

# Looking Through the Screen at the World's Suffering

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Theme: [History](#)

*"If you are really going to be free, you have to overcome the love of wealth and the fear of death." - **Martin Luther King, Jr.** as quoted by Andrew Young in the documentary "King in the Wilderness"*

Most people on this earth live on the edge of an abyss. Life is a daily struggle to stay alive, to acquire enough to eat and drink, rudimentary health care, housing, and protection from murderous government forces, their various death-squads, and their economic vultures. The gap between the rich and poor, while always great, has grown even more obscenely vast, and lies at the core of what so many face daily. Their perilous conditions are sustained by imperial nations, led by the United States, who, together with its minions, buy and bribe and butcher overtly and covertly all around the world. The love of wealth and the fear of death drive these power-mad marauders and divert the gazes of their citizens from the slaughter. It's an old story.

If you are reading this, I am probably not telling you anything new. You know this, as do I, as I sit safely behind a screened-in table on a beautiful spring day in the hills of western Massachusetts. I have had some soup and bread for lunch and there are no bombers overhead or death-squads cruising the roads here. While my family and I live a simple life, compared to the world's poor and persecuted, we are privileged. One does not have to be rich to be privileged. The advantages granted to those like me who can securely sit and pen words about the fate of the poor and persecuted victims of my country's endless violence weighs heavy on my conscience, as they have done since I was young.

I am ashamed to say that in the early morning of May 1, as I lay in bed musing, I thought I would like to stay in bed all day, a depressed feeling that I had never had before. Discouragement enveloped me: I was being forced out of my teaching job; I felt that my dissident writing and teaching made no difference in a world where injustice and violence are endemic and without end; and the forces of evil seemed to be triumphing everywhere. Self-pity mixed with an angry sadness that disgusted me. I disgusted myself.

So I jumped out of bed and prepared to go and teach some of my last classes. But I was lost in gloom as I drove along the winding roads.

When I arrived at the college and checked my mail, there was a package waiting for me. It was a review copy of the poet Carolyn Forché's startling new memoir (*What You Have Heard Is True: A Memoir of Witness and Resistance*) about her youthful transformative experiences in El Salvador in the late 1970s as U.S. trained and supported death-squads brutally murdered poor peasants and priests, and guerrilla resistance was growing prior to the outbreak of civil war. I opened the book to the epigraph, which reads:

Hope also nourishes us. Not the hope of fools. The other kind. Hope, when everything is clear.

Awareness.

The quotation is from the Salvadorian writer **Manlio Argueta**, whose deeply moving novel, *One Day of Life* (1980), banned by the Salvadorian government, takes the reader through one terrifying and bloodstained day in the life of peasants struggling to stay alive as they are tortured and slaughtered with impunity. We hear the voices of the poor tell a story of the growth of conscience ("God is conscience. And conscience is we, the ones forgotten now, the poor."), the discovery of rights, and the awareness of exploitation. Despite the terrifying evil that pervades this book – now considered one of the greatest Latin American novels of the 20th century – there is a luminous spirit of hope and resistance that miraculously prevails that is passed on from person to person despite death, torture, and immense suffering. Argueta fulfills the words of the tortured Jose to Lupe: "Don't worry, if those of us with understanding failed to act, we would all be in real trouble."

I remembered that I had reviewed this book in the early 1980s at a time when 100 or more very poor campesinos were being murdered every week, a few years after Archbishop Oscar Romero, the courageous defender of the poor who spoke out against the killers, had been gunned down while saying Mass. The Roman Catholic Church has subsequently declared him a saint.

Yet decades later, despite the extraordinary efforts of awakened souls like Carolyn Forché, it still seems true that Americans can't visualize, no less believe in or care about, the death and suffering their government is inflicting on innocent people all around the world. Today's screen culture – I Phone therefore I Am – while seemingly allowing for the visualization of the suffering of the world's poor, has rendered all reality more abstract and unreal, while inducing a collective hallucination sustained by media and machines that divorces us from flesh and blood, our own and others. All the disembodied data that is daily disgorged through these screens seems to me to have rendered the world disincarnate through the metastasizing of a digital dementia tied to death denial.

