

CHAPTER SIX

COMPASSION AS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS

Compassion is perceived and felt as genuine even by the most confused mind...when a confused mind is face-to-face with genuine compassion, awareness happens and opens the gate for their own compassion to come forth.

—Dane Sadler, former inmate

“Compassion as Weakness?”

During the ten years that Margot visited people in various prisons throughout the United States, she’s heard a common complaint from prisoners who’d embraced the Buddha’s teaching: *Others see compassion as a sign of weakness. To survive in prison you have to be aggressive—compassion will only make you a target.* The army is very much the same. As a soldier, you are expected to be aggressive. Showing compassion toward the Iraqis made you look weak, suspicious, potentially untrustworthy to defend yourself and others in a moment of crisis. Showing compassion in Iraq was a challenge that I never quite mastered.

But I did try to feel compassion, however unsuccessfully, under very difficult circumstances. The Sakyong's letter offered me enormous aid. As my situations became more intense, his advice became more relevant. The use of force typically incites greater levels of rage. Once the war became more intimate and personal, whatever reservations we might have had about accidentally killing innocents started to vanish. Hence, the need for compassion grew as the application of force intensified.

I wrote to Margot:

This place is like Vietnam; they kill you and slip away into the night. You never really see their faces. And because of that, the anger expressed by my friends is misdirected toward the average Iraqi who is just trying to survive. Their anger needs an outlet, and unfortunately most do not know how to channel it in a non-destructive way; we retaliate and our hate grows, simply perpetuating the problem. The only answer to the problem is MORE COMPASSION, just as the Sakyong said in his letter. But how do you convince a group of people who just had their good friends blown to pieces that the answer is love and compassion? Unfortunately, in America, especially in the Army, these types of attributes are considered a sign of weakness, not strength. We can launch a space shuttle that shows the brilliance of human ingenuity, but we can't find a way to solve the most basic ills that plague society.

The military establishment expected the American soldier to appear stoic under duress in war; you do your job without complaint—they don't want you to think. You have an objective, and you carry it out. Feelings and compassion open up a can of worms that is counter-productive to single-minded military aggression. It's a John Wayne world where you trust, without ambiguity, the righteousness of your mission: you're the good guys and they're the bad guys. Yes, there was this black and white thinking they trained us to have, and then there were the actual realities—the gray areas—we faced on a daily basis.

I compared it to traffic. Iraqis are like everyone else in the modern world—they do stupid things while driving. In Baghdad, when an American patrol rolled down a road, most drivers would pull off to the side. But for some mysterious but typically human reason, one driver would invariably attempt to jockey for a better position to get ahead of the others. On one occasion, three or four drivers pulled onto the shoulder to allow the American patrol to pass, but the last driver in line suddenly pulled out in an effort to move ahead of those in front of him. When he swerved out into the middle of the road, Eric Fleming, on orders from the T.C., raked the vehicle with a burst of machine gun fire.

That driver's impatience proved to be the biggest mistake of his life.

The car continued across the road and came to rest in a ditch. The driver was mortally wounded, but the patrol, en-route to the Safe House, didn't stop to verify if it was a suspected suicide bomber or just an innocent civilian in a rush to get home. Instead, it rolled on, passing the man who lay slumped over in his car on the side of the road. *Just another day at the office in Iraq.* The patrol did return to check on the man half an hour later. According to an Iraqi bystander, he'd been taken to a hospital in Baghdad, but apparently he'd died before he got there. Would his life have been saved if the patrol had stopped?

In the beginning of our deployment I'd tried to emphasize to other soldiers the need for understanding the complexity of our situation. I'd volunteered to be part of the Company Commander's personal security detail, thinking my knowledge of Islam and the Middle East could be helpful, but it wasn't. He was the captain of an infantry unit going to war; he knew what he needed, and he certainly wasn't going to take advice from someone who'd voted for John Kerry over George W. Bush.

I tried the same tack with SGT. Moore and others once we were in Iraq. But many saw our deployment in very simple terms: we were going to fight the "enemy," the perpetrators of 9/11. I saw things very differently. Like the soldier during training who asked to borrow my copy of the Koran simply to find passages that confirmed his anti-Muslim bias,

many soldiers around me were there for one thing and one thing only: to kill the enemies of the United States. But this wasn't a simple goal—something I tried to articulate during the first months of our deployment, that was quickly dismissed. This “war” was to be used by certain people to give them their fifteen minutes of fame.

