

David W. Lloyd: Voices On Passion Sunday

David W. Lloyd
Seekers Church
March 28, 1999

Voices On Passion Sunday

We came to worship today to celebrate Palm Sunday, the triumphal entry of Jesus and his disciples into Jerusalem. We came envisioning ourselves as the joyous throng, waving palm fronds and throwing our garments into the street to show our love and respect for Jesus as he rides into the final conflict of Good Friday. We are eager for the imminent coming of God's kingdom, for Jesus to bring an end to the suffering voices we can hear in the background.

I have spent my professional career trying to end one form of suffering, child abuse neglect. I began while in law school, where I learned litigation by representing abused and delinquent children. My first client was a 3-month old baby whose teenage schizophrenic mother had poisoned him. I had one client in a loving foster home because his mother had attacked him with an axe, and two preschool sibling clients whose mother's boyfriend had sexually abused them while they were in the care of a grandparent ill with blindness and dementia.

In my nine years at Children's Hospital I saw child victims of violence on a daily basis – children who had been physically and sexually abused: children who had been intentionally burned so seriously that they were unconscious from the powerful narcotics given to control their pain, infants deliberately made ill so that their parents could get the attention they craved from physicians, toddlers with permanent

brain damage from having been shaken severely, preschool children and adolescents who had been raped, all of them bearing internal scars. I heard their voices of suffering as they talked to police officers, physicians, social workers, and lawyers.

I moved to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 1987, where I had less direct contact with child victims. Instead, in dealing with the legal issues of eradicating child pornography I had occasion to see the faces of children in pain or fear who were being photographed and videotaped during their sexual abuse so that the abuser could later relive the experience, or could trade or sell the "product." I spent some of my time reading about juvenile prostitutes – mostly kids who had to run away from home to save their lives or their sanity, and who survived by selling their bodies to someone who took sexual gratification but ignoring their fear of AIDS. I spent a lot of my time talking with parents whose child had been abducted by another parent or by a stranger. These parents would call the Center on their child's birthday or the anniversary of their child's abduction because they knew Center staff could hear their suffering and would understand and commiserate. Parents who had lost their child to the child's other parent did not care about the legal technicalities that thwarted them from recovering their child, but only wanted relief from their suffering.

When I entered government service in 1991, I became an administrator of a bureaucracy at HHS, and since 1995 at the Department of Defense that addresses child abuse systemically. Occasionally I handle correspondence or get a phone call from a parent or from victims of spouse abuse. Occasionally I lead a team of professionals to a military base where a pedophile has sexually abused a number of kids, and I see the victims and their parents. But these occasions are rare. Since 1991 I have had little direct contact with either child victims or their parents. Their voices of suffering have faded away.

I live in Silver Spring and work in Arlington at Ballston. When I drive to work in the morning I turn out of our 1940's development Court, get on University Boulevard, and turn left at Four Corners onto Colesville Road and then down the ramp onto the outer loop of the Beltway. I crawl in traffic for a couple of miles and then cruise in the left two lanes at the speed limit across the American Legion Bridge, down the George Washington Parkway and Chain Bridge Road, climb up Glebe Road, and then take Military Road and Quincy Road through Arlington. I turn into the parking garage under the building in which I work.

In the evening I usually drive down Wilson Boulevard to Rosslyn, across the Teddy Roosevelt Bridge and up Beach Drive in Rock Creek Park to Piney Branch Road, on Arkansas Avenue to 13th St., NW. Up the hill to rejoin Piney Branch Road into Maryland, through the Indian Springs neighborhood to University Boulevard, and back into our development.

Sometimes for variety I will go into the heart of Silver Spring and down into Rock Creek Park, take I-66 and the Teddy Roosevelt Bridge onto Arlington Boulevard to Clarendon, Wilson Boulevard to Quincy Street and the entrance to the parking garage. More frequently I will reverse this to come home. I can also go through downtown Silver Spring, cross Rock Creek Park on Nebraska Avenue and proceed past American University down Foxhall Road to Canal Road, over Key Bridge to Rosslyn and out Wilson Boulevard to my office.

