Union Medal Acceptance Speech – Paul Farmer

December 6, 2006

Two Tuesdays ago, three Haitian co-workers, an American volunteer, and an unlucky soul looking for a ride were kidnapped at gunpoint between Port-au-Prince and Cange, the village where Ophelia and I have been working for almost 25 years. Two days later, upon payment of a ransom, they were freed.

On April 9, 1945, as Allied forces claimed victory in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged in the Flossenburg concentration camp.

Although there is all the difference in the world between a kidnapping and an arrest, between a social disintegration and war, between surviving and dying, I'd like to contemplate some of Bonhoeffer's last words as we contemplate a future in which deciding to side with, and live among, the poor means to run risks, whether in Haiti or Rwanda or Lesotho or Guatemala. I'd like to think about the destitute sick, of course, but also about prisoners and criminals; about what the Union Medal means today, for the two of us and for the 4,000 people who work with us.

I start with Bonhoeffer because of his association with Union, and because his *Letters and Papers from Prison* can guide us today. An essay of his called "After Ten Years: A Reckoning made at New Year 1943" acquired a new final paragraph in the 1970 edition of *Letters and Papers*, the version I have in Haiti. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's friend and editor and himself a former Union medalist, believed this paragraph was unfinished but was intended to close the reckoning. If so, it's a simple peroration, an incomplete gesture, but it mattered to Bonhoeffer and to those who knew him best. It's certainly important to us. Under the heading "The view from below," he writes, "There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."[1]

This simple insight has informed Ophelia's and my work since the two of us were fortunate enough to meet in central Haiti in May, 1983. At the end of that same year, I met Jim Yong Kim, whose mother is a graduate of Union. Together with Todd McCormack, who is also here tonight, and Tom White and many, many others in Haiti, we launched Partners In Health, which always seeks to take the view from below. We didn't teach this view to each other, nor did we learn it from Bonhoeffer or from the liberation theologians who have most consistently viewed historical events from below; we learned it from Haiti. Haiti and Haitians have been, surely, our greatest teachers.

Since I've just returned from Haiti and since our largest projects are there, I'd like to ask some questions about current events, there and elsewhere, from the perspective that Haiti has given me. Let me return to this recent kidnapping, which was not our first and is unlikely, regrettably, to be our last. This is what happened: two of our vehicles were nearing a large market town just north of Port-au-Prince. Those in the first jeep heard gunfire from an exchange between police and a group termed "bandits," or "gang members." (A policeman and an unknown number of civilians were killed then and later that night, during police reprisals.) If we'd been following our own protocol, those in the first vehicle would have signaled to those in the second that they should turn back; if we'd been following protocol, they would not have been traveling at nightfall. But all of us have trouble following protocols. And so those in the second vehicle, oblivious, were stopped at a speed bump (a fairly ridiculous addendum to a road scarred by much worse obstacles) and taken hostage by a group of young men—heavily armed though less heavily armed than the police who were shooting at them. These young men marched our co-workers into a dense thicket on the side of the road. The vehicle was abandoned, since the kidnappers knew that an American hostage was more valuable than a jeep.

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Our co-workers and the hapless *woulibe*—this is the Haitian term for someone who hitches a free ride—spent two miserable nights under the stars. They were blindfolded and marched for hours to some sort of camp. They were threatened with guns to the head unless a ransom was paid. One of them was manhandled, and all of them feared for their lives.

But since these five did have friends working hard for their release, I'd like to follow Bonhoeffer's lead and turn the story on its head, or at least tilt it slightly. Our hostages were, all told, lucky. It did not rain on either night, although this is the rainy season. They were threatened with execution, but they were fed. One of the hostages was roughed up, but the others were not touched. Another, a young woman, was allowed to bathe unmolested. The hostages were robbed, but the American was given his wallet back after the ransom was paid. He decided not to look in it until later, but when he did he found all his credit cards, though not in the sleeves in which he'd placed them. The kidnappers also decided to leave him $40. He didn't lose his passport, either, since the kidnappers did not take away his jacket. The hostages had been blindfolded during the day, but at night were able to see that a good many of those who'd captured them were teenagers. Some of the older "bandits" were hard cases, certainly; they announced that what they wanted to do with the ransom money was first to buy better weapons, since they and their families, they said, had been the victims of police brutality. At least one teenager told our friends that both his parents had been killed by security forces.

