Study War More and More
A day when brightness and horror converge

By GABE HUCK

Should the Gospel we profess and the liturgy we do raise in us some great unease with the political, economic, military and environmental conditions that are our responsibility as U.S. citizens and residents? If so, how do we grapple with the apparent absence of such unease in our churches?

Since 1946, every year’s August 6 is, for Roman Catholics, a day when the Gospel story called the Transfiguration is told in the presence of the anniversary of the first use of atomic weapons against human beings. Hiroshima. This juxtaposition seems to me a tangle of events where brightness and horror converge and can’t be untangled.

As it says in the introduction to this essay, we are struggling (you as well as I) in these recent reflections to call for a “great unease.” August 6 is a marker of that unease about all of the above: the political, the economic, the military and the environmental dimensions of our nation’s life. What will we ponder, preach, teach about such things this August of 2014?

A few months ago I saw the documentary film “Things Left Behind.” This is the work of American filmmaker Linda Hoaglund. In 2012 she filmed an exhibit made up of large color prints of photographs. This took place at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, British Columbia. The photos are the work of Japanese artist Miyako Ishiuchi. Ms. Ishiuchi has photographed garments and personal items that belonged to a few of the 140,000 victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. From kimonos to boots to jackets and dolls, these had been brought to Hiroshima’s Peace Memorial Museum by relatives who survived. Ishiuchi dealt with one garment at a time, arranging and photographing each, then making oversize prints of her photographs. “Things Left Behind” is largely a visit to the Vancouver exhibit and conversations with the photographer and with people who came to see the exhibit.

The film is gentle, slow, a meditation. Mostly we are ourselves visitors who may gaze at length at an image of some single item. Did we think we knew the story? We know now we barely understood. Instead of the horror of that day, we are simply in the presence of large images: a shoe, a shirt, a kimono. Each item belonged to one who perished that day. And we listen to what these images call forth in visitors to the museum. For any of us, something is added by that other side of August 6 where we are told that Jesus’ “clothes became dazzling.” So do these clothes dazzle us. But we never forget that we, like those who speak of their thoughts while looking at the exhibition, are in the quiet presence of evil.

In a New Yorker essay on the film, Roland Kelts wrote:

This is not the Hiroshima of bloodied sculptures, corpse-strewn black-and-white rubble-scapes, mushroom clouds, and denuded domes. It’s colorful and fashionable — but between the folds of disembodied silk blouses and dinner jackets, in the hollow eyes of an abandoned Ichimatsu doll, and between the sleeves of a child’s kimono, something is missing, absent, incomplete. We want to fill it. There is no voiceover narration; the photos are uncaptioned. “I wonder who wore this,” the voice of a visitor says, poring over a man’s jacket. Eyeing a scarred and beaten-up boot, a woman says, “Did it have laces, and what happened to them?”

The audience at the film stayed for a discussion with the director afterward. We, like the people at the exhibition in Vancouver, clearly felt we had been drawn into a quiet meditation that brought us, as only a work of art could, to the reality of Hiroshima, and, as Americans, to the reality of a world that began that day, August 6, 1945. The director has written, “Through the film, Ishiuchi’s images transport Hiroshima into the present so we can imagine ourselves in their fashionable clothes, shoes and watches, while unknowingly imperiled by catastrophe.” (See her thoughts and some of the images at http://lhoaglund.com/behind-things-left-behind-ishiuchi-miyako.)

Unknowingly imperiled by catastrophe? Us? We are not talking about heart attacks and car accidents. We are talking about a long process, one whose roots may be in genocide against the indigenous population of this country, and in slavery, and in wars without end, and in the marriage of religion and patriotism, and in the gradual creation of life-as-consuming. What catastrophe should await us?

We have had our Jeremiahs. Little changes about how we treat them. We have quiet, persistent voices that cry “Woe!” and “Stop!” and “No more!” One such voice was that of Jonathan Schell, who died in March of this year. He has a particular relevance to this reflection on August 6: The book for which he is best known and remembered is The Fate of the Earth, published in 1982, Cold War days. I think many who read this book 30 years ago will remember the effect it had on us at the time. Some would say that this book was like Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring in its impact: Suddenly the 37-year span of nuclear weapons becoming more powerful and more numerous was grasped in all its terror and stupidity.

Schell came to that book through what he witnessed in Vietnam and wrote about in The Village of Ben Suc. That 1967 book, written when he was still in his early 20s, begins thus: “Up to a few months ago, Ben Suc was a prosperous village of some thirty-five hundred people.” Schell then tells of the bombing of Ben Suc by the United States, the forced removal of
all survivors, the burning, bulldozing and then bombing of the rubble itself: “Having once decided to destroy it, we were now bent on annihilating every possible indication that the village of Ben Suc had ever existed.”

