

**Zero Dark Thirty:  
Torture, Disavowal, and the Oscars**

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*This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness, and who know the path of peace: Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways, peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful, not proud and demanding in nature. Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove. Wishing: in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be; whether they are weak or strong, omitting none, the great or the mighty, medium, short or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to-be-born — May all beings be at ease! Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings; radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies, and downward to the depths; outward and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will. Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding: not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision....*

—Sharon Salzberg, “The Buddha’s Words on Lovingkindness”

Kathryn Bigelow’s film *Zero Dark Thirty* has been nominated for five Oscars at next Sunday’s Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actress (Jessica Chastain), Best Original Screenplay, Best Film Editing, and Best Sound Editing. The film has *not* been nominated for Best Director. The background of that detail’s significance is that three years ago Bigelow’s previous film *Hurt Locker* was nominated for nine Oscars and won six of them, including both Best Picture and Best Director, making Kathryn Bigelow the first woman in the entire 82-year history of the Academy Awards to earn an Oscar for Best Director. Given that history, the absence of even a Best Director nod for *Zero Dark Thirty* speaks volumes. It may be an honor just to be nominated, but it’s not an honor to be snubbed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *snubbed* — “Ed Asner Adds His Voice to ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Protest,” available at <http://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/ed-asner-adds-his-voice-to-zero-dark-thirty-protest>.

However, Bigelow's film was not overlooked at the Box Office. The most recent figures I have seen are that the film had made more than [\\$88 million](#), doubling its production budget of \$40 million. So at least economically, I doubt Bigelow, Sony Pictures, or anyone else financially involved with the film have any regrets. Despite widespread criticism of the film, I will confess that my name can be added to the chorus of viewers who found themselves enraptured by the film for almost three hours, despite some disturbing scenes of violence.

One of the reasons I wanted to preach about this movie is that I love film, and I try to build a sermon around a film from time to time. I decided to preach about this film in particular because its depictions of torture have generated so much controversy. *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *New York Magazine*, *The LA Times*, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Atlantic*, and *Rolling Stone* are some of the many media outlets that have featured one or more major features about the ethics of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Although the film has many defenders, Democratic senators Dianne Feinstein and Carl Levin reached across the aisle along with Republic senator John McCain (who was himself a victim of torture in Vietnam) to add their voices to those who experienced “deep disappointment” in Bigelow's film. At issue for many people in this camp is that the film begins with the claim that it is, “based on first-hand accounts of actual events.” And the narrative of *Zero Dark Thirty* leads many — if not most — viewers to think that torture led to a critical piece of evidence being revealed that was a major turning point in finding the location of Osama bin Ladin.

In contrast to this view, on April 30, 2012 — eight months before *Zero Dark Thirty* was released — the chairs of the Senate Intelligence Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman released a statement to contradict claims being made about the necessity and effectiveness of torture in the CIA's ongoing counterterrorism work. Based on an extensive three-year study, the senators concluded that **the “CIA did *not* first learn about the existence of the [bin Laden's] courier from detainees subjected to coercive interrogation techniques....** Instead, the CIA learned of the existence of the courier, his true name and location through means unrelated to the CIA detention and interrogation program.” Also in contrast to *Zero Dark Thirty's* emphasis on one lone female operative as the prime mover behind finding bin

Laden, the senate report says that, “Information to support this operation was obtained from a wide variety of intelligence sources and methods.” Further supporting the case against the past, present, or future uses of torture, the report continues that:

- The three detainees subjected to waterboarding provided no new information about the courier. In fact, **the CIA detainees who were subjected to coercive techniques downplayed the courier's significance**, with some of those detainees denying they knew him at all, in the face of significant evidence to the contrary.
- Detainees whom the CIA believed to have information on [bin Laden’s] location provided no locational information, even after significant use of the CIA's coercive interrogation techniques.”<sup>2</sup>

So, on one hand, of course, Bigelow has the First Amendment freedom to make whatever film she chooses. On the other hand, critics have the freedom to evaluate the film as they see fit.

