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An update that unmask the missing morality

by Joan Chittister

From Where I Stand

About eight weeks ago, I dedicated this column to the meeting of Iraqi-American women in New York City. (**Iraqi**

ttwomen: Confused, maybe, but clear nevertheless) The problem with articles like that, of course, is that though they give us a filter through which we can view, interpret, and evaluate the hard news that plays on the front pages of our newspapers or on our newscasts, we are seldom able to follow up on either the people involved or the events to which they referred.

This week is different.

I got a letter from the office of the Global Peace Initiative of Women

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The name of the Iraqi participant is being withheld -- for obvious ttreasons. According to a recent CNN report, more than 1,400 Iraqis have been ttkilled this month, the deadliest month of the war for them so far.

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The letter reads:

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*Dear Dena [Merriam, convener of the Global Peace Initiative of
tt Women], Joan [Brown-Campbell, chairperson], and Joan [Chittister,
tt co-chair]:*

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*I finally called [one of the delegates to the GPIW] today, as we
tt had not heard from her for a while. She was due to join us [for an upcoming event] but
is now afraid to leave her family.*

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*She has lost her uncle and nephew recently in a bombing and so there
tt is tremendous grief in her family. They have decided to try to leave Iraq for another
Arabic speaking country as they say it is much worse now than ever before.*

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*Women cannot wear slacks now. They cannot drive. They must be
tt veiled and the bombings and shootings have increased manyfold.*

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*She said when they were here in the United States during the
tt meeting things were so much better. But now it is impossible to live there.
tt There is hardly electricity. There is talk of turning off cell phones and even the Internet
for a month or two. She has been unable to access her e-mail for many days. And when she
walks to her work each morning she now fears for her life.*

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*She said that there is not one family in Iraq that has not faced a
tt tragedy.*

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I am sorry to convey such sad news from Iraq.

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So now, think.

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In this country, we are gearing up for mid-term elections in November and, finally, for another presidential election 18 months after that. In anticipation of those events, our political parties are preparing to launch the platforms and programs that they say are essential if this country is to remain “the leader of the free world,” “the city on a hill,” the democratic model of the planet.

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Just this week, in fact, while Iraqis were dying by the dozens and a stream of U.S. soldiers and citizens were being air-lifted to Ramstein military hospital in Germany and Walter Reed Hospital in the United States, we were learning what the lynch pin of at least one of those campaigns will be.

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According to the Republicans, at least, the single most important issue in the United States right now is same-sex marriage. In a society where more people seem to be trying to get out of marriage than they are trying to get into it.

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Or, closer to the truth, maybe, the most important thing for the party in power is its ability to manipulate this issue to the forefront of the electoral agenda. If that can be done, of course, it will be possible to divert attention from other issues here like U.S. integrity in Guantanamo Bay, secret torture centers, military massacres of Iraqi civilians, the over-extension of presidential power, the moral necessity of the continuous deaths and wounding of U.S. soldiers, and the underlying question of what we are doing in Iraq in the first place.

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The only question now is whether or not that strategy will work. Activity in the Senate this week, which was dominated by debate over a constitutional amendment that would prohibit same-sex marriage, gives us a clue.

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In the first place, amending a constitution ought by nature to be difficult. Otherwise, the Constitution can easily become just one more political football and its principles up for sale at the time of every presidential election.

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In the second place, the amendment did not pass, but it could well leave senators embroiled in the process of explaining this particular vote rather than concentrating on all the others.

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In the third place, even if it did pass Congress, years would be needed to get two-thirds of the voters in two-thirds of the states to finally amend the Constitution. Even laws against interracial marriage -- also seen later as simply bigotry based on "the law of God" -- never managed to become a constitutional amendment.

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Clearly, this is not about amending the Constitution. The political strategists know that such a thing is close to impossible. But that does not mean that it is not a very clever ploy.

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Designed to "energize the Republican base," which we are apparently meant to believe is interested only in private sexual morality -- however important such questions are to us all -- it is surely doubly intended to blunt or squelch columns and questions like this one. Their hope is surely that those who dare to wonder aloud if this issue is really the most damning moral issue in the country at this time will themselves be targeted, smeared and branded "immoral" for doing so.

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"Guilt by association" they call it in first-year college psychology classes.

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The prospect is that fear for personal security, the engine that has driven this country for over five years now, will silence anyone who dares to weigh one

value against another. Anyone who asks, in the face of such public concentration on matters of sexual conduct, what happened to the binding value of the other commandments in the Judeo-Christian tradition will be stigmatized as “irreligious” -- or worse.

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While thousands die abroad on our behalf, and thousands of children here have no medical insurance, and hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens can no longer afford to drive the cars they need to get to jobs where they get no benefits, have no pensions, and have no assurance of welfare assistance when that work ends, I am convinced that the possibility of being branded is worth the risk.

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Morality is certainly a major issue in the United States today. But what morality? All of it or only some of it?

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From where I stand, the issue of same-sex marriage is not at the base of U.S. decline today. At the base of U.S. moral deterioration today is political oligarchy, corporate greed and the complete breakdown of the kind of morality that is not only social but civil and Christian. That kind of morality, unfortunately, we haven't seen for years, even from some of our moralists.

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