

## FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Today is Mother's Day, which I've been thinking about a lot since my recent return from Afghanistan, arguably one of the worst places on the planet to be a mother—or a female of any circumstance. The National Retail Federation estimates that we as Americans will spend more than \$20 billion for flowers, chocolate and other gifts to say "I love you" to our mothers. Twenty billion dollars, by the way, was the GDP of Afghanistan in 2011.

As I prepared for my trip, I came across a poem by the prominent contemporary Afghan poet Pir Muhammad Karwaan titled "Flowers and Man." He writes:

Flowers feed on earth and ashes,  
some clear water, but mostly murky --  
yet flowers are holy, beautiful, fragrant;  
their colours delight both eyes and hearts.  
While man, before whom angels once bowed down,  
looks on flowers, drinks water purer than tears,  
and crunches deep red apples --  
yet turns ugly -- why?

Despite Afghanistan's physical beauty—the rugged Hindu Kush Mountains east of Kabul, the fertile lushness of the Helmand River Valley, the rugged good looks of the Afghan people—this Texas-sized nation of 30 million people is also a showcase for profound ugliness and deprivation. Per capita income in Afghanistan is \$600 per year. Only 18% of the people have electricity. Only 28% of the people can read. The culture of the Afghan people, especially outside the urban centers, remains aggressively tribal and vehemently patriarchal. Taken together, these factors yield a life for most Afghans of crushing poverty, chronic disease, and rampant violence—and place Afghanistan near the bottom of most global indices of human wellbeing.

Why the ugliness? It's tempting to blame Afghanistan's troubles on everyone else. Thomas Barfield, in his book *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, notes that Afghanistan serves as a geographical link between the Indian subcontinent to the southeast, Central Asia to the north, and the Iranian plateau in the West. Given its location, invaders and conquerors have regularly marched through Afghanistan over the centuries, usually on their way to somewhere else. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Afghanistan was "caught up in the great power rivalry between British India and czarist Russia." In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it was "transformed into a cockpit for the Cold War struggle between United States and the Soviet Union." After the Soviets withdrew, Afghanistan

erupted into civil war and then became a failed state, largely ignored by the world until 9/11. Today, its six neighbors include China, three former Soviet republics, and two of the most troublesome nations in the world: Iran and Pakistan, neither of which wants a viable Afghanistan.

You could also blame Islam for the ugliness in Afghanistan, especially if your benchmark is the demonic perversion of Islam practiced by the Taliban. During their period of rule in Afghanistan, the men of the Taliban apparently tried to violate all human rights all the time. When it came to their treatment of women, they mostly succeeded. It's hard to imagine a more deeply misogynist regime, the power of which was compounded by their blatant misuse of religion.

Even so, I would argue that Islam is no more inherently sexist than Judaism or Christianity. The problem is that, especially under the Taliban, people in Afghanistan lived in a Muslim world that was analogous to pre-Reformation Europe, when the Christian church held absolute sway over all aspects of human life. The Enlightenment flourished as the individual became the point of fulcrum—not only in religion, but in economics and politics as well. The view of the church as the one and only means of grace gave way to the understanding that individuals could relate directly to God. The practice of kings and counts owning all the capital gave way to the realization that individuals should own the product of their own labor. The divine right of kings to rule gave way to the right of individuals collectively to choose their own government.

The Enlightenment and Reformation could not have happened as they did, however, without the development of the printing press and the spread of literacy. As the Bible was translated into the common languages of the people and made available in print, people began for the first time to read it for themselves. The absolute authority of the church began to weaken.

In a similar way, some of the ugliness in Afghanistan persists because so few people can read, especially women. The overall literacy rate of 28% masks a huge gender gap: 43% of men can read, but only 12% of women can read. Among other things, Afghan women can't read the Quran for themselves and see that most of the Taliban's pronouncements have nothing to do with Islam. My guess is that the Taliban prohibits the education of girls partly for this reason. Ashley Jackson, a courageous young woman who grew up in this congregation, has spent time with the Taliban on behalf of international aid agencies. Her reports for the Humanitarian Policy Group confirm the Taliban's insistence on ideology over human wellbeing.

