

## APOLOGIA

# SECRET TENTATIVE INTIMATION

BY JENNIFER BRYSON

If there is anything I learned during my time as an interrogator at Guantanamo Bay, it is the importance of a well-formed conscience. Too seldom do we use periods of ease to ready our souls for the great challenges each of us must face. I certainly didn't, and I wish I had.

"I want to be an interrogator!" was a thought that never crossed my mind while I was an undergraduate at Stanford, studying in the university's erstwhile Great Books program and then its political science department. I thought I might join the Foreign Service some day. Instead I earned a Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic studies at Yale. After September 11, I became an intelligence officer with the Defense Intelligence Agency, which included a stint from 2004 to 2006 as an interrogator at Guantanamo Bay.

While still a teenager, I encountered real life and discovered that I have a soul. This was for the most part not because any adults shared wisdom with me, and most certainly not because my university was providing me with an education about real life. It was oriented instead toward career preparation. Rather, this all came about because I was so youthfully naive and bursting with an adventurous spirit that I thought it would be "interesting" to spend my sophomore year of college from 1986 to 1987 studying in East Germany.

There I learned that the human soul has a great capacity for profound darkness. And through the witness of a few faithful, courageous Catholic students, mostly from Poland, as well as an encounter I had with God one day while reading Lenin, I learned also about God's light and love (a story for another day). But what did all this mean for my soul? I had no clue and when I returned to Stanford I couldn't find anyone to help me find out.

But eventually, thanks largely to the witness borne by faithful Christians, I started to get a clue. In 1990, I came into the Catholic Church. However, my faith life was often rocky for the first ten years. Frequent moves and difficulty finding any sense of community in parish life meant I had little to no soil to nourish the new roots of my Catholic faith. Also, I wasn't prepared for the fact that confirmation would get me only to the trailhead at the very base of the mountain. So, by 2000, while I was still deeply Catholic at heart, my faith had gaps and holes and lacked a foundation. I had in no way spent those ten years training my soul for the challenge that was about to come.

After I finished my Ph.D., I decided to pursue a career outside of academia. I spent a while unemployed, found an unpaid internship, and then a temporary position, followed by more unemployment. On September 10, 2001, I lay most of the night awake with insomnia because by that point my fear of prolonged unemployment was overwhelming. That is why on the morning of September 11 I slept through the attacks that would change my life.

A few weeks later, my phone was ringing off the hook to set up job interviews with D.I.A. I was offered a job in Washington, D.C. as an intelligence analyst and a position in intelligence collection as a human intelligence officer. The H.U.M.I.N.T. position was a lower-level job for less money involving unpredictable travel, but again I thought it sounded more "interesting."

My first assignment was horrid. D.I.A. placed me in a very dysfunctional office with no use whatsoever for my skills. After months of killing time by reading books and watching Hezbollah's television station in Arabic all day, I resigned.

Yet D.I.A. asked if I would instead give them time to find a way to put me to work. A senior leader came up with the idea of sending me to Guantanamo. But no one told me this. I was just told to pack my bags and move for a new assignment. A few weeks later this senior leader informed me that I would deploy to Guantanamo as an interrogator after several months of training.

To his astonishment, all I said was, “Okay.”

You see, I had no objection. This sounded like work that would be both meaningful and “interesting” (that word again) which is what I wanted. As a civilian employee, I could have resigned instead of going to Guantanamo. But I chose not to do so. I was there to serve my country. Talking with terrorists to gather information seemed like a way to do it. It was. And it was also so much more.

It never occurred to me that entering the world of interrogation might ever have anything at all to do with torture or torture-adjacent methods of eliciting information. That may sound strange or implausible now, but this was not the case in August of 2003. The American vocabulary did not yet include the terms “C.I.A. black site,” “waterboarding,” or “Abu Ghraib.” And since I don’t like violent movies, I was ignorant of Hollywood’s absurdly

unrealistic portrayals of torture functioning like black-magic fairy dust in interrogations. I thought that D.I.A. was sending me to Guantanamo to talk to the detainees to gather intelligence from them. Simply that. Yes, I thought it would be hard, but difficult conversations and torture are entirely different categories.

