The prophet at war

Kurt Shaw

The front lines of the Colombian civil war seem an unlikely place for children to reflect on ethics. Children and teenagers recruited as soldiers in this brutal and unforgiving war have seen evil turned into something normal. Paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the army all massacre civilians if they think it will advance their strategy. All of the warring armies finance their struggle by selling cocaine, stealing land and cattle, and kidnapping. Rape has become just one more form of social control. Many observers believe that the warring armies recruit children because they are morally maleable, easier to manipulate into the war crimes that play a strategic role in the conflict. After working closely with these kids, I think exactly the opposite is true. In fact, for many child soldiers, war stimulates profound ethical and theological reflection.

My wife and I went to Bogotá to teach a group of teenagers who had been guerilla and paramilitary soldiers how to make movies, hoping that a film made *by* teenagers who had been in the war, and not simply *about* them, would help the public see them as human beings, not merely the icon of fear and pity that we have come to associate with the catch-phrase "child soldiers." The movie that they made – transforming the stories of their lives so that Bogotá's urban underworld serves as a metaphor for the war – turned into something more: it became a prophetic text.

When the young filmmakers talk of their time in the war, they describe a world where evil has become normal. Murder and rape and theft become so commonplace that no one thinks them strange: it's just what soldiers do. In hindsight, the kids repent of what they did; some say that even at the time, they knew that what they were doing was wrong. None the less, they did things they recognize to be evil. It makes sense that one fundamental question lies under almost every scene of the movie they made, *Life's Roulette*: When evil has become normal, how can you escape it?

Though it sounds paradoxical, many of the kids insisted that ethics had been central to their decision to join the guerrillas or the paramilitaries.[1] Though we heard many reasons for joining the armed groups, almost all of the young filmmakers mentioned one of two motivations: they wanted to help their mothers by sending them the salaries they would earn as soldiers, or they wanted justice for a wrong done to their families by the enemy army. Their time as soldiers followed a predictable path of disenchantment as they learned that they would not be able to get the justice they craved and that their mothers were not getting the promised salaries. In the place of the adolescent ethics that had motivated them to join, their captains and colonels offered a group ethos. This ethos grew out of shared complicity – shared guilt for a massacre or rape would bond a company together, for instance[2] – but it also exercised a strong force to control group behavior and to normalize evil into something jejune and necessary. Yet even when evil became normal, the kids felt something wrong. In the film, they wanted to show the moment with the weight of this wrong fell on them, forcing them to flee the armed groups and look for a new future.

In much recent theology and philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas's concept of *hineni* has become the touchstone for this moment of ethical recognition, the break that constitutes the ethical subject. Levinas develops his idea through reflection on the prophetic call, when an otherwise ordinary person answers God with *hineni*, "here I am," showing that he is willing to obey Yahweh's command.[3] The prophet, like children immersed in war, lives in a world where evil has

---

[1] The stereotype of the child soldier, based largely on stories of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, makes us think that children only join armed groups when they are forced or kidnapped. In fact, most of the teenagers with whom we worked insisted that they had *chosen* to join the guerrillas or the paramilitaries, some for the ethical reasons listed here, others because they wanted to get away from an abusive father or stepfather, others because they wanted adventure in their lives or because they had been recruited by an attractive soldier of the opposite gender.

[2] According to Slavoj Zizek, what joins a community together is not the public law that everyone affirms, but the way that everyone is *obligated to break the law together*. By participating in this "counter-law", everyone joins in a kind of "solidarity-in-guilt". His most shocking example comes from the post-bellum American South, when public law was suspended every night. White vigilantes passed through the streets lynching blacks. A man who broke the public law (robbing a store, say) might be forgiven, but someone who refused to participate in the communitarian, nocturnal sins, was forever banished from society (or sometimes himself lynched). See Slavoj Zizek, *The Metasteses of Enjoyment.* London, Verso, 1994. pp. 54-57 and my *Agony Street*. Santa Fe and Florianópolis: Shine a Light, 2007.

