

# Women's Fast for Peace

## Weekly Reflections

**March 12, 2003**

Why fast? I made this decision to fast exactly a week ago, when I learned about a "Women's Fast for Peace" on the web site of the Mennonite Central Committee: every Wednesday until a peaceful solution in Iraq is reached or war starts. I have observed a weekly 24-hour fast on one other occasion, during a time of great need for discernment. I found this previous experience to be a wonderful prompt to prayer. Fasting is enacted prayer.

I wake up slowly this morning listening to the news on NPR. Condoleeza Rice is telling me that the military build-up in the Gulf is the Bush's administration attempt at a diplomatic response to Saddam Hussein. Gradually I realize that today is Wednesday, my day to fast. I begin to pray for a peaceful resolution to the situation in Iraq.

Mine is a "juice and water" fast, though I admit that I am unwilling to give up my morning coffee. So I have invented a form of fasting called "coffee, juice, and water." It is an extravagant and privileged fast. I drink coffee flavored with French Vanilla creamer, a bottle of V8, and ice water in a Styrofoam cup from the cafeteria at work. I think about millions who do not have clean drinking water and I pray about that. Some of these millions will be Iraqi children whom UNICEF is already rushing to vaccinate against measles, for which children in war zones are at an increased risk. I pray for the children of Iraq.

At lunchtime I buy another bottle of V8 and am surprised that this fast is much easier than the one I observed years ago. My juice of choice back then was orange. Perhaps this is the difference. I read an encouraging e-mail I received from the Mennonite Central Committee. I pray the prayer it contains.

At home I go to the kitchen to prepare dinner: quiche, roasted potatoes, fruit salad, biscuits. I resist the temptation to eat a handful of the sunflower seeds I'm sprinkling on the salad. After the blessing, I take my first bite since dinner the night before. "I am so hungry!" I announce. "I haven't eaten all day." "Why not?" my husband asks. "I'm fasting for peace with the Mennonite women." "That won't work," my son offers. I pray that he is wrong.

**March 19, 2003**

I wake to the NPR news announcer describing the scene in Baghdad. A taxicab out of the city, which will surely receive the worst of the US invasion, costs over \$1200 US. This fee is unimaginably out of reach for most of the city's residents. They are trapped. I am haunted by the president's words of Monday evening to the people of Iraq, "The day of your liberation is near." I pray that the president will come to his senses.

A letter to the editor in the morning newspaper suggests that the billions and billions of dollars that we will spend to make war on Iraq could be better spent on securing peace between Israel and Palestinians. We have no money to pay our children's teachers a decent salary. We have no money to provide medical insurance for one in six of our country's citizens. Yet we have billions of dollars to pour into a war on Iraq. I pray that we will come to our senses.

My day passes quietly; I spend it at home with my children on spring break. I knit, I write, I study the Bible. Isaiah relates a vision of a day when "they shall build houses and inhabit them . . . they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit . . . they shall not bear children for calamity . . . they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." I pray this vision may come to pass.

In the late afternoon I drive my daughter's playmate home and listen to the news. US forces are dropping leaflets urging Iraqi soldiers to surrender and bombing anti-aircraft missile launchers just beyond the border. Already seventeen Iraqi soldiers have crossed the border into Kuwait to surrender.

At the Kirk that evening, prayers are lifted up: "be with our troops and return them safely home . . . give our leaders wisdom and discernment . . . be with all who suffer." Do I dare speak my only prayer? "Forgive us, God, for what we are about to do to the children of Iraq. Take out of our flesh our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh."

Late at night we watch the news. The US is flying air strikes over Baghdad. President Bush is telling us that we will not stop until we have complete victory. I cannot even comprehend what complete victory means. We have lost so much of our souls already. "Good night, sweet dreams, I love you," I say to my son who is staying up to watch the war.

***March 26, 2003***

More US deaths and reports of Iraqis grieving the deaths of 14 civilians in a market area hit by a stray missile. In my e-mail box, I open the scripture sent to me by the church's daily lectionary service and read from Jeremiah, "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!" I can read the names of fallen American soldiers on the Pentagon's web site, but the fallen Iraqis are nameless and faceless to me. The same God weeps for both. I pray that the God of Abraham, whom Americans and Iraqis worship alike, will have mercy on us both.