As for considering in advance what I would do if I were asked or told to engage in torture, well, I would have needed a robust conscience to consider that. I had a conscience, but it was largely unformed and dormant. Following my rocky start as a Catholic, by 2002 I seldom ever went to Mass. Soul-killing liturgical mush and cold, unfriendly parishes left me feeling so depressed that I stayed away. It was hardly an optimal moment for my conscience to be catapulted into the intensity of Guantanamo. But that’s the thing about our consciences: we don’t get to choose when to lean on them.

When I hear Catholic academics talk about “conscience,” I think they genuinely mean well, but their discussions always sound so abstract and idealistic. Actual ethics and morality are messier.

Recently I found a description of how conscience functions, one that reflects my experience at Guantanamo, in the book by Ida Friederike Görres, *Die leibhaftige Kirche*. Görres asks, “And do we imagine *this* ‘conscience’—piecemeal, unstable, difficult to control, subject to many subliminal forces—would be able to find the hidden will of God from within itself at any time, right away?” She continues, warning against any assumption that conscience is available on-tap, fully formed, just waiting for us to flip a switch and activate it. Instead:

What practice and depth of prayer, what clarity of character, what sharpness of self-reflection, what strength to take on difficult things *you assume* if you expect that everyone, just when it matters, that is, in confusing situations, amid conflicting duties, caught off guard, during depression, under the pressure of a threat, discerns, recognizes, draws out, and asserts his own most secret tentative intimation of the good against all other impressions and impulses!

So there I was, dropped out of the sky in the winter of 2004 off at Guantanamo to serve as an interrogator. I was also the Saudi Team Chief, responsible for overseeing the interrogators and interrogation analysts for the Saudi detainees at the camp.

As I think back about what was going on in my soul then, with the help of Görres’s observations, this is what I notice. I did not have “practice” or “depth” in my prayer life. “Clarity of character”? Well, I tried, but who has time to build character





when running around the world fighting terrorists? “Sharpness of self-reflection”? Hardly, though the American methods of interrogation demand heightened self-awareness (and later on more advanced interrogation training taught me how to build and practice systematic, disciplined self-awareness). “Strength”? Not really. I was just a woman in her thirties trying to fend off feeling overwhelmed and trying to do my job as best I could.

And Guantanamo was “just when it matters.” It was that moment Görres describes when conscience becomes the dividing line between the will of God and the path of sin. She writes that this usually occurs in “confusing situations.”

To say that Guantanamo was confusing is an understatement. I had never deployed with the military before, and everything about the operations at Guantanamo was complicated. “Conflicting duties” abounded: the Americans at Guantanamo fought, sometimes rather fiercely, with each other on behalf of their various government offices, often more than they fought with the detainees. At one point I proposed that we should offer the detainees an internship program in our office to train them in our methods. My idea met with great approval—and more than a few laughs—from my teammates; we all knew that if members of al-Qaeda would fight with each other as much as we Americans did, they would defeat themselves.

In addition to it being “confusing” and “conflicting,” boy, was I ever “caught off guard.” Not only had I never imagined I’d ever be in such a situation. I would not previously have been able to imagine what such a situation would be like.

Görres writes about how personal difficulties at a given time, such as depression, can be a barrier to a sound conscience. Well, sure enough, I was also dealing with some rather severe, personal challenges while living amid total strangers on the Navy base. Plus, as a team chief I had to focus on the well-being of the soldiers, sailors, and contractors on the terrific team I led, not my own woes. I put on a strong “I’m fine!” public face and faked it. On top of this, “just when it matters” is often when one is “under the pressure of a threat.” For us, threats abounded. We feared that if we failed in intelligence collection, we might miss finding valuable information that could prevent an attack on Americans or our allies.

