

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys

All across the news this week the reports of the killing of Osama Bin Laden has played over and over again in word and image.

After the euphoria of the initial reports, a secondary wave of discourse concerning the probability of retaliation attacks emerged and serious, furrowed brows peppered the continuing montage of triumphalism.

Then a third wave of new dramatic tension was suspended over the now firmly entrenched 'history' – would images of the body be released? A posture for exercising ethical responsibility was assumed by the U.S. authorities. How wise would this be? – It might incite further violence - but was it not incumbent on the U.S. government to produce evidence, to authenticate their claims to victory, lest there be any doubters?

This was, after all, an action that depended very firmly on being right.



I am not a TV watcher.

We went for 7 years with no TV connection in the house. Only in the moves of the past 2 years have we found ourselves plugged into an aerial.



So I have watched this through the eyes of my son, and I have been observing his reactions, and fielding his questions, and riding the rollercoaster of his moods. Breakfast time is peak input time and dinner time is peak processing time.

In particular, I watched the mortified look of his face when the danger of retaliation attacks were canvassed. The brain was racing to catch up – on lots of levels.

Didn't they think of this before they busted him?

Are grown ups not sure about themselves even in this kind of action?

If killing this terrible man was meant to stop bad things happening, how could there be more danger?

And the images of the dead man - Why would you show something awful?

Leadership

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...

Stephen Said, on Neurotribe, also blogged his experience of the Bin Laden news served up for Breakfast with his son.

Read the whole post here.

Stephen wrestles with how to describe who Bin Laden is to inquisitive young 6 year old Harry.

And the answer he gives is beautifully just and truthful:
“He is a man, just like me”

The rest of the discussion is equally poignant and, if you are tracking with youngsters, a really helpful ‘*here’s one I made earlier*’ example. Here’s a few snippets:

“He was a man who was treated a certain way because of where his parents came from, the colour of his skin, the way he dressed and the things that he believed. It wasn’t just him though, many of his people were also treated badly. Many of his people were poor and he was angry about it. So he made a bomb and killed the people who treated his people badly because he was so angry.”

“Can’t he make ‘love-bombs’ like us?” asked Harry.



Seeing Bin Laden Busted while taking Breakfast with our Boys stirring the questions of young Harry, and the emotional responses of my own Son, the narrative that Stephen offered, and the narrative of images that have commanded the history myth-building of this moment, all call us towards a challenge of our culture focussed through the lens of childhood.

The Media wallpapers our lives with a design makeover every few days, but with the same repetitious pattern and arresting, attention grabbing intensity.

This time last week, it was all red carpet and gold brocade, teathy celebrity smiles, ‘pick me!’ hats and union jacks.

This week: concrete facades, choppers, fatigues, big beards, weapons and stars and stripes.

And next week, another wallpaper.

What story are we giving our children in this episode?

Is the marriage of a prince as important or more important than the murder of a terrorist?

What criteria, if any, is supplied for weighting these experiences?

What reality are we pointing them towards?

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Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...

More than play

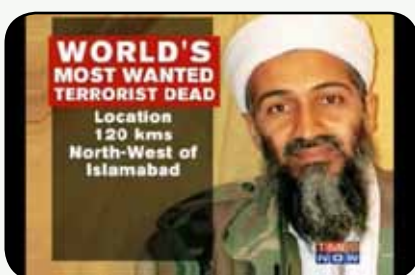
By early 2001, observant parents, kinder teachers and childcare workers had noticed a new narrative ritual in the play of young children.

Children were building tall towers of blocks - nothing new in that – and they were knocking them down. Also nothing novel or noteworthy. Block towers exist to be knocked down.

No, the noteworthy aspect was in how they were knocking the towers down.

Instead of the tried and time-tested methods of block demolition like swiping it with your hand, or jumping on it or kicking it or running at it or pulling out a block from the bottom, a single block, or perhaps a toy car, would zoom in from the side and crash into the tower.

From September 11, 2000 a generation of children saw image after image after image of an aeroplane flying into the side of a tower, and an almighty collapse. The repetition and ubiquity was unrelenting. And it changed the way they played.



For children, play is their 'work'. And just as the events and even more so the images of the destruction of a large building in an affluent city changed the way many adults now work, and especially how many adults now experience travel, so too we see a reshaping of the working-playing of children.