[3] See especially Gen 22:1, Is 6:8

become normal, where people have forgotten the word of Yahweh; in terms the young filmmakers might use, people have come to accept evil and oppression as a normal, necessary part of life and politics. To break the hold of this normalized evil, God must call a prophet to remind them to do justice (משפט), treat others with loving kindness (חסד), and walk humbly with their God (Hos 6:8). Levinas's eloquent and powerful philosophy begins at the moment when a person hears that call from God, or more accurately, sees his responsibility in the suffering face of the widow, orphan, or stranger.[4] Many Talmudic authorities insist that Abraham accepted the call of God "joyfully" or "without question,"[5] even though he will have to kill his son; like them, Levinas writes mostly of the challenge to gain the courage to say *hineni* when we hear a call to responsibility. The young filmmakers who made *Life's Roulette* offer an important preface to this ethics, wondering how one can even *hear* the call to responsibility amidst the deafening tumult of war.

The life stories out of which the young filmmakers made *Life's Roulette* give an idea of how complicated it can be to hear the call of Yahweh, let alone say *hineni*. Imagine a young woman whose father was murdered by the paramilitaries, whose family has been forced from their home in the countryside to a shantytown outside Bogotá. She knows that the courts will never give her justice, because the judges are allied with the murderers. Without her father's pay, the family goes hungry. By joining the guerrillas, she thinks she may have a chance to get justice against the paramilitaries at the same time that she earns money to buy food for her mother and little brothers. Though she may recognize that she will have to do bad things in order to help her family, she can still believe that she is a good person, because she is doing good things for them.

Though the guerrillas may force the girl to do much she considers wrong, each single action can be justified by the long term goal of justice for her father and food for her little brothers. She will not condemn a massacre because the victims sympathized with the paramilitaries. She keeps watch over civilian

---

[4] See Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969, especially p. 39 et seq.

[5] See especially *Genesis Rabbah, Vayera* LV. 6. Cited in Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Levinas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

prisoners, but because they were kidnapped to earn a ransom to support the struggle, she understands the necessity. She is raped, but she tells herself that suffering is necessary to get what she wants.[6] And amidst these little justifications, she soon becomes a person she would not have recognized. She has accepted evil as normal.

Life's Roulette transplants these stories onto the urban landscape, building a movie out of several interlacing tales. As a metaphor for the story of being forced from one's home in the countryside by the paramilitaries, one plot line follows a girl who escapes from an abusive father and comes to live on the street. Lost and without friends, she wanders the labyrinth of Bogotá looking for her brother, who had left home before her. In despair, she enters a bar to look for work, even though she knows that the only jobs available are for prostitutes. Seduced by whiskey and money and beautiful girls dancing, she is almost ready to sell her body when she sees the waiter at the bar: her brother. With the shock of recognition, she flees.

Many of the young filmmakers told of friends and even brothers joining enemy armies and coming to battle against each other, so the second plot line of the movie tells the story of best friends who become enemies when they join rival gangs. The climactic scene follows these two characters, each leading a gang that wants to take power in a certain neighborhood. The camera traces Andrés as he walks up the hill with a girl he has always tried to protect, lamenting the turn his life has taken and telling her "I know we will be able to solve this problem by talking." His words are eloquent and he offers a sharp criticism of the life he has come to lead, but when he sees his enemy on the top of the hill, his first reaction is to threaten him, his second to pull his gun.

As the two rivals draw their pistols, the girl throws herself between them. The frame freezes as the gun approaches her head, and then fades into the image of waving grass.

When they thought about moments of ethical recognition, teenagers who have seen how war normalizes evil saw such opportunities only in the most extreme circumstances. While Levinas might use Abraham or Elijah as the

[6] These notes integrate the stories of many of the participants.

metaphor for the capacity to say *hineni*, these kids did not find it so easy to hear the call of conscience, let alone respond to it. Their story is closer to that of Jonas, who could only respond to God after he had been thrown from the boat and swallowed by the whale.

Both stories in *Life's Roulette* end happily; after all, the movie is a sort of collective autobiography, and the filmmakers wanted to show how their lives are changing for the better. In the first plot line, the girl and her brother leave the brothel and run into a pair of documentary filmmakers who offer them work; in the second, the two friends stop before they shoot. At the most extreme point of ethics, the characters – and the teenagers who created them – were able to pull themselves back from the ethical abyss.