Speaking for myself, as I’ve waded through many different perspectives on this film, my current opinion is that while I generally celebrate films not spoon-feeding the audience, I do think that **Bigelow’s film could have benefited from far greater nuance regarding the ethics and effectiveness of using torture on terrorist suspects.**

But let me take a step back at this point, and to say that what interests me about this film is at least as much everyone’s reactions to the film as it is the film itself. For example, Jungian psychology invites us to consider that hyperbolic reactions — reactions that are far more exaggerated than would be expected or typically warranted for a given scenario — are often indications that someone’s unconscious “shadow” has been triggered, touching on something that has been repressed. In the case of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the argument could be made that, “It’s just a film.” But **the slew of hyperbolic controversy and headlines are perhaps an indication that this film touched on our societal shadow around all the misinformation and hidden information in our ongoing “War on Terror.”**

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<sup>2</sup> “Joint statement from: Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Chairman, Senate Intelligence Committee Senator Carl Levin (D-Mich.), Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee — April 27, 2012,” available at [http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve?File\\_id=026a329b-d4c0-4ab3-9f7e-fad5671917cc](http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=026a329b-d4c0-4ab3-9f7e-fad5671917cc).

Most of you are probably familiar with the story of “Emperor Who Had No Clothes.” This classic children’s tale is about the cognitive dissonance of being asked to believe that what you are seeing with your own eyes — a naked man — is not true, that he does in fact have on clothes. A psychological term for this phenomenon is *disavowal*, denying what you know to be true. But sometimes the moment comes when, for better or worse, you can’t repress, deny, or disavow the truth any longer.<sup>3</sup>

In the War on Terror, one of the starkest, most painful of these “Emperor Has No Clothes” moments was the publication of the Abu Ghraib photos. After the September 11th Terrorist Attacks, there was tremendous sympathy for the United States and even understanding of the need for retaliation. But the Abu Ghraib photos starkly showed U.S. military personnel as perpetrators of prisoner abuse, torture, and human rights violations. Even if those personnel were acting without official orders, the pictures contradicted any perceptions of the U.S. as purely an innocent victim seeking justice for those killed on 9/11.

Other aspects of our disavowal as a society regarding war was our government’s policy for many years (1991-2009) to ban the pictures of soldiers’ coffins, who died in overseas wars. The rationale was respect for the families of the deceased, but the accusation was that the policy

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of disavowal and misinformation in current events, see the confirmation hearings for John Brennan to become the new CIA Director, such as “A Long Overdue Discussion,” available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/opinion/at-john-brennans-cia-confirmation-hearing.html?ref=johnobrennan&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/opinion/at-john-brennans-cia-confirmation-hearing.html?ref=johnobrennan&_r=0). See also, “Drones, Brennan and Obama’s Legacy of Secrecy,” available at <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/drones-brennan-and-obamas-legacy-of-secrecy/?ref=johnobrennan> (“John O. Brennan’s testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday was representative of the Obama administration’s approach to counter-terrorism: right-sounding assurances with little transparency.”). Or consider this quote, “If the Congress — and perhaps the public — doesn’t know about the drone program, it isn’t for lack of coverage. **Perhaps the reason so many people are in the dark is because they want it that way.** After all, if the bad guys are on the run without risking legions of boots on the ground, what’s not to like?” in “Debating Drones, in the Open,” available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/11/business/media/the-inconvenient-but-vital-drone-debate.html?ref=johnobrennan&pagewanted=all>.

sanitized the public's perception of the war's true cost.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, our government's policy is not to publish the death toll either of enemy combatants or of civilians who die in what is called "Collateral Damage" from our military operations.<sup>5</sup> We have also tried to mask the horror of torture by calling it "enhanced interrogation." And despite President Obama's promises to the contrary, the detention center at Guantanamo Bay remains open to this day.<sup>6</sup>

In making this list of accusations, I don't want to be misunderstood. I love this country, and I'm deeply grateful for the freedom I enjoy here, and all the people who have sacrificed to earn and protect that freedom. But my love of this country and the ideals it represents — and has instilled within in — make me want to work to make this country more fully live up to the best of its own ideals of freedom, justice, and fairness.<sup>7</sup>

As a bumper sticker I saw recently said, **"I love my country, but I think we should start seeing other people."** I take that bumper sticker literally: we need to start *seeing* that the children killed as collateral damage from our drone strikes as just as precious as the children

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<sup>4</sup> "U.S. lifts photo ban on military coffins," available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/world/americas/27iht-photos.1.20479953.html>. An excerpt: "'The public has a right to see and to know what their military is doing, and they have a right to see the cost of that military action,' said Santiago Lyon, the director of photography for The Associated Press. 'I think what we had before was a form of censorship.'"

