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"I Was Wrong"

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I Was Wrong!

By [Ken Joseph, Jr.](#)
Amman, Jordan



Ken Joseph, Jr.

How do you admit you were wrong?

What do you do when you realize those you were defending in fact did not want your defense and wanted something completely different from you and from the world?

This is my story. It will probably upset everybody - those with whom I have fought for peace all my life and those for whom the decision for war comes a bit too fast.

I am an Assyrian. I was born and raised in Japan where I am the second generation in ministry after my Father came to Japan in answer to General Douglas Macarthur's call for 10,000 young people to help rebuild Japan following the war.

As a minister and due to my personal convictions I have always been against war for any and all reasons. It was precisely this moral conviction that led me to do all I could to stop the current war in Iraq.

From participating in demonstrations against the war in Japan to strongly opposing it on my radio program, on television and in regular columns I did my best to stand against what I thought to be an unjust war against an innocent people - in fact my people.

As an Assyrian I was told the story of our people from a young age. How my grandparents had escaped the great Assyrian Holocaust in 1917 settling finally in Chicago.

Currently there are approximately six million Assyrians - approximately 2.5 million in Iraq and the rest scattered in the Assyrian Diaspora across the world.

Without a country and rights even in our native land it has been the prayer of generations that the Assyrian Nation will one day be restored and the people of the once great Assyrian Empire will once again be home.

HOME AT LAST

It was with that feeling, together with supplies for our Church and family that I went to Iraq to do all I could to help make a difference.

The feeling as I crossed the border was exhilarating - `home at last, I thought, as I would for the first time visit the land of my forefathers.

The kindness of the border guards when they learned I was Assyrian, the taxi, the people on the street it was like being back `home` after a long absence.

Now I finally know myself! The laid back, relaxed atmosphere, the kindness to strangers, the food, the smells, the language all seemed to trigger a long lost memory somewhere in my deepest DNA.

The first order of business was to attend Church. It was here where my morals were raked over the coals and I was first forced to examine them in the harsh light of reality.

Following a beautiful `Peace` to welcome the Peace Activists in which even the children participated, we moved to the next room to have a simple meal.

`What in the world do you mean?' I asked.

`How could you not want peace?' **We don't want peace. We want the war to come.`**

Sitting next to me was an older man who carefully began to sound me out. Apparently feeling the freedom to talk in the midst of the mingling crowd he suddenly turned to me and said `There is something you should know.` `What I asked surprised at the sudden comment.

`We didn't want to be here tonight`. he continued. `When the Priest asked us to gather for a Peace Service we said we didn't want to come`. He said.

`What do you mean` I inquired, confused. `We didn't want to come because **we don't want peace**` he replied.

`What in the world do you mean?' I asked. `How could you not want peace?' **`We don't want peace. We want the war to come`** he continued.

What in the world are you talking about? I blurted back.

That was the beginning of a strange odyssey that deeply shattered my convictions and moral base but at the same time gave me hope for my people and, in fact, hope for the world.

THE STRANGE ODYSSEY BEGINS

Beginning that night and continuing on in the private homes of relatives with whom I stayed little by little **the scales began to come off my eyes.**

I had not realized it but began to realize that all foreigners in Iraq are subject to 24 hour surveillance by government `minders` who arrange all interviews, visits and contact with ordinary Iraqis. Through some fluke either by my invitation as a religious person and or my family connection **I was not subject to any government `minders` at any time throughout my stay in Iraq.**

As far as I can tell I was the only person including the media, Human Shields and others in Iraq without a Government `minder` there to guard.

What emerged was something so awful that it is difficult even now to write about it. Discussing with the head of our tribe what I should do as I wanted to stay in Baghdad with our people during their time of trial I was told that I could most help the Assyrian cause by going out and telling the story to the outside world.

