

# Costly Empathy

## Anonymous Military Chaplain

### *Summary*

*A chaplain, who was not there, imagines how a soldier died to save his buddies. The chaplain's empathic imagination confirms the words of Helen Keller: "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men experience it."*

I was not on that Ramadi rooftop that Friday afternoon, September 29, just days after my daughter turned three—I was 75 miles east in Baghdad. Although inside the wire and supposedly secure, I felt vulnerable. Helen Keller once said, "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men experience it." There on that rooftop, I could enjoy the superstition—an illusion—that with height came safety. I was above the fray; the fight was below—it was dangerous down there; here, not as much.

I had lived with that illusion my whole life, the illusion of being above it all, beyond danger's reach—bad things happen to other people. "All things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). I believed it until that grenade exploded my illusion and demolished my superstition. Once it did, I lost my innocence, my faith, my sense of peace and joy, and I want to say my friend Mike, but then I didn't know him until after he had died.

I was not on that Ramadi rooftop that day, but I have been there many times since. How else would I be able to visualize so clearly the sand-colored ledge, to feel the searing heat and the grit underfoot, to squint in the sunlight and lean forward into the silence and listen with my whole being for the sound of danger, to mute my breathing to mask even a whisper? How else would I find myself so on edge again and again, ready to leap toward safety or lunge toward danger? Why else would that site be so planted in my memory? Is my memory another casualty of the war? There is no prosthesis for memory.

I was not on that Ramadi rooftop that day. The night before, on September 28, I had worked into the wee hours of the morning, as always. Sometime between 0200 and 0300 hours, I left my place of duty and stepped out into the darkness that swallowed the night. Alone I walked to my hooch about a mile away. It was pitch black: no ambient light, save for a sliver of the moon and the tracers that darted randomly across the sky, as they did each night while I traversed the darkness. I navigated my course by landmarks detectable only when I drew near: a gate, a curb, a tree, a patch of gravel, a gully. Occasionally I used a small pocket light if I veered off course, flashing it for a second or so to adjust without being seen. I was spent, physically and emotionally, and terrified.

Reaching the tin trailer, I entered without benefit of light to avoid waking my hooch mate, whom I never saw by day. Slipping in silently, I unlaced my boots, slid them off, slipped out of my uniform, and dropped onto my rack. At first I lay still, craning my ears to hear sounds distant or near, listening for the crack of gunshots or the explosion of mortars. Then I whispered the same prayer I said every night while in theater: "Lord, I am too exhausted to keep watch any longer. Be my shield. Protect me from any harm that may come this way." For a few breaths, I lay still while my ears kept vigil. Soon I was asleep.

Sometime between when I fell asleep and when I arose seven hours later, Mike and his team had gone on duty 75 miles to the west to provide overwatch on that Ramadi rooftop for ground operations conducted in the streets below.

When I awakened, the sunlight was piercing through the crack under the trailer door. I rose, picked up my towel and shaving kit, put on my sunglasses, and squinted as I opened the door to enter the blinding daylight and hike to the latrine. Already the sun was searing and the air was hot. I cleaned up and made my way to the chow hall to have lunch (for "breakfast") before reporting for duty to relieve the chaplain who had been on duty since early that morning. I relieved him at the same time every day for months, but I cannot recall his name for the life of me.

To the west, in Ramadi, the overwatch was under way. Harassing fire had erupted repeatedly throughout the morning. A rocket-propelled grenade struck the building at mid-day, but by 1400, an eerie stillness had descended. Atop the roof, two SEAL snipers lay prone—another, named Mike was between them, crouched—there was a fourth SEAL to Mike's left, about fifteen feet away. The air was still, yet the heat made it shimmer. Sand and

grit imparted coarseness to every surface, including the skin. Streams of sweat poured, dripping silently to the blazing deck and evaporating.

Suddenly there was movement below...or was there? The SEALs' breathing slowed, their vigilance piqued. The air hung silent, in expectation that all hell might break loose.

It does.

Hurling across the ledge, a grenade flung from below smacks Mike in the chest with a "thunk," ricocheting to the deck and suspending time. Mike's gaze is riveted to the grenade. Ahead of him to either side are the two prone snipers he is protecting. Four feet behind him, the only exit—with a lunge backward, he alone can survive—but he doesn't take it. His instincts aroused, he never takes his eyes off the grenade, never pauses, never hesitates. "Grenade!" he shouts, (and a wave of terror surges through my body) as his boots make a scraping sound, gaining traction against the grit beneath them. Instantly, Mike lunges forward and down to smother the grenade: swift, purposeful, precise. A SEAL, who turns to look, sees the options cross Mike's face, but resolutely he rejects all but one. Mike flings himself onto the grenade belly first and braces with his forearms and knees to halt its roll underneath him. As he exhales the grenade detonates, accelerating time, exploding into Mike's gut, and propelling shrapnel into the SEALs beside him. I grimace, jerk away instinctively, turning my back toward the shards that embed themselves in everything they reach, including me. Searing heat gives way to searing pain and penetrating groans. I turn back and see Mike in agony, his blood everywhere, including on me. Horror, rage, fear, and grief must all be suppressed to respond in the moment, to do what must be done, to try to save Mike, and to fend off the next attack.