<sup>5</sup> "A Grim Portrait of Civilian Deaths in Iraq," available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/23/world/middleeast/23casualties.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Obama's Guantanamo Is Never Going To Close, So Everyone Might As Well Get Comfortable," available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/16/obama-guantanamo\\_n\\_2618503.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/16/obama-guantanamo_n_2618503.html). For more, see <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/national/usstatesterritoriesandpossessions/guantanamobaynavalbasecuba/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of possible Civil Disobedience related to whistleblowing around torture abuses, see "Ex-CIA Agent, Whistleblower John Kiriakou Sentenced to Prison While Torturers He Exposed Walk Free," available at [http://www.democracynow.org/2013/1/30/ex\\_cia\\_agent\\_whistleblower\\_john\\_kiriakou](http://www.democracynow.org/2013/1/30/ex_cia_agent_whistleblower_john_kiriakou). See also, "Ex-C.I.A. Officer's Path From Terrorist Hunter to Defendant," available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/25/us/john-kiriakous-path-from-ambitious-spy-to-federal-defendant.html?pagewanted=all>.

killed at Sandy Hook Elementary.<sup>8</sup> I don't mean to draw a false equivalency here. The point I'm working my way toward is just how radical the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism is: "The inherent worth and dignity of *every* person."

An important step toward a fuller realization of "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" might be to allow ourselves to be confronted more directly with the names, faces, and life stories of all those who die on *all sides* — soldiers and civilians — of our present and future wars. Such a policy would be the opposite of disavowal and repression. As Jon Stewart said about the decision not to show pictures of Osama bin Laden's dead body:

There's more gore in an episode of CSI than could possibly be in the bin Laden photos. The extremists already hate us, and the Muslim world sees graphic images of people we kill all the time. **Maybe we should always show pictures: bin Laden, our wounded service people, maimed innocent civilians. We can only make decisions about war if we see what war actually is.**<sup>9</sup>

On one level, I don't want to see pictures of bin Laden's body. I don't want to see pictures from our war zones. Relatedly I'm grateful that pictures weren't released of the children who died in Newtown. I know that I don't want to see those pictures because like many of you, I have seen the pictures of torture and abuse that happened at Abu Ghraib, and you can't 'unsee' those pictures after viewing them. But perhaps Jon Stewart and related commentators are right that too much is hidden from us, which allows us to disavow the full consequences of our government's policies. But if we are indeed a government of the people, by the people, and for the people — as our government has taught us we are — then there is a sense in which we are all complicit. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "**Few are guilty, but all are responsible.**"

To take a few steps backward, do you remember where you were when you learned that Osama bin Laden had been killed? Do you remember how you felt then and in the days that followed about his death? On May 1, 2011, a few minutes after 11 p.m., I was walking upstairs

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<sup>8</sup> "Are Drone Strikes Worth the Costs?" available at <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/22/sizing-up-the-effects-of-u-s-drone-attacks/>. See also [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/u/unmanned\\_aerial\\_vehicles/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/u/unmanned_aerial_vehicles/index.html).

<sup>9</sup> "Jon Stewart Makes Case For Showing Dead Osama Bin Laden Photos," available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/05/jon-stewart-dead-osama-bin-laden-photos\\_n\\_857947.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/05/jon-stewart-dead-osama-bin-laden-photos_n_857947.html)

to go to bed when I received a text message from one of my friends that said, “Obama to address nation. Bin Laden dead in U.S. attack.” Startled, I turned back down the dark staircase and powered-up my laptop. As I began scanning various website from *The New York Times* to *CNN*, I also started reading reactions on Facebook, which ranged from jubilation to indignation.

I will confess that the part of me was glad both that bin Laden was dead, and that there would be no long, drawn out trial. And within minutes of the President’s address, as I began to see some of my Progressive Christian friends posting references to Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” part of me also felt like it was too soon to be quoting that verse, despite my longstanding belief in the transformative power of nonviolent activism. As I continued to process my emotions in the wake of this unexpected, late night news flash, another of my friends posted sentiments similar to what I was feeling: **“Is there a status somewhere in between ‘USA! USA!’ and ‘How dare we celebrate death and violence?’ According to my news feed...there is not.”**

What I finally posted on Facebook before going to bed that night was the following: **“At my best, I think Martin Luther King, Jr. got it right** that, ‘The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral.... Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate.... **Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.**’”<sup>10</sup> And there are aspects both of bin Laden’s death and of our ongoing War on Terror that do murder liars and haters, but they seldom establish the truth or end the hatred that motivated past and likely future acts of terrorism.

And therein lies the core of my objections to torture, as well as the similar objections of many other people. In addition to torture being a clear violation of “The inherent worth and dignity of every person,” which is a fully sufficient reason to reject torture as morally repugnant, a strong argument can be made that **the entire debate around “Does Torture Work?” is a**

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<sup>10</sup> “The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral....” — This MLK quote is from his book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, 62-63 (1967). There were also some fake King quotes circulating around the Internet in the days following the bin Laden’s death. See: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/05/anatomy-of-a-fake-quotation/238257/>.