Unfortunately, those of us who have not had the misfortune to be child soldiers may not find a model for our own ethical transformation in these stories. Even so, we live in a world that has normalized evil. Whether it is the way we invest our money, the petroleum we use to get to work, or simply the way we treat our parents, we fail to pay attention to bad things we do every day. They fade into the background and become a kind of white noise; if asked about it, we probably know that it is wrong, but most of the time, we just don't think about it. We don't have the sort of cinematic moments represented in the film. Our ethical call has to come from somewhere else.

Let me tell another story that might help to show other ways that people can hear the call to ethical responsibility. Two years ago, I worked with a group of young rappers from the most violent *favelas* of the Brazilian city of Recife, where seventy murders on a weekend barely raises eyebrows.[7] In the midst of that kind of violence, most people would bolt their doors and huddle behind concrete walls, but poor mothers and fathers don't have that option; if they don't go to work, they and their children will starve. In order to give themselves the courage to go out the front door, they invent stories to convince themselves that

---

[7] In Rio de Janeiro, wars between gangs in the 1990s had a higher mortality rate than almost any civil war during the same period. [Dowdney, Luke. *Crianças do Tráfico*. RJ: ISER, 2002], and over the last several years, Recife has become more violent than Rio. I particularly remember a conversation with the proprietor of an internet café, who, after a particularly violent weekend, told me "I don't know why people are making such a big deal out of seventy murders last weekend. Fifty is average, after all, and it was a long weekend with a vacation day on Monday..."

they will be safe in spite of the battle raging around them. In the favelas of Recife, we heard the same phrase time after time: "He deserved to die because he was in debt to the crackhouse, and you know what they say, 'if you can't pay with money, you pay with your blood'." People die because they are guilty; I am not guilty. Therefore, I am safe. A simple, comforting syllogism. However, when I say that only bad people die, I justify the violence of the drug gangs. They are, after all, "only punishing the guilty". My argument gives them legitimacy, their reign becomes even more terrible, and more children – both kids who are involved in drug and those who are not – die.

In the rap album the kids recorded to condemn the violence in their communities,[8] they examined exactly this logic. Fifteen year old Chipan insisted that violence falls on both the guilty and the innocent:

> *It might be your picture, or mine*
> *On the front pages tomorrow.*
> *Your mother weeping, your father wailing,*
> *Reliving the day you were born, your first birthday party.*
> *Think about it, and reason with me.*

Instead of asking the listener to "reason with me," other rappers demand that everyone take a new look at the *favela* through the eyes of a child. Sometimes, the lyrics seem naïve, like 13-year old Ítalo's "Violence has to stop":

> *I speak, and say the truth,*
> *In order to be a person of quality,*
> *stop, study, work,*
> *and your future will certainly change.*

Ítalo knows that violence doesn't just stop when someone says "stop." He's seen to many murders to believe that. Instead, the lyrics to his rap carry a different

---

[8] *City of Rhyme/Ato Periférico*, produced by Shine a Light and DJ Big. The rappers who recorded the album won the 2008 Freedom to Create Prize as the best young artists in the world working for human rights. Available for download at www.shinealight.org/CityOfRhyme.html

demand: “Look at this place through the eyes of a child for a second. Don’t you see something strange?” A simple statement that everyone knows, but in the mouth of a child, it challenges us to see the evil we have taught ourselves to ignore. And with that shift in perspective, perhaps the adult will be able to see how he is complicit in the violence and how he can change it.

The message the kids wanted to convey is a relatively simple one. The profundity of the art comes not from its content, but from its speaker; in Christological terms, not from the message, but from the messenger. We all know that child soldiers and young gang members are human beings with the possibility for good, but we still cross the street when we see a black kid walking down the sidewalk toward us. The point of the message is not to teach us anything new, but to demand that we bring our actions into agreement with our beliefs. Instead of teaching some kind of absolute ethics, the kids call us to enter a relationship with them, to see them as real human beings. That relationship places our own hypocrisy into stark relief, showing us not only that we are doing wrong, but that those actions have consequences.

