

"Why Am I Alive?"

by Keith Mattingly

"Chaplain, why am I alive and my best friend dead?" I had anticipated questions on death, but not on life. And more than one American soldier asked me questions about life that February night in 1991. A night I couldn't help but remember as I listened to embedded reporters take us right into the heat of battle during Gulf War II. A night during which I listened to wounded soldiers recount the horror of an awful explosion. One soldier, a Vietnam War veteran, often choked up as he recounted to me what made the evening so hard. Two of the dead in the hospital morgue were young ladies. Back home in the States, he had comforted each of them by telling them he was a war veteran and thus knew how to take care of them and would return them safely home. And now he had to go back home and face their parents, having failed in his mission. War is terrible.

I never cease to appreciate the sentiment expressed by the words of Micah. War is not a new horror. Over two and a half millennia before us, Micah looked forward to that time when the Almighty "will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore" (Micah 4:3, NIV). But just maybe it takes war to remind us that our world is not yet the nicest place to live. The hardest part of Gulf War II has been opening the newspaper and seeing pictures of bereaved loved ones at another military funeral.



Chaplain Keith Mattingly

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As I sat on my own bed the next morning after that powerfully emotional night answering questions, I turned on the radio. It was my intention to see if the Armed Forces Radio Network had anything to say about what happened the night before.

Somehow my timing was terrible. Instead of hearing about the SCUD attack, I heard the announcer begin the sports report. I couldn't take it. Sports seemed so trivial and unimportant in light of what I had just experienced.

Sitting on my bed I reviewed other memories of the previous night. Early in the experience I had held a note pad for the physician in the morgue while he determined the cause of death for six

male and two female soldiers. I had not been in the morgue long when I was called out to comfort one of our distraught hospital personnel. I found a six-foot-something, young man sobbing. He couldn't handle the fact that the first military patients he had helped to unload at the emergency room were not alive. Though an EMT back in the U.S., he couldn't deal with the stress of that night, and kept muttering, "somehow this is different."

Larry was one of the living patients brought to the hospital. He had been showering in a temporary outdoor shower when the SCUD hit. The shower had been built out of two-by-fours with a water tank over the showerhead. Larry had somehow wedged his M16 rifle into the two-by-fours between the water tank and showerhead. The SCUD explosion destroyed the shower facility and, in the process, Larry's M16 had bowed. It evidently caught the water tank and spared Larry being crushed. Though stark naked and bleeding from shrapnel wounds to his back, Larry ran round the compound helping others, while at the same time sustaining more injury to his bare feet. Larry really cared for others.

And here I was sitting in my room, having struggled with answers for patients and hospital staff throughout the night, and now all I heard were sports scores. That night of war reminded me of what really is serious and I turned off the radio.

But God blessed the answers I gave that night. I couldn't explain why one was alive and another dead. All I could do was try to help the living accept the attendant obligations that come with living. We don't know why we are living, but we are alive. And the Almighty can use us and wants to use us. So throughout that night and the following week, patients and Chaplain explored ways in which the living can become better servants in their world.

But even when we face the grander issues, we can still go the wrong direction. I was often asked in the last Gulf War, "Is this to be the war of Armageddon?" Those most

interested in an answer came from a conservative Christian background, including a few SDAs. Most had abandoned their roots and came to me afraid they had messed up. Now they were ready to renew their faith. But the war was short and most ceased renewing their faith. I suspect the question has been asked again of chaplains during Gulf War II. And again the war was very short. Once again we risk becoming arrogant, forgetting that there really is a heaven to win and an apocalypse to avoid.

It is easy for us to luxuriate in our peaceful surroundings and become enmeshed in arguing the virtues of whether or not we should go to war. And then because this war, like the first Gulf War, turned out to be rather short and inexpensive with respect to loss of life--obviously not the final apocalypse--we quickly move on to other hot postmodern topics such as "what about the openness of God?" or "can we really know Truth?" And we forget that life really does have its miserable side. Though I hate war with a passion, I wonder if war might be a necessity to remind us of the deeper issues of life.

I was invited to join the 1991 Passover services held on a cruise liner docked at Bahrain. A Torah scroll had not been physically in that area for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. I was blessed to be part of a very moving service. As I left, I was given a few copies of *Likrat Shabbat, Worship, Study, and Song for Sabbath and Festival Services and for the Home*. One prayer in that book, written by Aaron

Zeitlin, reminds me of the need to be passionate and really care about the deep issues of life.

Gulf War II has reminded me once again to become passionate, to seek the deeper issues of life. And though I need to understand that truth for me will always begin with a lower case "t", I still know there is (big "T") Truth out there that I struggle to seek and to

Praise Me, says God, and I will know that you love Me.

Curse Me, says God, I will know that you love Me.

Praise Me or curse Me,

And I will know that you love Me.

Sing out My graces, says God.

Raise your fist against Me and revile, says God.

Sing out graces or revile,

Reviling is also a kind of praise, says God.

But if you sit fenced off in your apathy, says God.

If you sit entrenched in, "I don't give a hand," says God,

If you look at the stars and yawn,

If you see suffering and don't cry out,

If you don't praise and you don't revile,

Then I have created you in vain, says God.

incorporate into my life.

I remember student demonstrations on our campus during the late '60s. I remember being part of a movement that voted a write-in candidate for AUSA president. I remember passionate speeches in the Student Center. It seems to me that nowadays nothing much moves the passion of students on campus. Jonathan Rauch aptly addresses this issue in the May 2003, *Atlantic Monthly*. Though a self-proclaimed atheist, he now claims to be an "apatheist." He

doesn't believe "in God, but the larger truth is that it has been years since I really cared one way or another." And he thinks much of society is the same. For a while, I excitedly observed as Gulf War II moved students, such as Alex Carpenter and Bjorn Karlman, and faculty members to demonstrate for peace. It took war to motivate care. But the war was short-lived and apparently also the passion. Maybe all of us are, after all, "apatheists."

Why are we alive? In the end, I have to admit that war is not what we need to bring us back to a passionate and caring lifestyle. What we need is to listen to the prophets who remind us of that time when war will cease to exist. Micah also reminds us that God is one who pardons and forgives because He does not stay angry forever and because He delights to show mercy (Micah 7:18-19). May it be that God's compassion motivates us to look at the stars and really get excited, to see suffering and scream out.

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