

April 23, 2006

Dear Friends Everywhere,

Many of you have joined your thoughts and prayers with ours on behalf of Tom Fox, Jim Loney, Norman Kember, and Harmeet Sooden, members of Christian Peacemaker Teams International (CPT), who were kidnapped in Iraq on November 26, 2005. Your thoughts and prayers continued throughout the winter and into the spring. We remain grateful.

As you may know, on March 10, 2006, we learned that Tom had been killed and his body had been found. Jim, Norman, and Harmeet were freed on March 23. Jill Carroll, an American journalist kidnapped in early January, was released on March 30. Tom's public memorial service was held at Foundry United Methodist Church, in Washington DC, on April 22. It has been a long time from that Thanksgiving weekend to the end of April—filled with ups and downs and lulls that seemed to never end. Your care and concern have been very meaningful and important to us, and we believe to Tom.

Tom's three CPT colleagues have said that Tom had been separated from them on February 12. Therefore, little is known—or will ever be known—about what happened or why it happened. Tom cannot speak for himself and his captors have not spoken.

Indications are that Tom was shot in the morning of March 9. Contrary to early media accounts, the final autopsy report found absolutely no signs of physical torture or abuse and no knife wounds. There was no conclusive proof that he had been bound. Death came from approximately six shots, either fired in quick succession (typical of an automatic weapon) or simultaneously.

Some media reports (for example *The Guardian*, 03/25/06) surmise that there was dissension among the captors concerning Tom's death. This is a possibility that is supported in two ways. First, no person or group has taken “credit” for killing Tom—not before the freeing of his colleagues and not after. Also, on March 23 the people holding Jim, Norman, and Harmeet bound them together and left the house, expecting that Coalition forces would soon arrive. The captors had not planted explosives in the building before they abandoned it.

In the end, all we can say is that our beloved Friend was killed and we are bereft. Nevertheless, we join with the Rev. Carol Rose, Co-Director of Christian Peacemaker Teams, in asking that “everyone set aside inclinations to vilify or demonize others, no matter what they have done.”

Tom was a member of Langley Hill Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in McLean, Virginia. He participated in other Friends congregations, including Hopewell Centre Meeting and Alexandria Meeting. Prompted by a leading of the Spirit—a leading that was tested by the Langley Hill faith community and others—Tom joined CPT in November 2003. During his time in Iraq, Tom encouraged the formation of Muslim Peacemaker Teams, which has both Sunni and Shi'a members. Tom also aided families whose members had been detained by Coalition forces. He tried to help them locate their loved ones and he listened to their stories.

He and other CPT members documented about 72 stories of detainees, which served as background information when the scandals at Abu Ghraib prison were revealed.

Tom's story can be found on his weblog at <http://waitinginthelight.blogspot.com>. We knew him as an ordinary guy: a loving father, youth leader, musician, camp cook, grocery manager, student of scriptures, and a friend who listened carefully and respectfully. Like us, Tom had both gifts and human frailties. One of his gifts was compassion and a commitment to peace and justice. We were privileged to watch him grow in his ability to embody compassion and in the courage to enact his commitment to peace and justice.

We are grateful for the way Muslims around the world have entered Tom's story and made it their own. We believe that the immediate outpouring of prayers and support from Muslims, including the Islamic clerics and organizations who spoke out in late November and early December (support came from the United States, Canada, Britain, New Zealand, Palestine, Iraq and elsewhere), joined with pleas from family members and friends, kept Tom, Jim, Norman, and Harmeet alive in those first critical weeks. During those weeks a hostage video of them was shown internationally, demands were made, and two deadlines were given for their executions. The recent pattern in Iraq has been that if the kidnappers are initially convinced that the foreign people whom they hold have been in Iraq for peaceful purposes, a favorable resolution is the likely outcome.

We are grateful for the story of a little known Iraqi group whose name translates as “Independent Activates, a Society to Defend Human Rights.” On February 24, 2006, CPTers in Iraq reported meeting their representative. CPT learned that this group had about 170 members in several cities. The Activates began organizing for the release of Tom, Jim, Norman, and Harmeet as soon as they heard of their detention. They held press conferences, organized three vigils, and distributed leaflets. One member of the Iraqi Activates publicly offered to exchange himself for the CPT members.

We are grateful for people of faith everywhere who prayed for Tom, Jim, Norman, and Harmeet regularly in their private devotions and during community services. Our spirits were lifted when Quakers from other meetings and friends from other traditions came to our Friday Interfaith Peace Vigils, which began on December 9. We know that many Christian groups activated their prayer trees and prayer circles on behalf of the four CPTers.

We also know that the Sunday after Tom's body was found, many Christian ministers preached about his life and death as obedience to the Spirit and following the path of Jesus. Prior to the convening of their regular quarterly meeting on March 12, women from the several faith communities who form the Northern Virginia Interfaith Women's Fellowship paid tribute to Tom's life and peace work.

Tom's ministry embraced the vision of the prophet Isaiah—that the earth will one day be restored to what Tom called God's peaceable realm. The passage reads in part: “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid...They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” (Isaiah 11:1-9) This vision was depicted as the Peaceable Kingdom over 60 times by the 19th century Quaker painter, Edward Hicks.

We believe that a well-known Quaker quote from George Fox in the mid-17th century applies to this early 21st century situation: “What canst Thou say?” Where are you in the story to bring God's Peaceable Kingdom to all the earth?

As the spiritual community where Tom had his membership, Langley Hill seeks ways to continue his work, especially his work with Iraqi detainees. We are meeting with our U.S. Senators and Representatives and asking them to begin a routine publishing of the names and locations of all detainees in US/Coalition custody and to inform those in detention of the charges against them. While this seems like normal due process to us, giving such information will require changes in current US policy and practice. (For more information, see <http://www.quaker.org/langleyhill/howtohelp.html>.)

Knowing Tom helps us realize the importance of distinguishing Tom's story from our stories about Tom. Our stories say at least as much about the person telling them as they do about Tom. The real issue is not “What happened to Tom?” The real issue now is, “What does our personal understanding of Tom's ministry, life, and death say about our desire and willingness to work for a world of peace, justice, and compassion?”

In the Light,

Doug Smith, Clerk
Langley Hill Monthly Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quaker)