If history repeats itself, recent advances in literacy and education in Afghanistan will bolster economic development and political participation, eventually leading to a much more flexible practice of Islam, like we see in the US. These things will happen, of course, only if the progress of the past ten years continues.

Has Afghanistan made progress over the past ten years? The answer is an emphatic yes. The US military, working with their coalition partners as well as international aid agencies, have done a remarkable job of turning things around for the people of Afghanistan. The Afghans we spoke with expressed deep gratitude to the

people and government of the United States for the investment we have made in blood and treasure on their behalf.

In 2002, fewer than a million Afghan children were in school, virtually all of them boys. Today, there are more than 8 million children in school (two-thirds of all Afghan children), and 3.5 million of the children in school are girls. University enrollment has increased from 8,000 to 77,000. Life expectancy has increased by twenty years. Infant mortality has been cut in half, and maternal mortality is one-fourth what it was in 2002. With the notable exception of the eastern region of the country where the mountains border Pakistan, the security situation has vastly improved as well, especially in the south. The Taliban has mostly been driven out of the populated regions of the country into the mountains. The Afghan National Army, the first functional and truly national institution in Afghanistan, has made remarkable progress toward developing a 350,000-soldier force to counter the influence of both the Taliban and tribal warlords.

Will this progress continue as US and other forces wind down their presence? I visited Afghanistan as part of a delegation of 12 members and fellows from the Council on Foreign Relations, led by Max Boot, author of the recently published book *Invisible Armies*, a definitive history of guerrilla warfare through the ages. Our purpose was to experience the situation on the ground in Afghanistan for ourselves. We spent time in Kabul and also travelled south into Taliban territory: the NATO base in Kandahar Province and the US Marine base in Helmand Province. We spoke with generals, and ambassadors, and governors, and ministers, and soldiers, and aid workers. We spoke with Afghans, and Americans, and Australians, and Brits. We ate in military mess halls and sometimes wore body armor. I even spent part of one night—my first night—in a bunker during a Taliban rocket attack.

It was an eye-opening experience to see the progress that has been made, which is astounding, as well as the problems that remain, which are daunting. The problem of illiteracy has made it more difficult to build a competent Afghan National Army. As one general put it, you can't build a sophisticated army with illiterate soldiers. As a result, most of the sophisticated technology—from Medevac units and hospitals to surveillance equipment and bomb clearing devices—will leave as the coalition forces draw down.

To be sure, the literacy situation is rapidly improving. The question is whether improved security will continue to bolster literacy, and hopefully bolster governance and economic development, rapidly enough to enable the Afghans to continue fending off the threat of the Taliban as the coalition forces draw down. Boys and girls need to be able to go to school, men and women need to be able to go to work, voters need to be able to go to the polls, and so on. One general said that the most needed human right in Afghanistan is freedom of movement—a point that became personal for me as I sat in the bunker during the rocket attack.

Will the Afghans pull it off? My guess is that the answer will be some form of yes. It's true that a slower drawdown would give more time for literacy to improve, more time for the Afghan National Security Forces to establish security across the country, more time for the transition from an oral and tribal culture to a literate and national culture. But ultimately, the time must come when the Afghan people choose their own

destiny. The NATO Ambassador to Afghanistan put the situation bluntly: the Afghans need to stop blaming everyone else, he said, and step up themselves, which they now have the capacity to do.

That said, America now has a major US Army base 40 miles from Pakistan and a major US Marine base 140 miles from Iran. Given that these are two of the world's most troublesome states, enlightened self-interest suggests we probably should maintain a significant military presence in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

Beyond the question of how we and other nations will participate in Afghanistan's future, there's a deeper dysfunction in Afghanistan that adds to the challenge, one that doesn't distinguish Afghanistan from other nations but rather unites it with them. This is the Mother's Day aspect of the problem.