The muffled sound of the explosion jolts SEALs nearby and blows a hole in the pit of my stomach, though as I said, I was not there. A rescue party races to the roof and I help them roll Mike off the grenade, his belly ripped open. "Mike! You're gonna be alright, buddy," I lie to him. "Stick with us now. We're gonna get you out of here." I hear the chopper blades approaching, their familiar rhythmic thumping reaching a crescendo, and I feel the blast of hot air whipping downward underneath the blades, the sting of airborne grit pelting my face, arms, and hands. I try to position myself to shield Mike from the downwash, but grit covers him. We hoist him onto the helicopter, and it surges skyward and tilts in the direction of the battalion aid station—he will barely make it there. The rooftop heat shimmers and my memory fades. Everything feels surreal, as if what just happened didn't.

How could it...in this elevated position above the fray, looking down on the war? How could what just happened possibly have happened in the way I remember it, since I was not there?

Seventy-five miles east, I knew nothing of what had happened. It was 1405—SEALs' ears in Ramadi were ringing from the blast. Mike was medevaced as fast as possible, but died by 1440. The prone SEALs, riddled with shrapnel, would survive. I learned later that afternoon of the carnage in Ramadi, but it was several days before I learned that the incident involved a Navy SEAL. Mike was only the second SEAL killed in the war.

When I discovered that he had laid down his life for others on that rooftop, I launched a quest to get to know Mike (or "Mikey," as many called him). I would lead a memorial tribute for him just days later. I learned that he was asthmatic as a boy and fought to strengthen his lungs by racing his siblings in the pool. I learned that he did not make it through BUDS the first time due to an injury, but determined, he returned and completed it the second time. I learned that this sailor from Garden Grove, California—just over sixty miles from where my daughter was born—was the son of a Marine and a social worker, a devout Roman Catholic as I had once been, who attended Mass each day before leaving the wire—which meant that he went to Mass while I was sleeping on the morning of the day he died.

My suspicions roused, I learned that Mike was named after St. Michael the Archangel—long revered for his battle with evil—and that Mike gave his life on his namesake's feast day, September 29, as if somehow he fulfilled his life's purpose in doing so. That thought, I am sure, was never in his mind, but was it somehow in the mind of God—and if so, why? Why would Mike be born to die; why wouldn't he be born to live?

I never met Mike, never knew him personally, never served with him on a mission, but I have never been the same since he died. I have worn a St. Michael medal since returning from theater. Finding one was one of my first quests after returning home; I found it at a little Catholic gift shop. It depicts St. Michael the Archangel subduing a dragon, evil embodied. I pray for protection every morning when I put it on. Who knows what horror lurks outside the door? "St. Michael, pray for us. Guard and protect us." I need an angel with a sword.

I never met Mike, but I feel close to him in a way that is hard to explain. I have lost a friend I never knew. He is part of me now, though he wasn't before. I might have thought myself demented before my wife and I experienced four miscarriages, but somehow each of those children are part of me

now though they weren't before, dear to me though I never knew them—so, too, is Mike. I led tributes to many like him in theater, and I pray that in the communion of saints I will meet them one day. I need to fill the hole inside me that their absence has left—Mike, first among them.

I have been gutted by the grenade that took his life, galled at his chance execution, horrified at the injustice of a worthy life wasted, a man of character cut down. I have been struck dumb by the blast, rattled to the core by the deathly silence afterward that deadened my heart and my faith—too stunned to be angry at God (yet furious), too appalled to try to make sense of such senselessness (yet aghast), too torn apart to mend (though I bear no outward scar). My faith exploded like that grenade and was blown to bits and scattered—and my peace—and my joy. For what? "It doesn't matter," I tell myself—often. All that matters from that day is that Mike is gone and I survived. How, compared to his death, could my suffering matter?

While I carry no scar, the shards of my faith, and the sad remnant of the peace I once knew lie like embedded shrapnel just under the surface. The pain leaves me numb—and yet...

I was not on that Ramadi rooftop the day that grenade struck Mike in the chest and he lay down on it, but I have returned to that rooftop again and again. Each time the grenade hurtles across the ledge and smacks me in the chest, and like Mike, I fix my gaze on it and never turn away, moving steadily down and toward it to shield the others by absorbing its blast. I remember the fleeting stillness beforehand, the penetrating silence, the sudden intrusion, the muffled blast, the trauma to the gut, and the ringing sound that pierced the stillness that followed—and wounded afresh, I feel the void.

"Security is mostly a superstition," Helen Keller once said. "It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men experience it. Avoiding danger," she added, "is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing."