

Ralph Nazareth
Peace and Justice Rally
April 14, 2018

My father was a coffee planter in India with over a hundred laborers. He inherited the plantation from his father who, in turn, did so from the British, who ran India as their private plantation for over two centuries. I grew up in independent and caste-ridden India where over fifteen percent of the population were untouchables and lived lives of abject misery and indignity. These people, now called the Dalits, number at present over 300 million. Many of my childhood memories are of the cruel mistreatment of these all-too-visible invisible people. The fact that they continue to be oppressed still, seventy years after independence, is a blight on the land of the Buddha and of Gandhi and Ambedker. I speak to you, then, as the guilt-ridden son of the Indian equivalent of a slave holder.

I speak to you now also as an equally guilt-ridden and a long-time resident of the U.S., which has owned a good bit of the planet as its plantation for over a century and a half, be it through genocide, slavery, military interventions and bases, or the control of powerful global financial institutions. Now in my fiftieth year here, I feel the need daily to find a way to come to terms with my guilt of being indirectly complicit in the violent history and ways of the world's sole superpower.

I speak to you as a volunteer teacher in maximum security prisons, our retributive plantations with a crop of new slaves. These places tell us more about the soul of a society than any other. We shall be judged by how we choose to treat our fallen brothers and sisters. We shall be judged by the extent to which we own up to our own blindness, denial, and silence that create the conditions that lead to the breakdown of lives. I will have to do a serious examination of conscience if I'm not to unwittingly serve as a tool of the dark empire of the prison-corporate complex. Do you think I exaggerate?

The poet W. H. Auden said we must start by undoing "the folded lie." That is what I believe all of us gathered here in hope, faith, and resolve are attempting to do. We're capable of analysis, of engaging in critiques even as we shudder watching the doomsday clock inch closer to the apocalyptic midnight hour. But every morning when I wake up I feel the need for something more than owning up to my guilt or of pointing a finger at those I think are responsible for the terrible injustice that strides among us. I need something more. I need something that despite the despair, the rage, and the need to fight back is capable of revealing to me the holiness of things, the indescribable gifts of this world. I need something more. Shall I call them rituals of mourning?

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Pope Francis said recently, "The migrants are NOT the danger. The migrants are IN danger." Surely he was not talking of the migrants who conquered foreign lands and laid them waste for private gain and built their empires on the broken bones of their subjects. These days they speak of migrants as criminals—yes, the ones who are risking their lives, staggering across borders from lands that have for decades and even centuries been bled by the powerful northern vagrants. Do we have the strength and patience to parse out the difference between migrants and occupiers, provide the needed context every time this matter is simplified and propagandized? Do we have the moral commitment to undo the folded lie every time it's presented as a fact on the ground?

How quickly I get back to the critique, to the accusing finger! What rituals of mourning can I shape to help me get to a different place? Perhaps we can never evolve them until we have fully faced up to the horror of history.

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A couple of years ago, I sent a small gift of a hundred dollars with a friend who was visiting her parents in India. When she returned, she sent me an account of how she had used the money. She said:

Satyanarayana, a poor suicidal farmer was on the verge of dying after consuming poison until Rs.3000 of your money helped for his treatment. Ramesh, a student who cannot afford good clothes was able to purchase a few pairs of clothes with your money (Rs.1000). Venkateswarlu, a diabetic petrol pumping guy found out he had a heart problem, so some of your money helped his treatment (Rs.500). A poor little boy, whose name [I] cannot remember, was bitten by a stray dog and he needed rabies shots and your money helped through that (Rs.500).

A mere hundred dollars went this far? How is this possible? How can there be such stark disparities in the living standards of people and nations? There are experts among you who can explain in technical detail the causes of income disparity and how the deck has been stacked to favor the wealthy. I will merely point to the entire history of colonialism and imperialism that has brought us to this pass where multitudes suffer while a few enjoy lives of unimaginable luxury. You and I cannot possibly be responsible for this scandalous disparity. Or can we?

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In the '80s I did poetry with children in Stamford schools. One of them, a ten-year old, wrote the following:

The rainbow has separated
The animals have died
"Kill kill kill," says he

There is no earth
There is no sky
There is nothing

What infernal depths of pain, anxiety, and sorrow did this come from? How could one so young have been plagued by a vision so hopeless, so inconsolable?

And if this were the case with a middle class child in America, can we imagine how children in war-ravaged parts of the world, exposed day and night to brutal conditions, feel? Not long ago, on the way back to Jerusalem from Bethlehem, I met a group of social workers returning from the Catholic Relief Services Hospital. They had spent the day with Palestinian children who, terrorized by constant violence and war, had become deaf and mute. Was my ten-year old in the security of her life in Stamford speaking for them? Had she picked up the fears of helpless little children blowing in the wind? It's a small world, after all...

The arc of history is long, writes Barbara Ehrenreich, but it leads to catastrophic annihilation. Maybe, as my ten year-old child felt, we're already there? According to the United Nations Refugee Agency there were 65.6 million displaced people in the world in 2016, 23 million of whom were refugees. The agency projects a quarter of a billion displaced people by 2050, heading due north to those in shining enclaves who were directly or indirectly involved in bleeding the south for centuries.

In a small world we must see that charity does begin at home. And, indeed, home is none other than the world. We fail to act on this truth at our own peril. We must undo the folded lie that the stranger, the migrant, the Other is a hostile agent poised to ambush us at every turn, the one who figures in

my ten-year old's nightmare vision. We must embrace him if we are to affirm life and put our "rainbow" back together again and know ourselves fully, as it were, for the first time. The poet who said we must "undo the folded lie" also declared, "We must love one another or die."