Many, like Moore and Bopp, thought their knowledge was superior to all those around them. Certainly, to their way of thinking, listening to me was unnecessary, unwanted, and unheeded. One day at the Safe House, we got a report of a suspected insurgent driving a generic, ubiquitous vehicle with a specific license plate number. I knew the Arabic numerals and could read the license plates. I got the number and wrote it with a non-permanent marker on the inside windshield of Moore's hum-vee. This way he could look at vehicles we passed and try to match up the numbers I'd written for him on the windshield.

“That's a great idea,” a fellow soldier said. With reluctance Moore accepted my suggestion. But then I offered more. “I'll write all the Arabic numbers on the windshield, so in the future when we have different license plate numbers to look for, you'll have them written down for reference.”

He gave me a condescending look. “Just write the numbers down for the car we're looking for.” We were the same rank but he was technically my superior, so I had no control. I walked away with the realization that any effort on my part that might threaten his innate belief in his own superiority would be a mistake.

Shortly following that incident, SFC. Janes and Moore told me I would be in charge of the patrol for the day. This would mean navigating around our sector. Up to this point I'd simply ridden along as a dismount, never having to respond to radio calls or read a map and determine where we needed to go. Janes and Moore did this with the expectation, or simply the hope, that I would prove incompetent and need their assistance, confirming their preconceptions about me.

As it turned out, I navigated brilliantly around the sector that day, even escorting a different unit into Baghdad International Airport. Once



Inspecting the inside of a former Saddam palace.
From left to right: The author with SPC. Youngblood, SGT. Moore, SFC. Janes and SPC. Petty near the Safe House.

the patrol concluded for the day, Moore said hesitatingly, “You did a good job today, SGT. Kendel.” He turned and walked away, looking a little embarrassed. That was the last time Janes or Moore put me in charge of a patrol until Moore went home on leave. Their egotistical belief in their own superiority had been broken. I could function as well as they could, and they didn't like it. But my desire to view the Iraqis as human beings, not as objects of our resentment, would lead to incidents where my ability to function in combat would be questioned.

One day, as we were heading back to Camp Stryker at the end of an ordinary patrol, we passed the road leading to the Safe House, then came around a sharp bend to the left where there were a few mud huts among trees. Directly in front of me, on the other side of the road, I noticed children, ages three to eight, as they played in the front yard of a small house. I then focused on a small white car stopped in the right lane ahead. I had to make a split second decision whether or not to fire on the vehicle. It was not completely off the road, as was the normal Iraqi procedure. My

thoughts ranged from *perhaps the man was unaware of our sudden appearance to maybe he was the father of the children and had stopped in for lunch.*

He seemed to be waiting for someone from within the house. SGT. Moore bellowed from below, "Shoot the fucking car! Shoot the fucking car!"

With one eye I could see the car, and with the other I could see the kids playing in the front yard. Deducing that the car wasn't an immediate threat, I concluded that we'd simply surprised *him*. If I shot and hit the car the bullets could very well ricochet, cutting down the children.

I chose not to shoot. We passed the car without incident.

From below came Moore's voice: "Why *the fuck* didn't you shoot that fucking car?"

I sat back down in the gunner's seat where I could see Moore's livid expression. I said, "I couldn't shoot. I didn't want to take the chance of a ricochet killing those kids playing in the yard."

"I don't care about any fucking kids!" he responded. "Next time you shoot!"

I stood back up in the gunner's hatch, thinking, *What the hell have I gotten myself into? If I do something like that again, they're not going to trust me.*

I think it was at this point where conflict began to develop between myself and some of the other soldiers in our company. I clearly saw the war and our role in it as something far different than some of those around me.

As we continued down the road, I watched the children playing happily in the front of their house, oblivious to the conflict raging over my decision not to shoot. I realized I'd have to feign aggressiveness in order to placate those around me. I'd fire in the other direction if I had to. I'd pretend that I was playing the game. The last thing I wanted was to spend the rest of my tour behind a desk doing paperwork, the fate of soldiers not trusted to perform as the Army saw fit under duress. But in those few seconds where the lives of innocents hung in the balance, I'd controlled my fear and rage, made the right decision, and chose not to pull the trigger.