Right from the start of my time at Guantanamo, the pressure level was intense. I had to sign off on the interrogation plans for each individual interrogation session. Just after I arrived, while I was still a deer in the headlights, two interrogators submitted to me plans for interrogation sessions that would involve using a darkened room, strobe lights, and harsh music at loud volumes, but, as they explained in great technical detail (as if that made it alright), not at decibel levels that would harm hearing. *What is this?* I thought. I was baffled and perplexed. This had nothing whatsoever to do with the excellent interrogation training I had received at Fort Huachuca in Arizona, where all of the instructors taught us rapport-based methods. And significantly, this had nothing whatsoever to do with the officially permissible interrogation methods identified in the United States Army Field Manual.

Görres, writing in reference to a passage in Sigrid Undset’s novel *Ida Elisabeth*, describes conscience as “the fearful cry of a petite female teacher who is supposed to shout over a schoolyard full of mutinous boys.” When I read that image for the first time in the winter of 2021, my mind was immediately back at Guantanamo in the dumpy trailer that served as our office. Conscience itself is often just a small voice shouting to be heard over a cacophony of conflicting demands. And in my case, this was not only figuratively but also quite literally so. The interrogators who submitted these troubling plans, both large men, expected me to sign off on them. I was in contrast the petite female Team Chief. And I was the newbie, the one everyone was watching to see if I would be a

useless academic or be able to run hard and lead at the front of the pack. The other Team Chiefs and our supervisors, all men, were military officers; the population of humanities Ph.D.s on the Navy base was a grand total of one—namely, me.

Peer pressure in such situations is fierce; I believe it is one of Satan's favorite levers of influence. Indeed, consciences are "subject to many subliminal forces" as Görres explains. And time? Time to deliberate, seek advice, reflect for long periods of time in prayer? Ha. It strikes me as an absurd thought. "Just when it matters" is a moment when the sequence of seconds, minutes, hours, and days ceases to exist. "Just when it matters" is *now*. The only question is, *What will you do now? Right now.*

At Guantanamo, there was a Catholic priest on base, but my connection to the Church at the time was so anemic that it never occurred to me to seek his advice. And the idea of going to see him on a different part of the base, taking time away from the sprinting pace of work, was unfathomable. I needed to make every decision *right now*.

But there was one stroke of good fortune on my side. I had a colleague I thought I could ask for advice, a fellow Catholic whose later invitation to Mass led me back to regular attendance (and unlike my experience at American parishes, we had community at Guantanamo, with a group of us sharing brunch after Mass each Sunday, outdoors in the sun, overlooking the bay). This new friend whom I sought out for advice was Dick Zuley, a Navy officer I'd talked to a few times already whose office happened to be in the same trailer as mine. I've heard Dick is portrayed in a forthcoming Hollywood film about Guantanamo as a dark character. Hollywood loves villains. What Hollywood doesn't want to deal with is the realm where darkness is separated from light.

I thought I should deny approval for these bizarre interrogation plans that had nothing to do with the methods in the Army Field Manual. But I doubted myself. My reason for denying them was that in my gut—one could say in my conscience—they didn't feel right. But that's hardly a clear-sighted, persuasive reason, especially when one knows, as I did, that there would be opposition.

I told Dick my decision and that I wanted to know what he thought. Dick almost lept out of his chair. "Finally!" he exclaimed. "Finally someone is going to stop this! You are doing the right thing." I believe God used Dick at that moment to support me because my own conscience wasn't entirely ready. After talking with Dick, I went back to my office and issued my denial of approval.

During the two years after that, my encounters with interrogation consisted of drinking tea with Saudi detainees while we shared long conversations. And over time I adapted to the peculiar work environment inside the barbed wire of the detention facility. The greatest challenge to my conscience at Guantanamo came right at the start, right when I was least prepared. To an outsider, it might look like I hit a home run off an unexpected curveball. But that's not how it was. God showered my neglected conscience with grace and a friend to offer support, just when I needed both.

