ROUNDTABLE

LETTERS • FEEDBACK • COMMENTARY

JAMIE TOBIAS NEELY

Tragedy in Bahrain a reminder of perils

Anita Koch boarded a Northwest Airlines flight in Spokane on Tuesday afternoon and flew halfway around the world to her son's bedside in an intensive care unit in Bahrain.

Koch slipped into an alternate reality shortly after the beginning of the new year. She received a call that her 36-year-old son, Jay R. Olsen, had been hit by a car in Bahrain. Since then, she's flown back and forth between the U.S. and the Middle East, and searched relentlessly for a way to evacuate her son to an American hospital.

For middle-class Americans who grew up in the 1950s and '60s, it seemed that most of the world's perils could be mitigated with a good insurance policy and a U.S. passport. Today, in this era of globalization, it's the adventures of our children that force us to drop our delusion of American invincibility. Now it's clear we not only share the riches, but also the risks, of the entire globe.

Koch, a managing executive for personal lines at Payne Financial Group Inc., tucked her emotions away to support her son with calmness and focus. Her own family physician, Dr. Jim Bingham, says she's so steady that if his plane were going down over the Hudson River, he'd want Sully Sullenberger at the controls and Anita Koch next to him in the exit row.

She has long been proud of her bright, gregarious son, a 1990 Shadle Park High School graduate who received two congressional nominations to the U.S. Military Academy. After he graduated from West Point, he served in the Army for two years in Germany. In 1996 President Bill Clinton downsized the military, and Olsen and many of his classmates were released early from their Army commitments.

Olsen traveled to Korea to teach English. Last summer he moved to Saudi Arabia to teach business classes at Dammam Community College in Dhahran. His Korean-born wife, Woo Young, and their 8-year-old son, Joshua, planned to move to Saudi Arabia in late January to join him.

But on New Year's Day, Olsen was visiting Bahrain, which is connected by a causeway to Saudi Arabia. That evening, as he crossed a busy arterial, a car struck him. His injuries were so severe that his mother flew to join him on Jan. 7. She was there when surgeons amputated his right leg above the knee.

Olsen received free medical care from Bahrain's government-funded health care system. His mother found support from a large, compassionate Bahrainian family she met in the hospital waiting room.

This winter Olsen remained in Bahrain, sedated on a ventilator and fighting a serious infection caused by a strain of bacteria called acinetobacter. In December the Infectious Diseases Society of America released a report warning that drug-resistant acinetobacter baumannii is becoming as severe a threat as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA. Wounded soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan, the report said, are bringing these bacteria home with them.

Doctors in both countries urged Koch to fly her son back to the U.S. for treatment that might not be available in Bahrain. But his Saudi health insurance did not cover a medical evacuation to the States.

Koch and her family contacted the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain, politicians' offices, and the U.S. Department of Defense. They checked with every organization they could think of, from the Red Cross to West Point alumni. But over and over they were told that because Koch was a veteran, not an active-duty military member, he wasn't eligible for military transport. He was on a ventilator, and he needed to fly on a medical plane with specialized equipment and a critical-care air-transport team. The cost, ranging anywhere from $125,000 to $300,000, would fall to Olsen's family.

"We've done as a family everything we can for Jay," his mother said. "It's in God's hands now."

When Koch called Bingham to talk over her son's condition, she heard her doctor's voice dissolve with tears. "It just struck me how horrible this situation is," Bingham said. "It just breaks your heart."

Last week, as Koch arrived in Bahrain, she found her son's temperature had climbed to 104 degrees, and Bahrainian surgeons were preparing to operate on his leg once more. Koch's colleagues gathered donations, and Sen. Patty Murray's office offered to look into the situation.

But on Saturday afternoon, the word came back to Spokane: Jay Olsen died late that morning. His body will likely be flown back to the United States in the next few days.

Koch sent an e-mail from Bahrain. "He loves to take journeys," she wrote. "He is taking this one before all of us, but we will be with him again one day."