I'm not trying to make excuses for those who kidnapped my friends. I want rather to ask questions about why such events occur at all. No-go zones cut across Port-au-Prince, just as they do in most of Brazil's major cities, or parts of Johannesburg, Pretoria, not to mention certain U.S. cities. You'll find violence almost everywhere, some will add, asking for a better understanding of the root causes of such criminality; still others, especially in this country, have suggested that even seeking the root cause of such violence excuses the perpetrators. In any case, we don't have the option to ignore these questions, since we must conduct our work in settings of poverty and inequality, which are, by definition, settings of violence. We've been very fortunate, so far. Although several of us have been threatened or detained, none of us has been killed or even seriously wounded. That's an excellent record, in Haiti. We think we've fared well in large part because we fight the violence around us not with weapons, but with food, water, schools, clinics, and hospitals.

After mass two Sundays ago, this latest kidnapping was much discussed. Our American guest was a great sport about the whole thing, joking that he'd just spent two nights in "a hotel that didn't merit even three stars"—they slept on the ground—and complained that "the food was lousy." But many of my Haitian friends and patients from the village observed that the current epidemic of Haitian kidnappings—one news report last December named Port-au-Prince the kidnapping capital of the world—was launched rather spectacularly by the kidnapping of their own president in 2004.

Are our Haitian friends and patients right? Was he kidnapped? What we know is that the elected president of Haiti said he was taken from office against his will. His claim has been echoed by several members of the U.S. Congress and certain human rights groups. We know, too, that he was taken away on a U.S. government plane. Our soon-to-be-former Secretary of Defense dismissed this allegation as "ridiculous." Our former Secretary of State insisted that in the end the Haitian president was flown "to a destination of his choice…So this was not a kidnapping."[2] Regardless of your views on the probity of our cabinet members, it seems unlikely that the Haitian president would choose as his destination the Central African Republic, a country he had never visited, one that had its own coup d'etat a few months previously and was known for its general lawlessness (speaking of records, the BBC had just about then dubbed Bangui, the capital of said republic, as the most dangerous city in the world).

Haitians know a lot about kidnapping, of course. Almost all of them are descendants of people kidnapped from Africa, although pundits outside of Haiti dismiss as irrelevant reminders about such historical truths. Toussaint L'Ouverture, the general who led the world's first successful slave revolt, was invited at the dawn of the nineteenth century to a parley with French forces and was given the assurances usual in a negotiation between the heads of opposed armies. Instead of a parley, what occurred was a kidnapping: he was chained and put on a boat bound for France, where he later died, of tuberculosis it's said, in a cold French prison.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested, rather than kidnapped, but it's likely that he saw it coming. Some of his friends here at Union certainly did: they encouraged him to remain in the States and, later, to return here until the war was over. He knew the risks, and did not shirk them in returning to his family and his pastoral work. All around him, he saw German civilians, the great majority of them Jews, being kidnapped and taken away never to return. "Who stands fast?" he asked from prison.

Who stands fast? How do we know what to do in a time of war? Partners In Health is a secular organization, but all of us believe in the corporal works of mercy, which are laid out clearly enough in the Gospels. These are not vague injunctions; they are precise.

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[2] http://www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/30245.htm

Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Clothe the naked. Shelter the homeless. Visit the sick. Visit the prisoners. Bury the dead (Matthew 25:34).

We've had no choice: we've had to consider these commands carefully in choosing to remain in Haiti and to expand in Africa, Siberia, parts of Latin America. These commands became, in fact, our guiding philosophy. One of the things that surprised us most, as PIH grew and came to operate in several other countries, was just how contentious this philosophy was among our peers, the "experts" in international health and development, or among whomever dictated the latest trends within the aid industry and within the universities that nourish it with well-meaning and "reasonable" people. Feeding the hungry was not sustainable, we heard. Treating AIDS in Haiti was initially dismissed by some of our peers, but never by our patients, as quixotic or worse. Others said, with animus, "Surely you can't be serious about building houses for Haitian peasants with AIDS? That's not cost-effective." Indeed, we've been lectured a lot about our work: Doctors and nurses can't be wasting their time doing home visits. You can't work in prisons; it's too political. Still others chided us for providing Siberian prisoners with better care than is available to Russian civilians. African women with HIV infection are too poor to avoid breastfeeding their infants, who will succumb to diarrheal disease because they don't have clean water. Trying to provide clean water and formula, which would be necessary to eradicate pediatric AIDS, is not "realistic" in rural Africa. Et cetera.