Col. Julian "Dale" Alford of the US Marines, a member of our delegation, is completing a year-long fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations before taking command of the Basic School for Marine officers at Quantico. He's a colorful southerner, often contrarian, with an ample reservoir of salty language and compelling stories.

Over dinner one night at the Marine base in Helmand Province, he told me the story of how he took the Marine Expeditionary Unit under his command, numbering about 2,200 Marines, into one of the most bitterly contested regions of Iraq. Typically, the Marines would have established a secure base for their Unit, complete with a mess hall and support services. Against orders, Col. Alford took along a bulldozer and used it to create defensive berms for a series of eight encampments spread across the area, each of which would be home to 250 Marines or thereabouts. The Marines would live hard, he said, eating meals ready to eat (MRE's)—without the comforts of a base. He wanted his troops to engage with the people fully and directly.

Col. Alford knew that Marines don't like living on MRE's, at least not for long. Soon, in addition to patrolling for the enemy, they began going out on food patrol. It turned out that women in the villages who were postmenopausal, and who therefore wore no veil, were allowed to talk with the Marines. These women were also allowed to cook for the Marines, a welcome treat the MRE-weary Marines eagerly paid them for.

Eventually, the women began telling the Marines who the bad guys were in the village. These women were the ones who knew what was happening and what was needed. Aided by the wisdom of the village women, Col. Alford and his Marines were able to bring security to the region faster and with fewer casualties.

One of the brightest spots in Afghanistan is the city of Daykundi in Kandahar Province. It boasts Afghanistan's only woman mayor. In a recent nation-wide exam, sixteen of the top twenty students in Afghanistan hailed from Daykundi. A coincidence? I don't think so.

The evidence from around the globe is clear and conclusive: conflict decreases and overall wellbeing increases as women become well educated, economically prosperous, and civically engaged. In Afghanistan, 20% of college students are women, and women hold 27% of the seats in Parliament. While these numbers are low, they represent an astonishing advance from ten years ago, when women's footsteps during

the Taliban years were literally not allowed to be heard in public, nor were women's voices ever allowed to be heard. In my view, Afghanistan's future depends on whether the Afghan National Army can maintain sufficient security so that, among other things, women have freedom of movement to pursue their dreams of education and economic advancement.

Back in the USA, we have our own challenges on this front. The percentage of women in Congress currently stands at 18%, one-third lower than in Afghanistan, and women's health and human rights are under relentless attack. In David Rothkopf's article titled "The Balance of Power" in the current issue of *Foreign Policy*, he notes that only 4% of Fortune 500 companies have women CEOs. Women make up only 6% of the 6,000 people in the global power elite. In light of these numbers, Rothkopf says, "the systematic, persistent acceptance of women's second-class status is history's greatest shame."

"In fact," he says, "the underrepresentation of women in positions of power is proof not so much that men still dominate the top of the pyramid as it is of a system of the most egregious, widespread, pernicious, and destructive pattern of human rights abuses in the history of civilization." Put differently, the Taliban doesn't play by a different set of rules; they've simply stripped away the niceties to reveal the underlying framework.

Many of the underlying problems around the globe are fueled not mainly by religion or by economics or by politics; they are fueled by sexism—by a deep fealty to the prerogatives of patriarchy. Even in the US, we haven't taken with adequate seriousness the sexism of our systems of religious and economic and political power. And yes, shame on us.

Nonetheless, here we are. In light of all that is past, no matter how appalling, we celebrate what is possible, no matter how challenging. Besides, it's Mother's Day.

Flowers, the poet says, are holy, beautiful, and fragrant; their colors delight both eyes and hearts. The flower of motherhood is a sacred generosity—a magnificent gift of nurture and hope from women who bequeath the future to each new generation. Perhaps one day, this flower will not be crushed by conflict nor sullied by sexism.

When I look at the sexism and conflict that persist around the world, I sometimes feel discouraged, even cynical. But when I see the progress that one nation has made in one short decade, I feel hopeful. On this day and every day, we are all of women born—born of sacred generosity and blessed hope.