The rest of us are left to contemplate how Americans in this era are no longer immune to the dangers of the rest of the world. Perhaps, of course, we never really were.

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Dissent needs a safe haven

JAMIE TOBIAS NEELY

Last Sunday morning, the Day of Pentecost, I sat in a Spokane sanctuary where the parishioners wore red to celebrate the birth of the Christian church and a fabric banner resembling tongues of fire danced above the chancel.

Afterward, we cheerfully spilled into the May sunshine. When I arrived home, I was stunned to discover that a couple of hours before our service began, a man shot Dr. George Tiller as he was serving as an usher in a similar church in Wichita. I was startled to find he belonged to the same denomination I do.

It goes without saying that churches should be havens from violence. Thankfully, most of them are. But it struck me later that far too few provide a safe space for the fundamental path to peace: the expression of dissenting ideas.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America encourages its members "to participate in the public debate on abortion in a spirit of respect for those with whom they differ."

But my convictions about public dissent in church stem back to my childhood in another denomination.

I grew up in the First Presbyterian Church in Rapid City, S.D., a state where most churchgoers I knew voted a straight Republican ticket.

Yet each Sunday, our pastor led a session called Talk Back after the service. He invited members to respond to his sermon or to share opinions on topical issues.

It was one of the city's worst kept secrets that Dr. Ben Munson, a local gynecologist and Presbyterian, provided illegal abortions. I have vivid memories of Munson sharing his views in our church basement. That's probably because our pastor, the Rev. Ralph Smith, regularly reminded us: "We can disagree without being disagreeable."

Last week I e-mailed his son, Rex Smith, the editor of the Times Union in Albany, N.Y., for memories of his father, who died years ago.

Ralph Smith, he wrote, rebelled against a rigid religious upbringing when he realized "that his unchurched high school basketball teammates displayed character traits more admirable than the pious churchgoers of his hometown."

A book by J.B. Phillips called "Your God Is Too Small" also influenced his father's belief that "a God whose mind we humans could know with certainty wouldn't be big enough to warrant our worship."

If such a God had room for all the children of the Earth, Ralph Smith concluded, surely the church could welcome people whose opinions on social issues differed.

Rex Smith recalled Dr. Ben Munson as "a humble but fiercely honorable man" who frequently shared his support of abortion rights alongside a fundamentalist "who kept exhorting, 'Just preach the Bible!' "

Few congregations in the polarized America of recent years would welcome such debate.

It wasn't that the era of my childhood was hate-free.

Rex Smith reminded me that in 1968, when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. died, a memorial service was held in our church sanctuary. "A few days later, Pop and I were walking downtown, and a guy stopped us to chide my dad for allowing a service for 'that communist' at our church," he wrote.

But those days were mercifully free of one particularly virulent form of hate speech. Back then, there were no Rush Limbaughs or Bill O'Reillys daily whipping up the repressed hostilities of unhappy Americans or inadvertently inciting the truly crazed ones to strike.

Our town's abortion doctor never heard O'Reilly calling him "Munson the baby murderer" or "the executioner from South Dakota."

Today we turn to the rhetoric of hate for entertainment and escape. It's of course a cheap distraction from the fact that we're steadily losing the capacity to think with complexity about serious issues. Meanwhile, O'Reilly's and Limbaugh's voices remain powerfully, seductively destructive.

Last Sunday morning at St. Mark's we heard a passage of Scripture. The Earth's last days will be a time, the verse says, when "your young men shall see visions and your old men will dream dreams."

I don't know where that might leave us middle-age women.

I'd settle for imagining these simple wonders: perfecting the art of disagreeing without being disagreeable. And tuning into airwaves free from the voices of hate.

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Loyal colonel has his doubts

JAMIE TOBIAS NEELY

On Tuesday evening, as I sat down to watch the president's speech in Col. Darel Maxfield's North Side living room, I was struck by how much Maxfield's life has changed since we first spoke.

It was August 2007 when Maxfield's voice boomed into my office telephone, connected by a satellite from Besmaya Range Complex in Iraq. A 51-year-old member of the U.S. Army Reserve, Maxfield kept his head shaved and led an operation that trained Iraqi soldiers.

