

Not the Highway to Heaven

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a socialist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a trade unionist;
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me--
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

—poetic version of statement by German pastor and theologian, Martin Niemoller

Martin Niemoller, pastor of a wealthy Berlin congregation in the 1930s, was imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II for failure to support the Hitler regime. Like many people, I find that his memorable words continue to have currency in our time.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote from the Birmingham jail, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” he was expressing a similar truth. If we care about justice for ourselves, we must care about it for everyone. If we prize civil liberties for ourselves, we must prize them for everyone. If we value due process and rule of law for ourselves, we must value this for everyone. If we cherish human rights and freedoms for ourselves, we must cherish them for everyone.

Perhaps the greatest casualty of 9/11 is the deep erosion of any sense of commitment to maintain and practice our most cherished values, irrespective of what individual or group might be the most immediate beneficiary. We have witnessed a steady erosion of legal protections and human rights by governmental leaders, intelligence and law enforcement agencies, and even the courts. Mass arrests based on hearsay and ethnic profiling, indefinite detentions, denial of habeas corpus, extraordinary renditions, torture, and presidentially ordered and authorized assassinations all flaunt our most precious constitutional, civil, and international legal traditions

With the loss of a sense of universal justice has come a confounding loss of compassion and common decency. The increasing willingness of political leaders to cut services and benefits to the elderly, the young, and the most needy, while unwilling to tax the wealthy, is criminally insane. No longer able to see their neighbor’s, or fellow citizen’s, good as their own, the current crop of presidential contenders and their supporters are perversely rushing headlong down the road to perdition.

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