Although we have tried to master the language of international health and sustainable development, and although we've learned much in doing so, I still believe we've learned more by returning to these first principles, laid out so long ago in the Gospel according to Matthew.

What have we learned? That PIH is in a precarious position, because we have to find the resources necessary to feed the hungry, even when we receive funding to treat only one disease. That we have to build schools, even when we know that the hungry children who will learn there, as long as they receive a meal, will not be able to pay a cent for tuition or for that meal. That we will have to bury the dead, even if it means hiring someone to build coffins as we seek to make premature death a less prominent feature of the communities in which we work. That sometimes we will have to take risks in order to exhume bodies thrown into in mass graves and bury them properly, as their surviving relatives wish.

We still have to think about, and visit, prisoners, whether in Sing-Sing, Guantanamo Bay, Siberia, or Rwanda. If our friends' kidnappers were to end up in a squalid Haitian prison—which is less likely, under present circumstances, than summary execution or death in another gun battle—would we not visit them and bring them food? How many of the hungry, sick prisoners we visited in Haiti just this past Saturday were kidnappers? We don't know, since few of them have ever been convicted of a crime; they're simply detained. And some of them need immediate medical attention in addition to the Gospel-required visit. When we bring medicines to a prisoner in eastern Rwanda, knowing that we are surrounded by more than 7,000 men who took part in their country's 1994 genocide, do we shrug and say that criminals such as these do not deserve medical care? That they are in prison in order to endure punishment, rather than *as* punishment, for their crimes? In a time during which habeas corpus becomes not a right but an option for the U.S. government and when "extraordinary rendition" is the latest term for kidnapping, do we shrug our shoulders and say, well, it's a time of war? When the president of our nation's oldest neighbor, Haiti, is "rendered" all the way to Central Africa, do we buy into the dismissals and character assassination of the powerful, as so many in our country did? As we did regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that country's supposed links with Al Qaeda? All the "reasonable" people, after all, were only too happy to dismiss the latest coup d'etat in Haiti, or the genocide in Rwanda, as either the result of bad third-world leadership or ethnic conflict. And "reasonable" people assured us we'd be welcomed as liberators in Iraq. Wasn't this the news as presented in our nation's papers of record?

Allow me to close with another reflection from Bonhoeffer. Under the heading, "who stands fast?" he chides his peers. And his peers sound a lot like our peers, do they not? He writes: "The 'reasonable' people's failure is obvious. With the best intentions and a naïve lack of realism, they think that with a little reason they can bend back into position the framework that has got out of joint. In their lack of vision they want to do justice to all sides, and so the conflicting forces wear them down with nothing achieved. Disappointed by the world's unreasonableness, they see themselves condemned to ineffectiveness; they step aside in resignation or collapse before the stronger party."[3]

None of us can be dead sure who the "stronger party" is today. All of us would like to be considered reasonable and effective. At least for tonight, no one in this room will have to fear kidnapping, or worse. But doing social justice work, even in the arena of health care for the poor, entails risks; it demands that we question ourselves when we become too reasonable, when we replace what must be done with what's feasible. Partners In Health will use this award recognition to continue a ministry of simply showing up and doing the best we can do. You are honoring us, we believe, because we have questioned and resisted the received wisdom about what might be accomplished among and for the poorest of the poor.

We'll take risks if we have to. And we'll be unreasonable, shrill even, if that is what is required to do the corporal works of mercy among the poorest. Neither of us would ever dare promise that we'd have Bonhoeffer's courage if faced with prison or worse. But the recognition we've received tonight, from people we've long admired, inspires us to continue in these works, and to hope for the courage to avoid becoming worn down, condemned to ineffectiveness. And even when we hope to expand our projects even more, sometimes we hope only to hold fast.

Thank you for this great honor.

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