As I have watched the news this week of the murder of Osama Bin Laden, and observed my own child's reaction to this, I have begun to wonder how these images will reshape our children's play and work.

How will this act-out in the play of children? And will we just leave them to it?

And this is a serious question, for it is by their play, that children build their stores and stories of meaning.

Leadership

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...



Following the two world wars, children played 'soldiers' with gun 'sticks' and drills and marching.

For my brother and I, as children of the 70s it was all commandos through the jungle and Barbie and GI Joe were air dropped from the tree house countless times, usually into the pool. The Vietnam War in the Plum trees of Blackburn.

A Visual Case Study



VS.



Observe the difference between **the way** that the death of Hitler was reported in headlines of 1945.

As one facebook commentator pointed out, this is not an equal comparison:

I take his (articulate) point – but in doing so it only underlines for me the inaccessibility of the most powerful agendas and dynamics to most children.

It is not that our children, watching and listening to reports of jubilation and vengeance don't see how it 'really' is, but rather, we must be cognizant of the reality that is.

Children are reading us constantly. They are gathering data, not only about what is happening in the world, but also taking readings from the significant people in their lives about how to interpret these events.

"Flawed comparison: Hitler was officially elected by an educated population and appointed by a legal authority, commanded a 'Total War' commitment of multiple nation's resources, and was supported by a population of millions. Comparatively, ...Osama's force is miniscule and marginal. Osama clearly aimed to trigger an excessive reaction that would alienate Arabs from their governments and the West, and he succeeded spectacularly. His death does not reverse that success but entrenches it. There is not so much to celebrate, even if we felt it morally acceptable."



Leadership

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...

We say to them *'Two wrongs don't make a right'* and *'you can't fight fire with fire'* and *'seek peace and pursue it'* and *'ignore the attention seekers who misbehave and they will stop'*.

Some of these principles may have been well applied in the politic of 9/11 righteous indignation. Some perhaps not safely adhered to. I am no judge of international politics, but I am accountable for the ethics of my everyday interactions.

And when ordinary people cheer or even mutely acquiesce to the spin; the gloats over the victorious destruction of a human being, in his home, surrounded by his family, it moves from an international affair, to a personal one. And our children are listening and watching and deciding and forming.

"I try to look at not just the killing of Osama Bin Laden, but all of the events leading up to it, **through the eyes of my children**. How do I explain to them what is going on, and how do I help them make sense of it in the context of a suffering messiah who works to the day when the entirety of creation will be redeemed and restored? As I reflect, particularly on the images of jubilation and celebration, I am deeply disturbed."

Stephen Said, Neurotribe Blog, May 4, 2011.



This is surely a godly exercise. To ask ourselves, how this news will be received by children, played by children, worried by children?

And to ask ourselves, as we respond, what future are we plunging our children into?

The killing of Osama bin Laden, is referenced primarily as an historically oriented action – not a future oriented action.

Whatever the strategic intentions of the actual manoeuvre, perhaps done with a view to thwart future terrorism, or to render an enemy powerless for future aggressions, what has been reported, the images and words around this event, have found their fuel in the past.

"We got him"

"He caused us such pain"

"We brought him down because of what he did"

Our children need us to live with them into the future, **not to limit them by our past.**

Leadership

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...

N.T. (Tom) Wright raises our awareness of the connection between the largest meta-narratives of American history and culture and the typology of action by which Bin Laden was killed. Interestingly, it is the (often thought of as children's) comic book superheroes and wild west 'white hats beating black hats' that he cites.

This connection should make us even more attentive to the ways in which our children are hearing these stories and imaging the action.

There is more to this than white hats and black hats, caped crusaders and evil freaks.

Those stories are largely cast in individual terms. What our children need to know is that this is a social episode. Communities, collectives, companies and corporations are the players in this story, and there are systems catalysing actions.

Read more of Tom Wright here.



Consider another fictive scenario. Gangsters are preying on a small mid-western town. The sheriff and his deputies are spineless; law and order have failed. So the hero puts on a mask, acts 'extra-legally', performs the necessary redemptive violence (i.e. kills the bad guys), and returns to ordinary life, earning the undying gratitude of the local townsfolk, sheriff included. This is the plot of a thousand movies, comic-book strips, and TV shows: Captain America, the Lone Ranger, and (upgraded to hi-tech) Superman. The masked hero saves the world.