Simply put, **those living in Iraq, the common, regular people are in a living nightmare.** From the terror that would come across the faces of my family at a unknown visitor, telephone call, knock at the door I began to realize **the horror they lived with every day.**

Over and over I questioned them `Why could you want war? Why could any human being desire war?` They're answer was quiet and measured. **`Look at our lives! We are living like animals. No food, no car, no telephone, no job and most of all no hope.`**

I would marvel as my family went around their daily routine as normal as could be. Baghdad was completely serene without even a hint of war. Father would get up, have his breakfast and go off to work. The children to school, the old people - ten in the household to their daily chores.

`You can not imagine what it is to live with war for 20, 30 years. We have to keep up our routine or we would lose our minds`

Then I began to see around me those seemingly in every household who had lost their minds. It seemed in every household there was one or more people who in any other society would be in a Mental Hospital and the ever present picture of a family member killed in one of the many wars.

Having been born and raised in Japan where in spite of 50 years of democracy still retains vestiges of the 400 year old police state **I quickly began to catch the subtle nuances of a full blown, modern police state.**

I wept with family members as I shared their pain and with great difficulty and deep soul searching began little by little to understand their desire for war to finally rid them of the nightmare they were living in.

The terrible price paid in simple, down to earth ways - the family member with a son who just screams all the time, the family member who lost his wife who left unable to cope anymore, the family member going to a daily job with

nothing to do, the family member with a son lost to the war, a husband lost to alcoholism the daily, difficult to perceive slow death of people for whom all hope is lost.

The pictures of Sadaam Hussein whom people hailed in the beginning with great hope everywhere. Sadaam Hussein with his hand outstretched. Sadaam Hussein firing his rifle. Sadaam Hussein in his Arab Headdress. Sadaam Hussein in his classic 30 year old picture - one or more of these four pictures seemed to be everywhere on walls, in the middle of the road, in homes, as statues - **he was everywhere!**

All seeing, all knowing, all encompassing.

`Life is hell. We have no hope. But everything will be ok once the war is over.` The bizarre desire for a war that would rid them of the hopelessness was at best hard to understand.

`Look at it this way. No matter how bad it is we will not all die. We have hoped for some other way but nothing has worked. 12 years ago it went almost all the way but failed. **We cannot wait anymore. We want the war and we want it now`**

Coming back to family members and telling them of progress in the talks at the United Nations on working some sort of compromise with Iraq I was welcomed not with joy but anger. `No, there is no other way! We want the war! It is the only way he will get out of our lives`

Once again going back to my Japanese roots I began to understand. The stories I had heard from older Japanese of how in a strange way they had welcomed the sight of the bombers in the skies over Japan.

I had been demonstrating against the war thinking I had been doing it for the very people I was here with now and yet **I had not ever bothered to ask them what they wanted.**

Of course nobody wanted to be bombed but the first sight of the American B29 Bombers signaled to them that the war was coming to an end. An end was in sight. There would be terrible destruction. They might very well die but finally in a tragic way there was finally hope.

Then I began to feel so terrible. Here I had been demonstrating against the war thinking I had been doing it for the very people I was here now with and yet I had not ever bothered to ask them what they wanted. What they wanted me to do.

It was clear now what I should do. I began to talk to the so called `human

shields`. Have you asked the people here what they want? Have you talked to regular people, away from your `minder` and asked them what they want?

I was shocked at the response. `We don't need to do that. We know what they want.` was the usual reply before a minder stepped up to check who I was.

With tears streaming down my face in my bed in a tiny house in Baghdad crowded in with 10 other of my own flesh and blood, all exhausted after another day of not living but existing without hope, exhausted in daily struggle simply to not die I had to say to myself `I was wrong`.

How dare I claim to speak for those for whom I had never asked what they wanted!

ALL I COULD DO

Then I began a strange journey to do all I could while I could still remain to as asked by our tribe let the world know of the true situation in Iraq.

Carefully and with great risk, not just for me but most of all for those who told their story and opened up their homes for the camera I did my best to tape their plight as honestly and simply as I could. Whether I could get that precious tape out of the country was a different story.

**What I was
not
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speaking
out.**

Wanting to make sure I was not simply getting the feelings of a long oppressed minority - the Assyrians - I spoke to dozens of people. What I was not prepared for was the sheer terror they felt at speaking out.

Over and over again I would be told `We would be killed for speaking like this` and finding out that they would only speak in a private home or where they were absolutely sure through the introduction of another Iraqi that I was not being attended by a minder.

From a former member of the Army to a person working with the police to taxi drivers to store owners to mothers to government officials without exception when allowed to speak freely **the message was the same - `Please bring on the war. We are ready. We have suffered long enough. We may lose our lives but some of us will survive and for our children's sake please, please end our misery.**

On the final day for the first time I saw the signs of war. For the first time sandbags began appearing at various government buildings but the solders

putting them up and then later standing within the small circle they created gave a clear message they could not dare speak.

They hated it. They despised it. It was their job and they made clear in the way they worked to the common people watching that they were on their side and would not fight.

Near the end of my time a family member brought the word that guns had just been provided to the members of the Baath Party and for the first time we saw the small but growing signs of war.

But what of their feelings towards the United States and Britain? Those feelings are clearly mixed. They have no love for the British or the Americans but they trust them.

“We are not afraid of the American bombing. They will bomb carefully and not purposely target the people. **What we are afraid of is Saddam Hussein and what he and the Baath Party will do when the war begins.** But even then we want the war. It is the only way to escape our hell. Please tell them to hurry. We have been through war so many times, but this time it will give us hope”.

AT THE BORDER ... A FINAL CALL FOR HELP

The final call for help came at the most unexpected place - the border. Sadly, and sent off by the crying members of my family I left. Things were changing by the hour - the normally \$100 ride from Baghdad to Amman was first \$300 then \$500 and by nightfall \$1,000.

As we came to the border we began the routine paperwork and then the search of our vehicle. Everything was going well until suddenly the border guard asked if I had any money. We had been carefully instructed to make sure we only carried \$300 when we returned so I began to open up the pouch that carried my passport and money stuffed in my shorts.

Suddenly the guard began to pat me down. “Oh, no!” I thought. It’s all over”. We had been told of what happened if you got caught with videotape, a cellular telephone or any kind of electronic equipment that had not been declared.

A trip back to Baghdad, a likely appearance before a judge, in some cases 24-48 hour holding and more.

He immediately found the first videotape stuffed in my pocket and took it out. I could see the expression of terror on the driver as he stifled a scream.

The guard shook his head as he reached into my pocket and took out another tape and then from pocket after pocket began to take out tape after tape, cellular telephone, computer camera - all the wrong things.

We all stood there in sheer terror - for a brief moment experiencing the feeling that beginning with my precious family members every Iraqi feels not for a moment but day and night, 24 hours a day, 365 days a

year. That terrible feeling that your life is not yours that its fate rests in someone else's hands that simply by the whim of the moment they can determine.

For one born free a terrifying feeling if but
for an instant.

As the guard slowly laid out the precious
video tape on the desk **we all waited in
silent terror for the word to be taken
back to Baghdad and the beginning of
the nightmare.**

**He didn't have
to say a word. I
had learned
the language
of the
imprisoned
Iraqi.**

Suddenly he laid the last videotape down and looked up. His face is frozen in my memory but it was to me the look of sadness, anger and then a final look of quiet satisfaction as he clinically shook his head and quietly without a word handed all the precious videotape - the cry of those without a voice - to me.

He didn't have to say a word. I had learned the language of the imprisoned Iraqi. ***Forbidden to speak by sheer terror they used the one language they had left - human kindness.***

As his hands slowly moved to give the tape over he said in his own way what my Uncle had said, what the taxi driver had said, what the broken old man had said, what the man in the restaurant had said, what the Army man had said, what the man working for the police had said, what the old woman had said, what the young girl had said - he said it for them in the one last message a I crossed the border from tyranny to freedom . . .

***Please take these tapes and show them to the world. Please help us . . .
. and please hurry!***

[Ken Joseph Jr.](#) is an Assyrian, a minister and was born, raised and resides in Japan where he directs AssyrianChristians.com, the Japan Helpline and the Keikyo Institute.

[HOME](#)