaluable exposure, explanation and training regarding Islam to the troops at every level. Additionally, the cooperative presence, availability and effectiveness of the Joint Service ministry teams, composed of chaplains, Religious Program Specialists, Chaplain Assistants and Religious Lay Leaders underscored the principles of spiritual connection and shared values highlighted in this article. Being a religious professional and career naval officer, I was excited to witness the unfolding of the vision statement of our Corps in a new and exciting way, “Devoted to God and Country, we unite to deliver innovative, life transforming service throughout and beyond the Sea Services.”

Another important point that reinforced the value of spiritual readiness in situations of high stress and potential conflict was that evil must not be met with evil, but rather evil must be overcome with good. In this vein, our troops carried out their duties admirably and treated the detainees in the most humane way, exhibiting the highest respect for the differences of culture and faith. We who are committed to dismantling the terrorist network in this war recognize that, by the power of God, evil will not prevail, and those responsible for the attack on September 11th, and any other acts of terrorism, will be brought to justice.

In this war, there is an even greater struggle underway than the one being waged on conventional battlefields with planes and artillery and rifles. The conflict between the power of good and the deception of evil will be decided in the hearts and minds of men and women worldwide. The theological justifications offered by our enemies for their actions in this war serve as vivid reminders

that our troops must continue to be prepared for the other, deeper conflict of meaning and morality. For this, they will need more than just the temporal weapons of war. Our men and women will need to equip themselves with superior spiritual armaments to contend effectively with the message of hate and the culture of death that motivate our enemies in their evil assaults.

In GTMO, I witnessed the glow on a young Marine's face as he realized for the first time that the positive spiritual strength he possessed, as taught to him by his faith tradition, was stronger than the evil he sensed among some of the detainees in the camp. He could steady his rifle and stand his post with greater confidence because he had the assurance that our cause is just in this war against evil. I saw young people searching through the scriptures, looking for guidance to this awesome task that they are called to, and through their search, finding deeper meaning and purpose for their involvement in this operation. As one young Seabee told me, "Chaplain, I know I'm building these detainment units for a good cause. And God knows that these people had to be

stopped. I'm going to continue to do my part so that my little girl can grow up and board a plane safely, to fly wherever in the world she wants to go. That's why I'm here."

In conclusion, I am reminded of a text from the Christian scriptures, Ephesians 6:10-13, which gives perspective to the spiritual warfare that is upon us, and our need to be diligent in our preparations for such attacks:

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the evil one. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

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