Films and comics with this plot-line have been named as favourites by most Presidents, as Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence pointed out in *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002) and *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (2004).

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...

Some helpful exercises

Let's remind ourselves that, if we are followers of Jesus, we are called to make disciples, not recruit to a political position.

Our children need to hear not so much our political critique of international events, but the goodnews of Jesus. The wholly different vision of the righteous, just and peace-filled rule of a great and generous, gracious God.

How might we go about this practically?

This will take some intentional, overt thinking, but this is not the same as 'giving children answers'.

One of the enduring gifts from my dad is the ethos that thinking about things is even more valuable than knowing things. Here are some ideas in the 'thinking about things' category.

Re-reporting

Help children participate in writing and imaging their own sense of history. Ask them to think about how they would report this incident (and remember that they are digital natives, so do this in their dialect).

Jesus has some very good guidelines for how we speak about the wrongs of other people. He doesn't ask us to pretend that everyone is perfect, and he never asks us to cheer for evil or injustice or sin.

Here are some of the boundaries he sets:

The first stone

John 8

"Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone".

Specks & Logs

Matthew 6:1-4

¹Don't condemn others, and God won't condemn you. ²God will be as hard on you as you are on others! He will treat you exactly as you treat them.

³You can see the speck in your friend's eye, but you don't notice the log in your own eye. ⁴How can you say, "My friend, let me take the speck out of your eye," when you don't see the log in your own eye? ⁵You're nothing but show-offs! First, take the log out of your own eye. Then you can see how to take the speck out of your friend's eye.

Gaining the advantage

Matthew 16:26

What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...

Gnats and Camels

Matthew 23:23 -28

²³ Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

²⁵ Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

²⁷ Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Matthew 26:52

But Jesus told him, “**Put your sword away.** Anyone who lives by fighting will die by fighting”.

We are very tempted to ‘explain’ these events – in a kind of pseudo rationalism - to our children. Here’s what happened and here is why, according to our particular sense of politics and ethics. We certainly can try to do that, but that in itself betrays the utter senselessness of all the violence across all the communities that form the tapestry of this story. Perhaps it is wiser to not try to contort violence into being ‘sensible’.

While I am resistant to the idea of ‘rationalising’ the Bin Laden story to children, I stress the need to address it as whole multi-generational communities.

So, here are three ways that I think this might be helpful.



- 1) **Read the Bible** (you knew I was going to say that, didn't you!) Soak yourselves as a household or a community or a small group in the alternative vision that the God of Grace offers us. Let this become as articulate and active in your imaginations as what flicks across the media screens.



- 2) **Pursue conversations** with older people who remember past conflicts and international acts of violence. Allow younger people to observe the way those stories and experiences weather in time. How do they stand? Do they twist, do they fade, do the boundary markers change?



- 3) **Pray** There is more going on in the world, in Pakistan – perhaps of greater need of attention.

Leadership

Busting Bin Laden and Breakfast with the Boys continued...

Less than a year ago, Baptist World Aid called for support for Pakistan. Imagine this –

“estimated 2,000 persons have died and 20 million affected by widespread flooding that have stricken Pakistan since July. The flooding has covered an area estimated at 160,000 square kilometers or 61,800 square miles, damaging or destroying close to one million homes.”



By providing strong alternative narratives we set the emphases of our culture in a broader context. We also nurture our children in thinking skills that hold nuances and multiple realities in creative tension. We model seeing an enemy, as a human person needing boundaries, understanding communities as continuing in a capacity for life and hope despite the presence of evil within it.

We need these visions not only for thinking about Osama Bin Laden, and Pakistan, but for understanding Australia and thinking about some of the powerful personalities we harbour too.

What do I tell my little boy? How do I help him understand and follow in the footsteps of a radical messiah?

After our brief discussion this morning, I am starting to think that maybe I need to get him to help me understand.

Stephen Said concludes his blog post recognising that simply telling our children ‘from above’ will not give them access to a life giving counter-cultural gospel. We must listen to them, talk with them, walk with them, to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.