If I'm working late, past 7 p.m., I may leave the parking garage, take North Fairfax Drive to the entrance ramp to I-66 west to the cutoff for Dulles Airport, then the inner loop of the Beltway and follow it to Colesville Road, then turn right at Four Corners onto University Boulevard, and into our development.

Why am I giving you these daily travelogues? It struck me this week that whichever route I take, I am almost certain to avoid

any sign of human suffering. Serious traffic accidents with injuries are pretty rare on these routes. The Beltway, the George Washington Parkway, I-66, and Military Road travel through parkland and some of the toniest suburbs imaginable. Only on 13th Street and Piney Branch Road do I encounter any homes that are middle class to lower middle class.

And to top it off, I usually listen to classical music on the radio or to a favorite tape or CD, turning only occasionally to WAMU for discussions of serious issues of interest to the well educated. I confess that I have no idea what stations or frequencies broadcast talk radio discussions that appeal to the lower middle class and socioeconomic groups below that. Nor do I listen to the AM broadcasts in languages other than English that keep our large immigrant population in touch with news from their homelands.

In fact, if I carefully choose my movies and TV shows, I can manage my life so that with only a little effort I will encounter human suffering only occasionally. As an educated white male upper class American I can insulate myself from misery. My life can become the "Truman Show" or "Pleasantville." I have to work much harder to encounter suffering.

And yet, as the voices today remind me, there are voices of suffering all around me. I only have to exert some effort to hear them. In a sense, I have developed a disability; I have become morally disabled – I cannot hear the cries of the wounded, or see their scars, or remember their pain.

I claim to be a Christian, that is, a follower of the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. What does that mean? If I am serious in my claim, it means that I choose to live my life as he lived his. And if I choose to do this, I will be confronted with an alternative way to live that is both exciting and challenging and ultimately threatening.

Over and over we are told in the Gospels that Jesus encountered suffering in the sick and the crippled, in those excluded from participating in the rituals of Jewish faith because of their sins, in those grieving for loved ones who had died. When he encountered them, the Gospels state that "he was moved to compassion," or that "he showed mercy." Such descriptions indicate that the richness of the English language is still inadequate to describe something from another culture. In Hebrew the word "compassion" is linked to a feeling, particularly to the part of the body from which deep emotions come. For women, this is the womb, and there are many examples in the Hebrew Scriptures of God's love for Israel being linked to feelings of the womb – the source of life and nurture. For men, it is the bowels – the gut to which we refer when we know we are in touch with our deepest feelings, our intuition of rightness. But in Hebrew the word is also linked to action – one feels the deepest emotion of life-giving and sustaining love, of the rightness of something – and then one acts upon that feeling. This is altogether different from showing mercy, an act that may spring from calculation or otherwise be divorced from feeling.

To be merciful as God as merciful is better rendered as to be compassionate as God is compassionate – to act out of the deepest emotion of life giving and sustaining love, of the rightness of something. And so Jesus heals, forgives sins and companions himself with those who had been excluded, raises the dead. To follow Jesus is to feel that same depth of feeling, and to act out of that same depth of feeling. In his first letter to the Church at Corinth Paul reminds us that the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit is love, *agape* love, and God's all encompassing compassion.

When I act out of *agape* love I encounter paradox. The Sermon on the Mount is a blessing for the poor and the oppressed. When one acts out of the depth of feeling for the poor and the oppressed, when one joins in solidarity with them, one sees

that much of their suffering is due to the effects of our worldly values on them. For example, to be poor in America is to be perceived as sinful – something is wrong with you if you are poor: you are lazy, or stupid, or made the wrong decisions, or are the wrong color.

If I truly identify with the poor and truly feel compassion for those who are poor, I give up all that I have – my nice home and other nice material possessions, the public acceptance and prestige that I dearly love, my Seekers faith community, and even my family – Sharon and the girls, my parents, and my siblings. And when I give such things up, I will become persecuted and rejected like the poor I am serving.

The paradox is that to eliminate suffering, which is clearly God's will, we must be willing to undergo suffering. And a second paradox exists – if we save our lives we lose them; if we lose our lives we save them. Jesus intentionally said this as a riddle. He did not mean that by losing our lives in this world we gain them in the next. That takes it out of being a riddle. When I try to save my life it is because I love life. I love it so much that I become attached to it and try to hold onto it, and thus death becomes my enemy, rather than a part of my life. When I am willing to lose my life I become detached from it and can face the inevitability of my death. If I fear my death I live to stave it off and in doing so I become dead to life. If I accept death I live in the moment and come alive.

If I am truly to follow Jesus I must be willing to lose my life, not for a cause, but out of compassion for people, and not just for some people, but also for all of them. Jesus showed compassion to Jewish men, but he also showed compassion to Jewish women, a compassion that scandalized the good folks of Galilee and Judea, and he also showed compassion to Samaritan and Gentile men and women, which disgusted and enraged the good folks. To live the compassionate life is to

feel love for all, even as I am limited by time and geography to focus my actions on one part of humanity.

When I follow Jesus, my compassionate actions are not philanthropy, giving of my surplus time and wealth. They are given out of what I cannot afford to give. This is the meaning of call. Moses is asked to give up his life as an exile in safety to go back to Egypt and face possible execution for having murdered an Egyptian. Elijah is asked to risk the wrath of Jezebel and her prophets of Baal; they have put to death hundreds of the faithful of Israel. Isaiah is asked to give up his aristocratic priesthood to tell the truth of Israel's impending doom. Paul gives up his status as a Pharisee to preach the word under persecution.

In his book, *Suffering*, Arthur McGill reminds us that:

If a man really possesses a readiness to expend himself for others, will they not take advantage of him? Will they not soon take all his clothes and borrow all his money? Of course, says Jesus. Of course, if you live in this way, others will use you up. Of course, they will take everything you have. That is why you should expect this self-expenditure to lead sooner or later to your death. He is clear and unafraid about the practical implications of his teaching. But this, he says, is exactly what you want people to do. It is the essence of your love to want to be expended for others, and even to die for others. "There is no greater love than this," he says, "that a man should lay down his life for his friends."

Therefore, when Jesus identifies love with self-expenditure, he means just that, the real expending and spilling out of the self. There are no magical tricks here. There is no suggestion that the expression of such love will bring some pleasure to the giver or serve to build up a good reputation with God.

There is also no secret expectation that other people will be so irresistibly impressed by such kindness that they will suddenly become kind themselves. On the contrary, Jesus is quite emphatic that, far from impressing or converting people, this way may only make them contemptuous, may even encourage their worst tendencies to victimize and exploit.

But how can Jesus propose such a creed as a way for the enhancement of human life? For him this loving is itself the fullness of true life. By his advocacy of love, then, Jesus does not mean to give people a new and superior way for achieving such life as they have always sought. He means to redefine the very character of life. ... Such giving and dying are themselves life at its richest, no rewards are needed. ... When does a grain of wheat become fruitful? Jesus asks. Not when it is living on the stalk, but when it falls to the earth and dies.

This is hard stuff for me. I am always tempted to compromise, to see if I can't act out of that true compassion but also keep my family, my social status, my material possessions, my faith community because I love them all so much. They have given meaning to my life as well as wonderful times of pleasure. And losing them seems so awful, that when confronted with injustice I say only part of what I feel, do only part of what I can do. I am a bureaucrat, which almost by definition means that I give up part of my autonomy and integrity to a structure in order to accomplish something systemic. Almost every day I am confronted with the opportunity to truly witness to God's truth in word and deed.

And so today, on Palm Sunday, when I am invited to be part of the joyous throng, I reflect on what Jesus said and how he has lived. I hear the voices that tell of a world of pain and suffering, the voices of Passion Sunday. And I feel myself dropping my palm frond, slipping away from the crowd, heading away from Jerusalem, back to my life, uncomfortable as it

sometimes is. Slipping away from the voices.

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Voices Of Passion Sunday

(During the prelude)

Six young people are infected with the AIDS virus every minute, the United Nations said as it launched a new campaign to slow the spread of the epidemic among youth. Nearly 600,000 children under 12 and 2.5 million people ages 15-24 caught the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) last year, it said.

Washington Post
February 27, 1999

(While the children are coming forward for the Word for the children)

How long, O Lord, wilt thou quite forget me?
How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
How long must I suffer anguish in my soul,
 grief in my heart, day and night?
How long shall my enemy lord it over me?

Psalm 13

(While the children are leaving after the Word for the children)

A 29-year old Alexandria man was charged yesterday with raping a 12-year-old Dumfries girl who became pregnant, concealed her condition and last week threw her newborn child in the trash. Prosecutors said he had sexual intercourse with the girl repeatedly during a months-long relationship.

Washington Post

February 26, 1999

(During the quiet that follows after the children have left)

An independent commission formed to investigate widespread human rights abuses during Guatemala's 34-year civil war accused the U.S.-backed military yesterday of responsibility for the vast majority of the crimes, including murder, torture, rape, destruction of Indian villages and widespread state terrorism. ...The report also accused Marxist-led guerilla forces of carrying out summary executions and kidnappings.

"The massacres that eliminated entire Maya villages are neither perfidious allegations nor figments of the imagination, but an authentic chapter in Guatemala's history...The report found that about 200,000 people – the overwhelming majority of them civilians – were killed or "disappeared" during the war...Of the 42,000 civilian killings investigated by the panel, it found the army responsible for 93 percent.

Washington Post
February 26, 1999

(During the litany)

Alex is 2 years old. He has a respirator tube down his throat. Two transparent tubes full of watery blood descend from an incision in his right side. Another tube comes out of his stomach, leading to a little plastic jar that collects his stomach acid. An intravenous needle makes a red welt in his tiny wrist. A tangle of thick black wires sends the story of his pulse, respiration, skin temperature, and oxygen saturation to a bank of beeping, blinking monitors. Except for the artificial inflation of his lungs, he is motionless.

I have napped once in three days and I think I ate something yesterday. His upper esophagus dead-ends at mid-chest. The

lower esophagus comes up from the stomach and was attached to the trachea, the windpipe. Left untreated, Alex will starve.

More X-rays and sonograms, doctors with stolid faces and awful news: Alex also has an extra half-vertebra that makes his spine twist and wend like a bobsled run. Alex has a heart murmur. Alex may have chromosomal abnormalities. Alex had an apparent seizure; we are checking for bleeding in the brain.

"My Baby is Very Sick"

Brad Lemley

Washington Post Magazine

(During the silence after the litany)

O Lord, do not condemn me in thy anger,
do not punish me in thy fury.

Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am weak;
heal me, my very bones are shaken;
my soul quivers in dismay.

And thou, O Lord – how long?

Come back, O Lord; set my soul free,
deliver me for thy love's sake.

None talk of thee among the dead;
who praises thee in Sheol?

I am wearied with groaning;

all night long my pillow is wet with tears,

I soak my bed with weeping.

Grief dims my eyes;

they are worn out with all my woes.

Psalm 6

(During the confession)

A prominent Roman Catholic human rights lawyer was killed by a car bomb outside her home this afternoon as sectarian tension in Northern Ireland erupted into fresh violence. Rosemary Nelson, 40, died in the hospital of injuries suffered when a

device exploded under her car in Lurgan, 30 miles southwest of Belfast. The dissident Protestant Red Hand Defenders, a group outlawed only this month for a series of bomb and grenade attacks, claimed responsibility for the killing.

Nelson, who was married and the mother of three children aged 8 to 13, had a law practice in her home town but represented nationalist activists in high-profile cases throughout the province.

Washington Post
March 15, 1999

(During the confessions voiced by the congregation)

Doctors are far less likely to recommend sophisticated cardiac tests for blacks and women than for white men with identical complaints of chest pain, according to a new Georgetown University study whose authors suggest the differences are the consequences of race and sex bias.

Washington Post
February 26, 1999

(During congregational prayers)

At the end of the day you're another day older,
And that's all you can say for the life of the poor.
It's a struggle, it's a war
And there's nothing that anyone's giving,
One more day standing about
What is it for –
One day less to be living.

