

A Tale of Two Fathers

Introduction *Jim Loney* was one of two Canadian Christian Peacemakers kidnapped in Baghdad in November 2005. Jim wrote the following reflection in 2004. A version of the story appears in *Getting in the Way: Stories From Christian Peacemaker Teams*, Herald Press, 2005; it is used with permission. (CPT is featured in the *Inspirational People* section of Hill Connections .)

My father’s name is Patrick. He is 70 years old. I am 39.

I first told him in September [2003] that I was planning to go to Iraq with a group called Christian Peacemaker Teams to do human rights work. He said, “Well James, I’m not very excited about it,” and then, “I wish you’d think of your mother and I when you do these things.”

We talked more about it when I went home to Sault Ste. Marie for a Thanksgiving visit. We were on our way to the cottage to patch a leaky roof. I told him I was scared, but that I felt it was something I needed to do. I talked about how Rick Yuskiw — he was a year behind my brother Ed in grade school — was sent to Afghanistan as part of Canada’s war against terrorism, and how one of his closest buddies was killed when a roadside bomb exploded next to his jeep.



If Rick was being asked to risk his life as a soldier then I, as a paci-

fist Christian who believes that war is not the way to peace, should be prepared to take the same risks.

My father’s temper flared. “What can you accomplish by going there?” he demanded. “It’s futile. Every westerner is a target. They don’t care who you are or why you’re there. It’s just not worth it.” Silence filled the truck.

The memory of a breezy June day when I was fourteen visited me. My father had just purchased land on St. Joseph’s Island, and I was helping him to cut a clearing in the trees for the house he would eventually build.

My father was bucking a log, and I must have been standing too close. I don’t remember how it happened, but somehow the chainsaw in my father’s hands sliced through my sweatshirt and undershirt and left a foot-long scratch across my chest that ran directly over my heart. I marvelled at the ragged slash in my clothes, the red, pencil-thin cut. My Dad stepped back, sat down shaking, his eyes wide with horror.

“Jesus Christ! Be careful,” he said. I shrugged it off and suggested we go back to work; at that age, I was still unfamiliar with the concept of mortality. My father said he wanted to do something else.



Back in the present, I turned to look at my father sitting behind the wheel. I knew there was nothing I could tell him that would make him feel any better about my decision. We somehow found our way into another conversation.

I called my parents on New Year’s Eve to say goodbye. My father launched into a defence of American foreign policy, asked me why I was always criticizing the Americans. I took a deep breath, bit my tongue.

Khadan’s father is called Ismael. Ismael is 60 years old. Khadan is 22. He earns three dollars a day as a street cleaner for the municipality of Baghdad.

I interviewed Ismael at Baghdad’s Abu Hanifa Shrine where he sings the call to prayer five times a day. The corneas of his eyes were a smoky white colour and noticeably without pupils. Ismael was blind.

He explained that his son and a friend were swimming in the Tigris River on October 19, 2003 when they heard an explosion — an everyday occurrence in Baghdad. It was only when they heard gunfire close by that they became scared and got out of the water. They were both shot by American soldiers — Khadan in the right foot — and

then swept up into the U.S. Army's massive security detainee system.

According to Ismael, the Americans charged him with being in possession of a rocket propelled grenade. "This is impossible," he said. "My son was excused from the army because of a head injury he received in 1997. He does not know how to use these weapons. He is innocent."

Fifteen days later, Ismael learned that his son was being held in a nearby hospital but he was not allowed to visit. Khadhan was transferred to Abu Ghraib Prison in November and, after repeated requests, "they had pity on my situ-

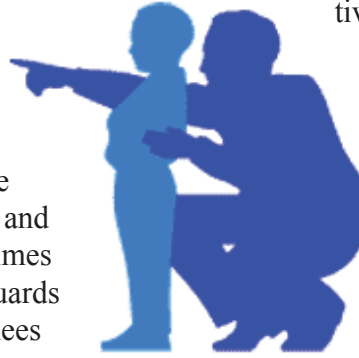


ation" and allowed him to visit his son at the end of December.

"My son said the food is sometimes good and sometimes not. Sometimes they get diarrhea. The guards don't allow the detainees to receive clothes from visitors." During his second visit, Ismael wore a track suit under his tunic and successfully smuggled it to Khadhan.

At the end of the interview, Ismael let go of his cane and extended his arms towards me with his palms facing upwards. "I just want my son back," he said, eyes staring lifelessly in an open, pleading face. "Can you help to get my son released?"

Several days later my family called. My father's voice was tenta-



tive, nervous. "How are you, James? Are you okay?" I told him that I was fine, feeling much better after spending the day in bed with a fever two days before. "Oh — are you sure you're okay?"

Yes, I'm really fine.

"What kind of food do you have to eat?" I told him. "Well, make sure you get enough to eat." Okay. "You be careful now," he said.

When the call was done, I closed my eyes and saw my father, his arms reaching helplessly across an ocean and pleading for the return of his son. I saw Ismael and Patrick, searching blindly for their sons, united — if in no other way — by their vulnerability. First grief, and then strength poured out of my heart into my arms. I had work to do.

*Gratitude to CPT for use of their previous logo.
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