**distraction.** In addition to the report we heard earlier that torture was unnecessary to find Osama bin Laden, the practice of **torture undermines the moral authority of the torturer and creates enormous hatred and resentment around the world.** Instead of winning the hearts of minds of our enemies, torture emboldens them, speeding the descending spiral of violence that King warned us about.

In the same year (1967) that Martin Luther King, Jr. warned us about the “ultimate weakness of violence,” he preached a Christmas Eve Sermon on Peace in which he said the following:

I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because **non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good**, so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally and otherwise, for integration, but we’ll still love you. But be assured that **we’ll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.**”

I have no intention to impugn the courage of SEAL Team Six or to disparage the military and law enforcement officers in this country and around the world, who daily put their lives in harm’s way to protect the innocent. But I do think that **misinformation and disavowal have shielded many civilians in this country, including myself, from seeing the full consequences of war.**

They have stopped us from seeing some of the ways that the “Emperor Has No Clothes,” and they have stopped us from seeing the ways that our military strategies may have sought only a “single victory” for us, and not the “double victory” for all sought by nonviolence activism.

So what would it look like to imagine a way of stopping the spiral of violence? To name only one example of how we might begin to imagine a different way forward, theologian Ron Sider gave a speech in 1984 about a vision of “Peacemaker Teams” that would be comprised of **people equally as committed and as highly trained in the nonviolent activism of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as U.S. soldiers are committed and trained in the techniques of modern warfare.** Sider rightly points out that calls for alternatives to violence are usually hollow because we have so many willing to risk death in *war*, but so few willing to risk death in *nonviolent activism*. He writes:

Unless comfortable North American[s] and European[s] ... are prepared to risk injury and death in nonviolent opposition to the injustice our societies foster and assist...we dare never whisper another word about [nonviolence] to our sisters and brothers in desperate lands. Unless we are ready to die developing new nonviolent attempts to reduce international conflict, we should confess that we never really meant...an alternative to the sword. Unless the majority of our people in nuclear nations are ready as congregations to risk social disapproval and government harassment in a clear ringing call to live without nuclear weapons, we should sadly acknowledge that we have betrayed our peacemaking heritage. **Making peace is as costly as waging war.** Unless we are prepared to pay the cost of peacemaking, we have no right to claim the label or preach the message.... What would happen if we...developed a new nonviolent peacekeeping force of 100,000 persons ready to move into violent conflicts and stand peacefully between warring parties in Central America, Northern Ireland, Poland, Southern Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan? Frequently we would get killed by the thousands. But **everyone assumes that for the sake of peace it is moral and just for soldiers to get killed by the hundreds of thousands, even millions. Do we not have as much courage and faith as soldiers?** For centuries we...have believed there is a

different way, a better way. Our world needs that alternative. Now. But the world will be able to listen to our words only if large numbers of us live out the words we speak.<sup>11</sup>

The controversy over *Zero Dark Thirty* touched on our society's ongoing internal struggle with what the atrocities that have been committed in our name to secure our collective freedom. I have offered Sider's vision of large-scale "Peacemaker Teams" as one example of imagining different way forward. As with the work of King and Gandhi, such a commitment to nonviolence could win the "hearts and minds" of our enemies, giving us a chance of ending the cycle of violence. But such a radical commitment doesn't comes easily or quickly. And any such societal shift must start with ourselves.

To that end, I would like to invite you to experience one small in that direction this morning. Some strands of Buddhism have a practice called *metta* or "loving-kindness" meditation. As you've heard me say before, "Practice doesn't make perfect. Practice makes permanent." And *metta* meditation is a way of inculcating loving-kindness as a habit, it's a way of ingraining loving-kindness as our default way of being in the world.

If you feel comfortable exploring what it feels like to practice a *metta* meditation, as a way of laying a groundwork for creating more loving-kindness in the world, I invite you to repeat after me:

*When I breath in, I'll breath in peace.*

*When I breath out, I'll breath out love.*

*When I breath in, I'll breath in peace.*

*When I breath out, I'll breath out love.*

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<sup>11</sup> Sider was particularly interested in *Christian* Peacemaker Teams (<http://www.cpt.org/resources/writings/sider>), but his vision can be combined with the work of King, Gandhi, and others such as Gene Sharp for a vision of a twenty-first century, pluralistic movement of nonviolent activism. If you are unfamiliar with Sharp's work, be sure to visit <http://www.aeinstein.org/organizations9173.html>.