What I learned from my time at Guantanamo is that the time to deliberate, seek advice, and reflect for long periods of time in prayer so that we have a conscience that can stand on solid footing "just when it matters" exists only ahead of time, when one can't foresee the curveballs. Conscience is, after all, not a rabbit one can suddenly pull out of a magic hat. It is something that must be cultivated and developed over time so that it is available and ready to go when one of those "just when it matters" moments comes our way.

Last spring I was a guest speaker in an undergraduate course on morality at the Catholic University of America. We discussed interrogation and torture. When I tried to talk with the students about why the formation of conscience along the way in life matters so much, I was met with stares. Nothing about the topic of conscience resonated with them. They wanted to ask me about Jack Bauer and "ticking time bomb" scenarios. But then



again, the formation of conscience must be treated as a *pastoral* problem. Textbooks are important, but we cannot expect them to do the long, hard work of awakening and forming the consciences of the young (and the not-so-young as well). Our Catholic institutions need to prepare students for real life, not just for careers. There will always be curveballs.

As for me, today, when people find out I was an interrogator at Guantanamo, many just assume without question that I am a horrid monster, and they cannot be convinced otherwise. I'm used to this by now. I call this the "Scarlet G" effect. No matter what one may say, in the eyes of these people, I am condemned to wear a Scarlet G for life. I've learned to ignore such people. I let their condemnation be their problem, not mine. I know the fine work of effective, humane interrogation my team

did at Guantanamo. And most importantly I know that the judgement which actually matters is God's, not that of ignorant strangers.

No one is ever fully prepared for a curveball coming over the plate. I imagine even the saints struggled through some of their innings just as we do. But we can see that they trained and took some batting practice with their consciences ahead of the big game. And their hearts were open to allow God's grace to assist. So they knew how to handle a bat and smack the curveball out of the park for a home run just when it mattered. We would do well to do the same.

*Jennifer Bryson, Ph.D., is a Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. She lives in Heiligenkreuz, Austria.*



# AIRBNB POLITICS

BY THOMAS HELLENBRAND



When I went to Poland this past December, I felt a mixture of apprehension and curiosity that had almost nothing to do with the pandemic travel restrictions then in place. Over the last two years, I had often heard friends and teachers speak of the country in a certain tone. I had read even more from journalists and politicians. Some say Poland is Europe's black sheep and a terrifying example of a backsliding democracy, proof that illiberalism is a real threat to the political, social, and moral progress Europe has made in the last eighty years. Others say Poland is a success story of the marriage between social conservatism and liberal fiscal policy. To me, the country was like a

controversial classmate or colleague who is rumored to have inscrutable or abstruse views, which no one can quite understand. I wanted to learn more firsthand.

Why are so many people seemingly obsessed with Poland anyway? Of course, to some extent what happens in Poland affects global affairs, especially now, given its proximity to the war in Ukraine. But that doesn't explain the inordinate amount of attention paid to Poland from non-experts who never seemed willing to delve into the reality of Polish government and society.

Perhaps the instrumentalization of Poland as an ideological chess piece is a result of what I call Airbnb politics. I use the term to describe a tempting inclination to homogenize and simplify different



# THE LAMP

A CATHOLIC JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, SCIENCE, THE FINE ARTS, ETC.



02 The Publisher's desk 05 Feuilleton 09 Brass Rubbings: Max Bodach on an island church 12 The Jungle: C.J. Ciaramella on the elderly 15 Historia ecclesiastica: Declan Leary on Canada 20 Apologia: Jennifer Bryson on Guantanamo Bay 24 Thomas Hellenbrand on Poland 28 Carino Hodder on drawing 31 Gregory Caridi on canon law 35 Robert McLeod on N.A.S.C.A.R. 42 Jude Russo on classics 46 Jaspreet Singh Boparai on Robert Burton 51 Andrew Petiprin on Anglicanism 54 Aram Bakshian, Jr., on beer 58 Appreciations: Roger Lewis on Kingsley Amis 61 Verse: The Dream of the Rood translated by Tessa Carman and J.C. Scharl 64 Monica Costa on cardigans and tweed