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# Kathy Kelly: More from Kabul -- The legacy of the Butter Battle

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**Out to the Wall**
by Kathy Kelly
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*?On the last day of summer, ten hours before fall ?*
*? my grandfather took me out to the wall.?*

Kabul

When we arrived at the museum, two legless men wheeled themselves past us, traveling in wooden carts operated by a hand held steering device. Inside Kabul?s OMAR museum, which houses ordnance and land mines used in Afghanistan over four decades of warfare, there were many more pictures of legless, armless and eyeless survivors of land mine explosions lining the walls. The OMAR organization bravely collects and defuses abandoned mines and cluster bomblets before they can produce more casualties such as these (and casualties that are far, far worse) among men, women, and children in Afghanistan.

And my mind, I suspect as a sort of defense mechanism, started going back repeatedly, as I studied the exhibits, to The Butter Battle Book.

Generations who were raised (or are raising others) on the children?s books of Theodore Giesel aka ?Dr. Seuss? may have recognized, above, the opening lines of ?The Butter Battle Book,? Dr. Seuss?s delightful yet alarming parable of the cold war and its fragile nuclear stalemate, with only the threat of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) holding off attempts by either side to exterminate the other, as an arms race spiraled towards a potential World War III.

In Seuss?s story, the little boy?s grandfather schools him in the rightness of their nation?s principles, and assures his grandson that at last ?the boys in the back room? have come up with the ultimate weapon, so that the ?Yooks?, who eat their bread butter-side-up, can finally triumph over the ?Zooks?, who eat theirs butter-side-down. He narrates the arms race up to this point, from relatively harmless snick-berry switches through elephant-mounted slingshots to long-legged blue-goo spraying machines, and how the hated Zooks would match each newfangled victory-promising invention, inspiring the Yooks to escalate. ?I?m here to say that if Yooks can goo Zooks, you?d better forget it, ?cause Zooks can goo Yooks!? As his story unfolds, the grandfather cycles through shame and elation depending on whether he is behind or in front of the latest weapon, but when both sides develop the ?bitsy big-boy boomeroo,? fleeing to underground shelters in case it is deployed, even the belligerent grandfather, perched atop the wall staring down his Zook nemesis, is given cause to look nervous as the book unresolvedly ends: ??Grandpa?, I shouted. ?Be careful! Oh, gee! Who?s going to drop it? Will you? Or will he??? ?Be patient,? said Grandpa. ?We?ll see. We will see???

The book is bright, clever and shrewdly truthful. A simplification, certainly, but to be comprehensible maps have to be simpler than the terrain. There in the museum, memories of bringing Seuss?s colorful and fanciful

approach toward war and destruction into classes I taught, three decades ago, helped me cope with the abject realities presented by each curated display. How can anyone comprehend the actual madness of developing round after ever-more-lethal round of sophisticated explosives and killing devices, and in particular this selection of devices, whether laid as a trap in the ground or rained from the skies over a land that has taken its place among the poorest and most desperate nations on Earth?

The dreary, rusted displays of murder devices, each encased in its dusty glass box, all bore labels identifying the countries that had manufactured each weapon and the relative explosive potential of each.

We learned that Afghanistan?s countryside is still littered with remnants of HEAT (High Explosive Anti-Tank) tracer missiles and rockets made by the Chinese and the Soviets, High Explosive Anti-Personnel projectiles from China, cluster munitions made by the Italians, Czechs, Chinese and Russians, Soviet fragmentation bombs, Soviet plastic explosive fragmentation bombs, US Claymore fragmentation bombs, plastic land mines from Iran and Pakistan, British and Egyptian anti-tank mines, plastic explosives from Italy, Belgium and Pakistan, plus mortar bombs, rocket propelled grenade launchers and, displayed on shelves but a few inches above the floor, the disused rifles, bullets and swords from back at the start of this escalation, in the simpler, "snick-berry switch" days of one-on-one small-scale violence.

A caption next to a dismantled mine explains how, upon activation of the mine by an unwary soldier or grown or youthful civilian, a part called the initiator (a small copper cartridge) would be pierced by a striker pin causing a flame to pass through a hole to the explosive-packed detonation chamber: the large hollow space we could see on the left.

Another display case of bomblets from a cluster bomb noted that in 2001 the U.S. had dropped unnumbered cluster bombs each consisting of exactly 202 bomblets. Many of the bomblets would not explode on landfall but would wait years to be stepped on, or picked up, or else driven over or ploughed through by an unsuspecting victim. They looked like yellow building blocks that any unschooled child might take for a plaything, as many had.