At the end of the day you're another day colder
And the shirt on your back doesn't keep out the chill,
And the righteous hurry past,
They don't hear the little ones crying,

And the winter is coming on fast
Ready to kill –
One day nearer to dying.

At the end of the day there's another day dawning,
And the sun in the morning is waiting to rise –
Like the waves crash on the sand,
Like a storm that'll break any second.
There's a hunger in the land,
There's a reckoning still to be reckoned and
There's gonna be hell to pay
At the end of the day.

Les Miserables
Alain Boublil

(During congregational prayers)

Lord, hear my prayer
and let my cry for help reach thee.
Hide not thy face from me when I am in distress.
Listen to my prayer
and, when I call, answer me soon;
for my days vanish like smoke,
my body is burnt up as in an oven.
I am stricken, withered like grass;
I cannot find the strength to eat.
Wasted away, I groan aloud
and my skin hangs on my bones...
My enemies insult me all the day long;
mad with rage, they conspire against me.
I have eaten ashes for bread
and mingled tears with my drink.
In thy wrath and fury
thou has taken me up and flung me aside.
My days decline as the shadows lengthen,
and like grass I wither away.

(As the second hymn begins to play)

The Rev. James Callan, a Roman Catholic priest who performed weddings for gays and gave women a prominent role on the altar, has been excommunicated for starting his own church.

Washington Post
February 24, 1999

(During the second hymn "O Sacred Head Now Wounded")

My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me
and art so far from saving me, from heeding my
groans?

O my God, I cry in the day-time but thou dost not answer,
in the night I cry but get no respite...

I am a worm, not a man,
abused by all men, scorned by the people.

All who see me jeer at me,

make mouths at me and wag their heads:

'He threw himself on the Lord for rescue;
let the Lord deliver him, for he holds him dear!'

A herd of bulls surrounds me,
great bulls of Bashan beset me.

Ravens and roaring lions
open their mouths wide against me.

My strength drains away like water
and all my bones are loose.

My heart has turned to wax and melts within me.

My mouth is dry as a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaw;

I am laid low in the dust of death.
the huntsmen are all about me;
a band of ruffians rings me round,
and they have hacked off my hands and my feet.

I tell my tale of misery,
 while they look on and gloat.
They share out my garments among them
 and cast lots for my clothes.
But do not remain so far away, O Lord;
O my help, hasten to my aid.
Deliver my very self from the sword,
 my precious life from the axe.
Save me from the lion's mouth,
 my poor body from the horns of the wild ox.

Psalm 22

(During the scripture readings)

I left my home to walk the three blocks to work.
It was very cold outside. I heard his footsteps behind me
And when he got to me he asked,
"Where are you going?"
"To work," I responded.
"You're going no place," he said as he aimed a gun at my
forehead.
He dragged me backwards by the neck, to a drainage ditch and
raped me.
He then urinated on me and dragged me to the top of the hill
Where he cut all my clothing with his knife and raped me
again.
Before he left, he slit my trachea.
I tried to stay calm and didn't resist.
I'm sure that's what saved my life.

Beyond Sympathy
Janice Harris Lord

(During the scripture readings)

A two-year investigation of deaths at Pennsylvania's largest
home for the retarded led to charges yesterday against six
doctors accused of such offenses as manslaughter and sewing up

patients' wounds without anesthesia.

Washington Post
February 27, 1999

(During the scripture reading)

Cassandra Woods rides an 82 bus to a Metro train. From the Red Line she transfers to the Blue Line. Finally she boards a 23 bus to Landover. It's two hours of slogging from a job in Northeast Washington that pays \$6.15 an hour and offers little chance of advancement, but "I'm not going back to welfare – never, never," she insists. Her tough transition was made that much harder when the State of Maryland slashed her \$322-a-month welfare benefit, called, cash assistance, upon hearing she had landed a job.

Maryland halts cash assistance to welfare families at a lower earnings level than do 48 other states and the District, making the leap to work ever more tenuous. Once people being bringing home \$520 a month for a family of three – less than half of the federal poverty level – they lose all cash aid in Maryland.

