

A Day Off in the Life of an Intern

It's spring in Washington DC. There is a war on. I'm walking down the National Mall, surrounded by people, flags, and monuments to abstract ideas I only wish we could live up to. I'm tired and my feet hurt; Tom Fox is dead; the William Penn House is turning forty.

I'm upset about the news of Tom Fox and trying not to think, so I attempt to lose myself in history and monuments. Usually I'm not much of one for symbols, and the rather phallic Washington Monument has always amused me, but the reflecting pool intrigues me. Close up, I try not to take it as too symbolic that the water is fouled with chemicals and goose droppings. I back up until the water looks pretty again, and head for the Lincoln Memorial.

There's a rally going on at the bottom of the steps—when is there not? I'm wary; the news of Tom Fox's death is too fresh for me to face a pro-war rally right now. Just a week ago Tom was supposed to be in our living room, presenting on the Christian Peacemaker Teams to our monthly lecture-and-potluck series. After scheduling that, he left for Iraq and got kidnapped. We held the date, hoping, but it was two other CPTers who presented last Sunday. We lit a candle for the four in Iraq and I donated more than I can afford and wondered if I could be the sort of person Tom was... whether I could be a soldier of peace.

It's not a pro-war rally; it's a protest against the Chinese Communist Party. I climb the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and try not to brood on a monument to a divisive, bloody civil war. Reading the Gettysberg Address, I know I've had an overdose of symbolism. Everywhere on the Mall are the words "Freedom" and "Sacrifice". President Bush and I both believe that freedom takes sacrifice, but we don't agree on what freedom means. President Lincoln freed the slaves, but it took Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington to bring the disenfranchised their rights.

At WPH we're working on the Quaker Youth Seminar for this fall. In partnership with the Help Increase the Peace Program, we're holding a seminar on race and civil rights. Quaker youth and DC youth will spend the weekend living and learning together: learning about the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the history of race relations in DC, how to build community and talk about difficult issues, how to lobby for civil rights legislation. I'm excited and a little intimidated.

Approaching, the Vietnam War Memorial looks like a vicious gash in the ground. Must everything today remind me that the nation is as divided now as it was then? I'm almost afraid to enter the monument. Maybe I don't have the right—I didn't live it. Last month's potluck lecture was by Mike Boehm, a vet who has spent his life trying to heal. He works on micro-financing women's projects and building peace gardens in Vietnam. When my dad or Patricia talk about the war, I can see how it's still a sorrow deep seated. I'm not blind; I've seen that our country hasn't healed. Vietnam is the 800-pound gorilla of politics, especially now that we're in another unwinnable war.

But I enter, because my dad once said that the Memorial was healing for him. Names, too many names. I descend until the columns of names are taller than I can reach. The stone is reflective; those names are etched on my own reflection. Too many symbols today. Too many names written on my body.

A guest told me recently about Arlington West in Santa Monica, where they put up rows of crosses on the beach each Sunday for all those killed in Iraq. Tom Fox wasn't a serviceman, but I hope they have a cross there for him for him, too. He died trying to make the world a better place, sacrificing his life in the name freedom and peace.

I'm stuck at the lowest point of the Memorial, overwhelmed by etched names, and I want to run away. It's too big and too scary and much too reminiscent of the here and now. Why did I set out for here today instead going to Meeting to remember Tom Fox with other Friends? Why did I think the Vietnam War Memorial would help?

But I don't bolt, and it's then that I experience the healing my father once spoke of. Because I've descended into this orderly hell of names, but the path leads back up. Out. I made it through. We made it through. Maybe not all symbols have to be depressing.

Forty years is a long time to survive. Today, William Penn House is thriving. We have our seminar on teaching peace in the classroom in the works; Washington Quaker Workcamps has formally become a part of William Penn House; we'll host the FCNL's Young Adult Lobby Weekend at the end of this month. The Cory Room has a new ceiling and a fresh coat of paint. We're building a peace garden in our front yard.

It's spring.