

## **A Call to Consciousness, A Litany of Questions**

*Remarks by Juana Clem McGhee, Classroom on the Quad, Emory University  
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On the evening of January 16, 1991, I stood in the pulpit of Glenn Auditorium to read scripture for an annual gathering of clergy. What was to be a celebratory event changed in the afternoon hours leading up to the worship service, as the U.S. began military action against Iraq. Now 12 years later, I stand in the midst of this learned community with U.S. troops again at war in Iraq. What can I possibly say that will make a difference?

On this particular occasion and as often is the case in these middle years of my life, I find myself stretched somewhere between what is seemingly so simple & what is actually quite complex, between theory & practice, between my head & my heart. I like to think that as I grow older, I also grow a bit wiser. But the more I learn, the more I realize how much there is to learn. I seem to have more questions than answers, about many things and especially about this war.

I'm skeptical anytime I hear "either or" language, that tends to oversimplify a given situation and overlook many significant matters. I no longer see the world in terms of opposites, or extremes that tend to polarize, or ultimatums that cause great harm. I believe that there are always alternatives, options, possibilities & choices, if we will only look & listen, near & far, one & all.

We are part of a long history & interconnected relationships. Situations seem to re-present themselves time & time again. We continue to try to resolve them, with the same kinds of approaches, with the same kinds of results. We head down the same path & we end up at the same destination. Perhaps it's time to select a different route, to choose another way, if change is really what we're after.

Is it really only a choice of going to war or not going to war? Of taking military action or taking no action? Is that truly all there is? Are those the only choices we have? Is there nothing else we can do? Or is there something else we can try?

Would our perspectives & decisions be different, if we lived in closer proximity to the Middle East? If we could hear the sirens screaming in our ears day & night? If we could feel the earth shaking below our bellies on the ground? If we could smell the smoke burning in our nostrils? If we could see nothing but sand swirling before our eyes?

Would our leaders choose differently, if there were no safe underground shelters for them to hide in, here & abroad? If they themselves were on the front lines of the battlefields staring the stranger in the eye, with their finger on the trigger? If they were the ones who buried the dead, treated the wounded & consoled the mourning? Would they then make the same choices?

Is there nothing better we can do with our time, our money, our lives? Is there no other, more beneficial way to spend \$75 billion in 30 days? Is it the case, as it was in 1991, that 146 U.S. deaths are equivalent to 158,000 Iraqi deaths? How do we honestly & responsibly justify such actions?

How can I possibly explain any of this to my young daughters, as we read the magazine covers in the check out line of the grocery store? As we stand on the courthouse lawn, raising candles in a vigil for peace? As they share a classroom, a playground, a lunch table with children from Ethiopia, Sudan, Vietnam, Bosnia, Afghanistan & Iraq?

What can I offer them as a guide as they learn from the past, live in the present & hope for the future? What can I offer you on this day that might make a difference?

Only this...

Think critically, imagine with creativity.

Listen attentively, speak with wisdom.

Act responsibly, respond with compassion.

Ask yourself this question:

Not, what are you willing to die for?

But rather, what are you willing to live for?