Washington Post
February 25, 1999

(At beginning of the sermon)

A 20-year-old District of Columbia man was convicted of killing a 17-year-old after an argument on a Northwest Washington basketball court in 1996. Curtis Dickson was convicted of second-degree murder while armed. The argument began on the basketball courts of an elementary school after Wayne Walker and a friend of Dickson finished a game of basketball. The two youths began debating who was the better player. Dickson left the basketball court and the argument ended. As Walker and two friends began walking home, Dickson approached and fired twice, killing Walker instantly.

Washington Post
February 26, 1999

(During the sermon)

I am waiting for my case to come up
and I am waiting
 for a rebirth of wonder
and I am waiting
 for someone
to really discover America
 and wail

...

I am waiting for the Second Coming
and I am waiting
 for a religious revival
 to sweep thru the state of Arizona
and I am waiting
 for the Grapes of Wrath to be stored
and I am waiting
 for them to prove
 that God is really American

A Coney Island of the Mind
Lawrence Ferlinghetti

(During the sermon)

...Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress,
 and my eyes are dimmed with grief.
My life is worn away with sorrow
 and my years with sighing;
 strong as I am, I stumble under my load of misery;
 there is disease in all my bones.
I have such enemies that all men scorn me;
 my neighbors find me a burden,
 my friends shudder at me;

when they see me in the street they turn quickly
away.

I am forgotten, like a dead man out of mind;

I have come to be like something lost.

For I hear many men whispering

threats from every side,

in league against me as they are

and plotting to take my life...

Psalm 31

(During the sermon)

John William King, an avowed white supremacist, was sentenced to death today for the racial murder of James Byrd, Jr., a black man who was chained to a pickup truck in the predawn darkness and dragged on a winding stretch of pavement until his head and right arm were torn off.

Washington Post

February 25, 1999

(During the sermon)

It was a year from the time she brought her boyfriend home and when he killed her. Whenever they came to our house, he was quiet and sullen and frequently made us all uncomfortable. During the summer she called home twice, once to tell me that her ear was black and blue, and once to tell me he had tormented her by bringing an old girlfriend into their home. She was hysterical both times, but she later told me he had apologized and she forgave him. Christmas Eve he got drunk and beat her until she was black and blue all over. But again, he returned with a cry for help and promised never to do it again. So, once again, she took him back. I was scared for her, but never imagined he would kill her two months later. I worried about her and called her every few days, but she didn't like that and said I was interfering. How I wish I had interfered more.

(At the beginning of the offering)

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the Negro streets at dawn looking
for
an angry fix,
angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up
smoking
in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats
floating
across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw
Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs
illuminated,
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes
hallucinating
Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars
of war,
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing
obscene odes on the windows of the skull...
who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through
images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the
soul
between 2 visual images and joined the elemental
verbs
and set the noun and dash of consciousness together
jumping
with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus
to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and
stand

before you speechless and intelligent and shaking
with
shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to
conform to
the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head,
the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting
down here what might be left to say in time come
after
death,
and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the
goldhorn
shadow of the band and blew the suffering of
America's
naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma
sabacthani
saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the
last radio
with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of
their
own bodies good to eat a thousand years.

Howl

Alan Ginsberg

(During the offering)

A 3-year-old girl was left to die in a field on a winter day, her mother passed out drunk at home. Police in Pacific, Missouri are calling it a homicide and have two suspects in custody: an 8-year-old girl and a 6-year-old boy. The child was found naked and unconscious in a soggy field near a drainage ditch, about a quarter mile from her home. Her clothes were found nearby.

Washington Post

February 27, 1999

(During the closing hymn "Were you there")

"I remember this beautiful little kid of about 6 or 7 in this Cambodian refugee camp. She would cry for a couple of minutes and then look around with this vacant stare. Her body had the droopiness of a 90-year old woman, somebody who had been through a whole lifetime. One cheek was all puffed up and one eye was closed. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I was real angry. I mean, she's about 6 years old and she looks like she's been through it all. That's not right.

"In the Eye of the Storm"
Washington Post