It turns out to be a very busy day at work. Meetings, pressing tasks, needs of customers and coworkers leave me with little time to stop and think. It is a strange feeling, not unlike my experience of a death in the family. From time to time, I am shocked at the normality of the day. It makes me uneasy to see myself and everyone around me going about our business as though bombs weren't flying over Iraq, as though attackers weren't deceiving American soldiers under a flag of surrender, as though soldiers and civilians weren't dying. I look at the list of military dead, "Fallen Warriors," the Pentagon calls them. The oldest of them is 42, the youngest 19. I have no words to pray with.

In the late afternoon, I hear that a close family member has gone to the hospital with chest pains and dizziness. The first reports are that she will be fine and I consider carefully how to tell my children. If normal life seems out of place in war time, then sudden illness seems too much of a burden on top of it all. When I am able to talk to her and learn that she really will be fine and is just in for observation and tests, I am able to tell the children. Later that night, in the hospital, we visit and laugh and enjoy each other's company. A box of chocolates, a shared laugh, a hug are as fitting a prayer as I can think of.

***April 2, 2003***

A surprising effect of fasting is that it draws my attention not to what I lack, but to what I have, or at least to the options available to me. This morning I walk a hundred yards to the cafeteria and am amazed at the array of coffees, bottled waters, and juices I have to choose from: Hazelnut, Mocha, Columbian Supreme, French Roast, Vienna, Aquafina, Deer Park, Crystal, V8, Minute Maid, Tropicana Twister, Powerade. Yesterday I read a New York Times reporter's account of Iraqis filling drinking containers from open pools of contaminated water because it is all they have available. The reporter met one man who walked ten miles one way to buy eggs for his family. Some American troops have been allowed only one meal a day while supply chains are delayed. War causes deprivation on all sides.

Though I oppose this war, I have tried to support the American service men and women who are fighting it and to relieve the suffering it causes. The deprivations caused by this war occur not only in Iraq, but also here at home. So our family has provided support on both sides: through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Iraq Appeal and through the Air Force Aid Society. These relief efforts seem ironic to me, however, when I consider that deprivation—economic and political—is among the root causes of war.

I began this fast as a sign and symbol of my opposition to this war. It has been an act of solidarity with the people of Iraq. Yet as I read about the deprivations of American soldiers and of their families at home—some of whom are having to get by on less than half of their usual family income—it occurs to me that it is also an act of solidarity with them.

War causes deprivation. Deprivation causes war. How then shall I pray? Isaiah says, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well" (65:21-23). It is a prayer for plenty, for everyone: Iraqis, Americans, civilians, soldiers. It is a prayer for eradication of poverty and want, for uprooting the causes of war. Let it be.

***April 9, 2003***

The news this morning is that Baghdad is falling. What Iraqi officials said would never happen is happening: the Iraqi people are greeting American soldiers in the streets of Baghdad with flowers. I wonder what it must feel like to be an American soldier being handed a flower by an Iraqi citizen. I wonder what it must feel like to be an Iraqi citizen handing a flower to an American soldier. Surely the feelings that pass between are mutual relief, a wary trust, and hope. My hope is that it is a humbling experience for the soldier. My hope is that the American military, with its goals in sight, will soon be able to turn from combat to servanthood. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves," Paul writes, "but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:19-21). I pray that food and water and medical relief will find its way quickly to the heart of Baghdad.

By midday, the television in the break room shows images of Iraqis and American soldiers pulling down statues of Saddam in Baghdad. One of these statues, the reporter says, is "pointing toward Jerusalem." Jerusalem, a city where Muslims, Christians, and Jews worship, the target of a dictator's ambition, lies at the heart of much of the conflict in the Middle East. I "pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.' For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, 'Peace be within you.' For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good" (Psalm 122:6-9).

People are looting government buildings in Baghdad. People who are desperate for material subsistence are raiding ministry offices for refrigerators, desks, chairs, whatever they can carry away and sell or trade for food and water. At Wednesday evening prayer service, a worshipper prays that Christ's peace will calm this desperation. My own prayer is that we will see this military victory as an opportunity to serve rather than as an opportunity to loot Iraq in our own way.