I think of Galway Kinnell's poem, "The Fundamental Project of Technology":

To de-animalize human mentality, to purge it of obsolete,

Evolutionary characteristics, in particular of death,

Which foreknowledge terrorizes the content of skulls with,

Is the fundamental project of technology; however,

*pseudologica fantastica's* mechanisms require:

to establish deathlessness it is necessary to eliminate those who die;

a task attempted when a white light flashed.

Awareness? I sit here looking through the screen that encloses the little porch where my table rests. MLK's words reverberate in my mind as I watch a grey fox slink across the grass

in search of prey. What is it about the love of money and the fear of death that so cripples people's care and compassion? I know I don't want to see that fox seize a screaming rabbit and worry (to kill by biting and shaking the throat; strangle) it to death. Unlike Forché, I have not physically seen the dead and mutilated bodies of Salvadorian victims of death squads, nor been threatened by them, as she was. Nevertheless, thanks to her and others like Manlio Argueta, I have seen them in my imagination and heard the screams, and they have haunted me. Ghosts.

But why are some so haunted and others not?

The foreknowledge that terrorizes the contents of skulls, as Kinnell puts it - our ultimate powerlessness - overwhelms humans from childhood unless they can find a way forward that discovers power in powerlessness. When one's "well-being" is dependent on the death of others, as is the case for most Americans and others in the so-called first world, people tend to repress the terror of death by building various types of culturally induced defenses that allow them to shakily believe they are in control of life and death.

One's natural impotence is then hidden within what Ernest Becker called "the vital lie of character," and in what, by extension, is the lie of American character that rests on money and military might. One lives within the manageable cultural world that helps blot out existential awareness by offering various social games, agreed forms of "madness" that narcotize. One learns to adjust, to use all sorts of techniques to blot out the awareness that each of us is essentially exposed and mortal, flesh and blood.

The aim is clearly to cut life down to manageable proportions, domesticate terror, and learn to think we are captains of our fate. Inevitably, however, not all these social "tricks" work equally well. Life's terrors have a way of breaking through to dim awareness, and therefore more drastic measures are needed. So after having lived the cultural lie uncritically, one tries to blot out awareness itself. If shopping to forget doesn't work, if obsessive work doesn't do it, one turns to drugs or drink, anything to forget, anything to assuage our fears, anything to deny our need for courage. Anything to help us refuse the truth that our lives are built on the blood of others.

The ineluctable reality of uncertainty is our fate. I have always known that, but I forget. I have also long known that we live by faith of one kind or another, and whatever name we give it, it is by faith we enter into the holy mystery of existence. We are carried forward by the spirit that binds us in solidarity to all human struggles for freedom and dignity, for bread and justice. The day I wished to stay in bed and wallow in self-pity and depression came as a shock to me. It revealed to me my hubris, my sense of self-importance, as if my efforts were not just a drop in the sea, seeds scattered that may or may not take root. I was afraid to accept possible defeat, despite my best efforts. I was afraid of death and lacked courage. Like those I criticize for turning their faces away from the suffering faces of America's victims, I lost my courage that morning in bed. And hope.

But later that day I would awaken and see through the screen of my self-importance when I leafed through Carolyn Forché's book and chanced upon her quoting Fr. Romero's words:

"We must hope without hoping. We must hope when we have no hope."

Then her poem "Ourselves or Nothing" bubbled up in memory:

There is a cyclone fence between  
Ourselves and the slaughter and behind it  
We hover in a calm protected world like  
Netted fish, exactly like netted fish.  
It is either the beginning or the end  
Of the world, and the choice is ourselves or nothing.  
Priest and poet reminding us to fight lucidly on. Hope when everything is clear. Awareness.

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