Back then, we regularly discussed the Iraq war through e-mail interviews. I was dubious. He was wholeheartedly committed.

On Tuesday, we reconnected for a cup of coffee and an update on all that has changed in Maxfield's life, the losses and rewards of military service and the nature of sacrifice. As a backdrop, CNN commentators prepared us for the president's Afghanistan announcement, and Maxfield, who voted for John McCain, was now the skeptic.

He returned home in spring 2008, too jarred by war to resume life exactly as it had been, but by that fall, he was teaching social studies at Ferris High School once again.

Last summer, he and his wife, Lesley, invited their family and friends to their backyard to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. Lesley Maxfield wore a purple dress. Darel Maxfield held her hand. And a college classmate, Judge Sam Cozza, officiated as they renewed their wedding vows.

"If I am nearing the end of the show," Maxfield said Tuesday, "that will remain probably the greatest of days for me."

But a month later, as he was about to start planning another deployment overseas, he suffered a serious stroke.

His right side was paralyzed at first. His vision, short-term memory, speech and balance were all damaged. A cluster of orange prescription bottles on a kitchen table marks his new regimen.

Gone is his shaved head. Now he combs brown hair back from his M-shaped hairline. His rapid-fire eloquence has been slowed by an occasional stutter.

While technically still a member of the Army Reserve, Maxfield anticipates he'll be asked to retire soon. He hopes to return to the classroom but doesn't yet know if that's possible.

He's beginning to imagine a future that might include anything from counseling fellow veterans to ministry to serving in the Peace Corps. And in the meantime, he remains fascinated by the military life he loves.

Afghanistan, he argues, is not Iraq, where people connect through satellite television to the rest of the world. In Afghanistan, the severe terrain isolates people into small tribes ruled by Islamic extremists.

In a recent e-mail, Maxfield described Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who commands U.S. forces in Afghanistan. "Personally, I wish he'd simply declare victory and come home," Maxfield wrote, "but I'm afraid nobody and I mean NOBODY has the courage to do that."

Instead, President Barack Obama plans to send 30,000 more American military. Maxfield doesn't think that's enough. And even if they're successful, he said, "What are you left with? A government that nobody believes in?"

Nonetheless, Maxfield, as a member of the U.S. military, supports the president. "Tonight before I sleep I will pray that he is right," he said.

Obama launched into his speech. Soon, like his predecessor, he was evoking the memory of 9/11, reminding Americans of the need to protect our country's security.

I gazed at the hot, weary West Point cadets in Obama's audience, and I thought of that abstract, emotion-laden word so often used in connection with American military service.

I interrupted to ask Maxfield one more question. How does he describe the nature of his own sacrifice?

Tears welled up in his eyes.

He did not mention the losses I recalled: the damage to his hearing on the Besmaya firing range, the toll on his back from wearing body armor, not even the lingering post-traumatic stress that sends him to appointments with a VA psychiatrist.

The stroke? "Just bad luck," he said.

Instead, he named time as his greatest sacrifice. Time to support his son Ben's baseball talent, time to play golf with his son Daniel, time to visit the bedside of his son David, who was injured in a serious car accident during Maxfield's deployment.

Now 30,000 more Americans will be asked to sacrifice those irreplaceable moments with their families, to risk their health, their peace of mind and their lives.

Maxfield, the loyal, big-hearted soldier, has his doubts about this effort. Afghanistan strikes him as "Korea on steroids." And yet.

Near the end of his speech, the president paid tribute to "the men and women in uniform who are part of an unbroken line of sacrifice that has made government of the people, by the people, and for the people a reality on this Earth."

The Spokane colonel remembers his time in Iraq as an invigorating challenge that integrated every skill he'd ever learned.

"I guess I should be grateful I don't have to go to Afghanistan," Maxfield reflected Tuesday evening. "Truthfully, if somebody has to go, I'd love to go. And if they send me, then that's one less of my kids at Ferris they'd have to send."

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