Our guide, a Pashtoon man from Jalalabad, had worked in mine clearance for four years and then at the museum for three years. He seemed friendly to us, but had admonished our friend Farhad, as we later learned, that he had no right to befriend foreigners. ?These foreigners are not our friends,? he had told Farhad. ?They are infidels. They are coming only for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the people, and they are only in the country to cause destruction and to steal from us.?

We?re in Kabul, visiting with the young activists of the Afghan Peace Volunteers, for the purpose of helping describe the consequences of war as experienced by ordinary Afghans. But nearly every Westerner in the country is there under the presumption of offering necessary help, and Afghans understandably bristle when they see that many of them foster unsustainable projects while earning large salaries. So why should he have trusted us? Was he aware that the U.S. is spending 2 billion dollars per week to maintain our part of the occupation of his country, preparing and all-too-often employing a devastating arsenal of state-of-the-art weapons, with even cyberspace wars planned to guarantee U.S. control of resources and politics in his country?

I wonder what tiny fraction of U.S. weapon expenditure is devoted to the never-ending work of mine clearance and disposal which so taxes the resources, courage and dedication of the sparsely funded OMAR group.
Our guide insisted that before leaving we should all climb into a very old plane parked outside the museum. Once inside, we realized that the plane?s cabin had been converted into a classroom where children visiting the museum were shown films about land mines ? how villages could go about clearing them, and how children could avoid them. They were encouraged never to touch a land mine, to identify partially exposed mines on sight, and to understand how terrible these weapons are. With shock I remembered visiting the Intrepid Museum years before, a converted U.S. aircraft carrier that is still moored at its pier in Manhattan, and feeling outraged

that the school teachers who had brought their students there would allow the children to climb into the tiny coin-operated facsimile bomber aircraft that let them aim bombs, using a joystick, not even at individual humans but at whole countries, at maps of Iraq and Central Asia, allowing them to imagine bombing whole peoples, for fun, without seeing a single human face.

Elsewhere in Kabul, just before heading to the OMAR museum, we?d informally met with a man whom we?d known for some time and who confessed that in his earlier life he had been involved with gun running and weapon distribution. It had been a desperately needed way to feed his family. Now, he told us, he never wants his children to become involved in handling, much less smuggling or employing weapons. His life has changed - he has cultivated several gardens and is proud to supply his family with food that he has grown himself.
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Our guest nevertheless seemed quite savvy about weapon distribution in Afghanistan today. He readily estimated percentages of ethnic populations, within Afghanistan, that are armed. The butter-side ups have this many ? the butter-side-downs have these. So many of the weapons had been handed out, first to this favored ally and then to that, by the occupying forces who have so much more force to apply, and much more than buttered bread to eat, but the same rapacious hunger for victory and an apparent willingness to encourage any amount of internecine warfare to divide the country and thereby satisfy its own long-term aim of dominance.

Our next visit was with a group of university students hosting one of many regular debates about current events relevant to Afghanistan. For several hours, they engaged in thoughtful discussion about whether or not Afghan people will be more secure now that an agreement has been made to allow - at the minimum - ten more years of U.S. military occupation, in and outside bases scattered across Afghanistan. One student said that Afghans have no choice but to accept the forces, but that the militarism contributes to an atmosphere in which everyone is waiting for World War III.

And it's a cliché, but in many ways World War III is starting, is already underway. It's happening now. The crises in climate stability and global health that international cooperation might have delayed or prevented - incurable TB appearing as predicted in the slums of India, uncontainable in the absence of anything resembling a healthcare system and destined for worldwide spread; global warming data exceeding our former worst-case scenarios. These were crises we ignored in order to fight our butter battle. And our resource wars brought us the chain of escalating economic detonations that seems far from over.

And what wars, what cycles of violence and despair and with what weapons used, will follow the next economic tragedy, engulfing a world already poverty-maddened past the point of desperation?

It's too late for a children's book to teach us truths we should have learned back when we were children, and the grim lesson of the weapons in the museum, for many, were they to visit, would be the nonsense-lesson of the savagery of all the other nations whose weapons are on exhibit. The walls seem to have gotten so much higher since the last time we were drawn to look over them and decide, with a clear mind and searching conscience, how many children we're actually willing to kill.

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