The denouement of *Life’s Roulette* points to a similar process. In the movie, drugs and crime served as a metaphor for life in the war, but the kids also wanted the camera to represent where they saw themselves in the future. In the fanal scenes, several characters come together to use the ill-gotten gains from drug-trafficking to make a documentary showing the virtues of their neighborhood. By drawing attention to the fact that the kids themselves made the film, this conclusion makes it clear that they have a lesson to teach with their movie. In the brief documentary where the actors tell other how they made the film, one of the young men insists,

> “Kids like us, kids who fought in the war, we have a lot to teach... We are normal people, just like anyone else. We have a heart. And we have put all of that heart and effort and enthusiasm into this movie… So that when people see where we come from, they'll see

> we are people of peace. Not like the majority of people think, that we're always violent."[9]

One of his friends adds,

> "Now that we have this project done, fabricated, and ready, as we show it, I think that the way people think will change. They'll look at us in a different way. They'll see that we have these difficulties, but also these qualities that matter more than what's bad. What's good about every human being is that we have bad qualities, but we also have good qualities that overcome the bad."

Conversion – or to use more secular language, the break from the normalization of evil – demands prophesy. Young men and women who were soldiers have found a new purpose: not only to integrate themselves into society and teach others about the war,[10] but to create a world "where no kid has to go to war," as the protagonist of the film told us. For them, as for Elijah or Jonah or Paul, when one hears the call of God, *hineni* does not merely mean "I will repent", but "I will work to make the world more just."

When I read Levinas, I feel like he expects all of us to be prophets, individually hearing the call to responsibility when we see the suffering of the widow, orphan, or stranger. That makes sense for a man like Levinas who suffered through the concentration camps. The truth is, though, that few of us spend much time in the Wadi Cherith with Elijah, nor in the belly of the whale with Jonah or in the war with the children who made *Life's Roulette*. The evil in our daily lives has become so normal and boring that it doesn't even open the possibility of a plot twist. With our cars and office cubicles and quiet vacations,

---

[9] "We are people of peace: how we made the movie *Life's Roulette*". Available at www.shinealight.org/ruleta.html or on the *Ruleta de la Vida* DVD (Shine a Light and Taller de Vida, 2009).

[10] To add a little result orientation to a very theological essay, while almost half of the thousands of children who attempt to leave the war end up returning to the guerrillas or paramilitaries, ["Gobierno perdió la pista de 212 niños desmovilizados de las autodefensas". *El Tiempo* (Bogotá). 6 Octubre, 2007] none of the 15 teenagers who made *Life's Roulette* have gone back to battle.

we have isolated ourselves from the face of the other that might call us to responsibility, from the need to say *hineni*.

Nor, in fact, were most people in ancient Israel prophets. Most of them lived their lives from day to day, working to feed their families and care for their parents… and often, forgetting their duty to care for the widow and the orphan and to do justice for the poor. However, they knew that from time to time God would call someone to speak for Him, so sometimes people would have the courage to listen to a prophet. Prophecy was a social practice, a relationship between people, not merely between the believer and God or the ethical subject and the face of the other. Sometimes, I fear that Levinas misses this detail, but the kids in Colombia and Brazil never do.

Who, then, are our prophets? To whom do we have the responsibility to listen? I'm voting for children and teenagers from the margins of society: child soldiers and street kids and gangsters and Indian kids selling arts and crafts to support their families. Kids from the periphery can still say *hineni*. They still see the evils and violence and oppression we have assimilated into our ethical blind spot, in part because they are the victims of that hypocrisy, and in part because they take seriously the ethical lessons that their mothers and fathers teach them.

We generally portray prophets as men with long beards, but the truth is that most of us adults have developed great skills at *not* hearing the call of God, of accepting the normality of evil. It isn't the noise of war that makes us deaf, but the repetition of our normal lives. These aren't even conscious skills, just the ability to overlook things that might make life difficult for us. Children and teenagers haven't learned those lessons yet. As hard as we may try to teach them, they haven't learned that murder victims in the *favela* are guilty, nor that killing someone else in a war is justified. Even with a gun in their hands, they can't quite believe it.

For most of us, the call to ethical responsibility doesn't come from the death of a friend in a gang war, nor from running into our brothers in a brothel. So we have a responsibility to listen: to teenagers who have escaped the war, to the music of kids from the *favela*, to our own children when they point out our elegantly constructed hypocrisies. They are the small-scale prophets of our age,

challenging us to break with the quotidian evil we have come to see as normal or necessary.