

## A TIME OF MIRACLES

By Rita Nakashima Brock

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Thursday, an Iranian medical doctor named Arash Hejazi spoke to a BBC reporter. Dr. Hejazi had fled Iran because he felt compelled to tell a story that endangered his life.

([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8119713.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8119713.stm))

Over a week ago in Tehran, Dr. Hejazi was outside his office observing the protesters walking by outside. Suddenly, he heard a loud pop. A few feet from him, a young woman stood frozen. Dr. Hejazi glimpsed the innocent, shocked disbelief in her eyes for a split second. Then her gaze dropped to the huge bloody hole in her upper chest as she collapsed to the ground. He rushed to her side, and tried to stop the bleeding from what he feared was a severed aorta. She died in less than a minute.

When he returned to his office to wash off the blood that covered him, he began to shake with the realization that it could have been him that day who died. And he felt deeply ashamed that he was grateful he was not the one who was shot.

Not wanting to be alone, he went to his parents house, but he was unable to speak of what happened.

Hours later, his family was watching CNN on television, and there was a grainy video of him hunched over the dying woman. He had to tell them of the horror that shook him to the core.

The young woman he could not save was Neda Agha-Soltan, and the grainy image of her dying face is now the icon of the protest for democracy still rocking the streets of Iran's cities.

Dr. Hejazi said that the look of innocent disbelief in Neda's eyes haunts him. To honor her commitment to a different government and different world, he had to tell her story.

The Ayatolla Khamenei has accused the protesters of shooting her. Dr. Hejazi knows this is a lie. He said the crowd almost immediately identified the Basij Militia man who shot her. The protesters pulled him off his motorcycle as he yelled in terror, "I did not want to kill her. I did not want to kill her." His captors wanted to hurt or kill him, but others said, "we cannot do that. We are not killers, we are not like them." So they discussed what to do.

They could not take him to the police without turning themselves in as well. So, one took his photo ID card while others took pictures of him. They had no way to hold him, so, they let him go.

It seems miraculous to me. In the adrenaline rush and chaos of a shooting and the accumulated days of protest and Basij violence, the protestors let the murderer go unharmed. This act of mercy is even more amazing when we consider that the Iranian police only have teargas and rubber bullets. The Basij Militia, on the other hand, are armed to kill, and kill they do.

I would have found the doctor's story of mercy incredible....I would have found it incredible, had I *not* seen another grainy video a few days before.

Protesters had knocked over a Basij motorcycle and set it on fire. The dazed driver sat on the street as some men punched and kicked him. A woman swathed in black wrapped herself over him to shield him. I watched her embrace a strange man, perhaps even her enemy, with her own flesh. Her beautiful face looked up at the protesters, imploring them to stop. Soon others helped her protect him, and they calmed the angry men, pulling them away.

**Torture is ancient and ordinary.** In the Bible, when the men of Lot's city wanted to assault a group of visitors, Lot offered his daughters to be gang raped instead. The biblical prophets yell "Woe" to the people, but their prophetic rants are often followed by a threat of what God will do to them if they disobey, and what they say God will inflict on the people is often torture.

The Roman Empire ruthlessly inflicted crucifixion, not to extract information, but to terrorize people and to discourage political insurrection and slave rebellions. It was very effective, not just in erasing people's lives, as if they had never existed, but also in squashing dissident movements. Crucifixion was such a brutal and shameful way to die that families of its victims often never again said aloud the name of the deceased.

Christians refused to be silent, but told the story of Jesus' crucifixion as lamentation. They remembered his life's work and refused to let death have the final word. They told his story and did divine deeds of justice, healing, and peace in his name. For this defiance, they endured torture and persecution for nearly three centuries.

However, a millennium later their Christian descendants in Europe accepted an imperial version of the death of Jesus that claimed God willed the crucifixion to save them from the same punishment for their sins. They came to believe the more they suffered in this life, the more likely they would escape divine wrath in the next. This imperial propaganda, first enforced by swordpoint, supported public torture and execution as part of religious festivals. The faithful crowds wept as tortured criminals forgave them as they were executed. The images of crucifixion from this time show the bodies Jesus and the thieves as victims of medieval torture technologies. They put these images in churches for devotion and emulation.

Then, their descendants wrote a torture manual for how to wring confessions from women accused of witchcraft, and the horrors of inquisition were born. Still later, fervent Christians traveled to a new world to inflict themselves on the native inhabitants and to torture people from Africa whom they enslaved. Denied slaves to torture, they turned to lynching freed African Americans.

In the face of this long history, *the UN Convention against torture is astonishing.* While we have not eliminated it, and we even slipped back into it the last few years, with the collusion of neo-con imperial aspirations and a militant, apocalyptically driven Christianity, still, many of us have the moral sensibility to be appalled and to stand unflinchingly against it.

**And this, too, is ancient and ordinary:** our commitment to our basic common humanity. Virtually every religion on the planet we call earth recognizes a spark of divinity that binds us to each other. We call that spark

Spirit,

Allah,

Adonai,

Wakantanka,

O-Kami-sama,

Atman,

Ahimsa,

Bodhisattva-nature,

whatever we call it, it names the sanctity that we, as human beings, share collectively, together.

It is our greatest gift, this profound need for each other that links us to the power of our sacred humanity.

We do unto others, love our neighbors, and love what is sacred with heart mind soul and strength because, without the whole of our sacred humanity, we are nothing.

An angry crowd releasing a murderer, a woman in black shielding an enemy with her own body, a survivor of torture telling us the truth about its harm—these are life-giving miracles of our common sacred humanity.

A global agreement outlawing torture and crimes against humanity? This is perhaps even beyond miraculous.

In the face of this astonishing historical moment, I have to ask a question of my Christian kin. Those of you who are not Christian may want to ask us the same question of your Christian friends.

If we have said Jesus died to save us, or that God loved the world so much he sacrificed his son to save it, or that Jesus loved us so much he suffered for us:

If we have said such things, we have said God loves and saves us through torture and murder. If this is God, what is evil?

If we are supposed to be grateful because someone else proved his love by being tortured and murdered on our behalf, to free us from the same horrible fate that God would otherwise have to inflict on us, how is this not simply cowardice?

What if we are not so bad? What if we are not hopeless sinners deserving condemnation? What if we are just ordinary people doing our best to honor what we hold sacred? What if we do not really have to be afraid? What if God really, really does love us and want us to have the courage to be healers, justice workers, peace-makers, and lovers in this bruised and sorrowing place we call earth, the only place paradise has been and still is?

Can we all live with this truth: though the future is imaginary,  
the present, this minute, this life, and every person here in this very space is real,  
right here, right now, and right before our own eyes.  
Can we believe that we are astonishing beyond any miracle we can imagine?  
And if we are greater than any miracle we can imagine, what might we do together to reclaim  
our common humanity?

If we can face the distressing and difficult witness of our scriptures, the genocide of our history  
on this land, the horrors perpetrated by a government that did atrocities in our name, and the  
edges of our own despair, I think we will find, here and now, all the resources we need:  
To heal the brokenhearted,  
To tell the truths that will set us free,  
To restore respect for human dignity,  
To protect our common humanity  
And to be greater than any miracle.

May we be so, may we always be so.

**Rita Nakashima Brock** is Director of Faith Voices for the Common Good. Her latest book is  
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