In a way, the arrogance and meanness Schell witnessed in the U.S. military operations in Vietnam, and the language he found to help us comprehend it, put eloquent words to the passionate opposition some Americans already felt for this seemingly endless effort. Our nation was pouring out its integrity and its wealth in a finally futile effort to subdue a tiny, poor country in southeast Asia.

Fifteen years later, Schell took on what seemed another hopeless cause. Convinced that most of us did not understand and did not feel what it meant to possess nuclear weapons, he wrote The Fate of the Earth and brought to light what we had been doing in darkness.

In its obituary last spring, the New York Times quoted Schell:

“Usually, people wait for things to occur before trying to describe them,” Mr. Schell wrote in the book’s opening section. “But since we cannot afford under any circumstances to let a holocaust occur, we are forced in this one case to become the historians of the future — to chronicle and commit to memory an event that we have never experienced and must never experience.”

One cannot improve on Schell’s prose. Please read these now 30-year-old quotes from The Fate of the Earth.

When one tries to face the nuclear predicament, one feels sick, whereas when one pushes it out of mind, as apparently one must do most of the time in order to carry on with life, one feels well again. But this feeling of well-being is based on a denial of the most important reality of our time and therefore is itself a kind of sickness. ...

Intellectually we recognize that we have prepared ourselves for self-extinction and are improving the preparations every day, but emotionally and politically we have failed to respond. Accordingly, we have begun to live as if life were safe, but living as if is very different than just living. ...

A society that systematically shuts its eyes to an urgent peril to its physical survival and fails to take any steps to save itself cannot be called psychologically well.

One year after The Fate of the Earth appeared, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops completed their pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace.” They finished it, filed it, forgot about it in the sense that the institutional church and its educational institutions and its homiletics never promoted or developed the ponderings and teachings of that document (or the one that followed on the economic questions we face). Thirty years on, now in this age of being the sole superpower, this age when at least nine nations possess nuclear weapons, “The Challenge of Peace” still has much to say. And there are statements we still have not dealt with. For example:

We speak here in a specific way to the Catholic community. After the passage of nearly four decades [since the bombing of Hiroshima] and a concomitant growth in our understanding of the ever-growing horror of nuclear war, we must shape the climate of opinion which will make it possible for our country to express profound sorrow over the atomic bombing of 1945. Without that sorrow, there is no possibility of finding a way to repudiate future use of nuclear weapons or of conventional weapons in such military actions as would not fulfill just-war criteria. (#302, italics added)

This is one tiny point in a large and complex document, but I was amazed, and still am, that this call to express “profound sorrow” for Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not attract more attention. Was it pondered in Catholic schools and universities, in clergy study days, in RCIA discussions? It has happened in our lifetimes that nations have expressed such sorrow for past deeds. What is it about us Americans? Profound sorrow? Fugetaboutit!

Is “The Challenge of Peace” being preached and taught today? In the years after its publication, Cardinal Bernardin (who led the episcopal team writing “The Challenge of Peace”) spoke much of the “seamless garment,” but other parts of the garment — abortion especially — received nearly all of the institutional church’s attention and support. To what end?

Nuclear weapons still exist and we still don’t think about it. Recent decades have made it clear that our sole superpower status has only led us to new ways of relying on military might and military budgets. We seem powerless to control ourselves. We are ever in a rush for technology toward domination over other nations, capable of wars and occupations and all sorts of military “incursions” (e.g., drones killing people in Pakistan) indifferent to the health of the very world we depend on, indifferent to the United Nations, indifferent to any healthy humility, above all determined that we’ll hang on to our toys. We seem to have an endless resistance to standing up to say: Enough! Worse, we resist listening, studying, pondering. We’re generally too busy working or being entertained.

When he saw what his country was doing in Vietnam in the 1960s, Jonathan Schell grasped what still eludes most of us. In a tribute to Schell in The Nation, Rebecca Solnit wrote that in Vietnam, Schell was realizing that “U.S. firepower had done nothing to break the will of the Vietnamese people, and observing that violence was often not a sign of power but of weakness, and how little it could do to win or even crush hearts and minds, whatever it might do to bodies and places.”

In the end, we have to deal not only with our acquiescence to violence to control others and violence to keep our disproportionate share of the earth’s wealth. We must go beyond this to ponder how moral it is as a nation to control others and to control the world’s wealth by any means at all. And if we cannot figure out how to change, we can at least lament what we have become.

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