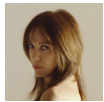




Natalie Portman in "Black Swan." The movie provides the most recent -- though most egregious -- example of the "ballerinas-are-victims" stance that certain good Samaritans love to embrace, writes Toni Bentley. (Credit: Fox Searchlight)

02.25.11



Toni Bentley

Butchery at the Ballet

Oscar and audiences may love *Black Swan*, but one former New York City Ballet dancer thinks it's nothing more than "balletploitation." Author Toni Bentley explains why Darren Aronofsky's psychological thriller is insultingly off pointé.

I have tried to avoid writing about Darren Aronofsky's pirouetting parody *Black Swan*, but, having been a professional ballet dancer for George Balanchine, I keep getting asked what I think of the movie. And now that it has garnered a huge audience, numerous passionate fans and five Oscar nominations, it is time to put on my toe shoes, wrap my ribbons, paint on my four-inch black eyebrows, lace-up my wet-tutu suit and take a grand jeté into Aronofsky's swamp. I mean lake.

I first saw this film at a screening last November, before it opened to the public. I had high hopes: Aronofsky had done a great deal of homework on the "ballet world," consulting with many dancers, myself included. Reading the script a year or so previously, I'd been baffled by its reductive simplicity. But, hey, I thought, what do I know about script writing—and Aronofsky and his people seemed like earnest folk.

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The film opens with a gorgeous low-lit scene of a ballerina's beautiful legs and feet ensconced in the shimmering satin sheaths that are the art's greatest symbol, dancing to the great soaring strains of Tchaikovsky's passionate score. Oh goody, I thought, I will be swept away by this: the magic, the music, the beauty, the lines, those hypnotizing arched feet that skim the stage on their toes like purring paws (the ballerina was, of course, not the film's star, Natalie Portman, but her double, Sarah Lane, a real dancer from American Ballet Theatre.)

Unfortunately it proved a terrible tease—the only lyrical moment in a film ostensibly about a lyrical art prior to the onslaught of histrionics that ensue.

One hundred and eight minutes later, as the movie ended, the friend I took—not a dancer—turned to me and asked in all seriousness, “Was that supposed to be camp?” There, on the screen, was a beautiful, bleeding-into-her-tutu Portman as the White Swan, uttering those portentous dying words: “Perfect . . . It was perfect.” As a dancer, I have never been so perfectly insulted.

I had thought when I read those words in the script, this is really stupid simple (the opposite of wicked smart, I would venture), but maybe Aronofsky has one of those things you hear film directors sometimes have: a vision. This was the vision? A dead ballerina in a bloody tutu with the caption “It was perfect”? He could not possibly be basing a film on a ballet dancer—the most fleet, complex, and powerful artist of the physical that exists—and the great 19th-century love story that is Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* by reducing it to one crazy girl's addiction to perfection. Or could he? Is this how he sees our art? Like a profession full of self-destructive addicts that need an A&E *Intervention*, a Dr. Phil “How's it working for you?” talk, or an Oprah bailout? Aronofsky totally missed—or dismissed—the love story that is the *raison d'être* of the entire ballet and, instead, myopically latched on like a pit bull (and with the same finesse) to the White Swan/Madonna-Black Swan/whore dichotomy and then delivers his sophomoric dissertation with a sledgehammer. He does, however, clearly delineate his Cygnini discoveries: a White Swan masturbates in white grannie panties, while a Black Swan goes (black) thongless into the night. (Aronofsky clearly has a penchant for mutants: his next film is *The Wolverine*.)

Black Swan provides the most recent—though most egregious—example of the “ballerinas-are-victims” stance that certain good Samaritans love to embrace (“those dancers are too thin, they are just too too thin”) on occasion to aggrandize themselves, while patronizing those superb creatures whose

absolute commitment to excellence they cannot understand. Ballet is the practice of physicalized morality, a poetic standard for every man and woman's ideal capacity," wrote Lincoln Kirstein, who founded the New York City Ballet with Balanchine. To imply that its proponents, dancers, are victims rather than teachers provides swift avoidance of that uncomfortable suggestion. Aronofsky has created a movie celebrating the failure of a ballerina, and by implication her entire art—disguised, insidiously, as a film about sacrifice and success.

As *Black Swan* so clearly demonstrates, one simply cannot “act” being a ballerina. It is a state of being, of feeling, of mind, an externalized expression of internalized discipline, faith, and good manners.

But I am too harsh. Perhaps *Black Swan* is simply Aronofsky's bloody, melodramatic, nonsensical, middle-of-the-road, badly-written bid for box-office success after he tasted its heady brine with the success of the excellent *The Wrestler*. It could have been such rip-roaring good fun (see Jim Carrey's rendition from *Saturday Night Live*). And a real nice break from the dull, repetitive, hard work of a true ballerina. But then *Black Swan* isn't a film about real ballerinas at all, no more than *Jurassic Park* is a film about real scientists (or real dinosaurs for that matter)—it merely exploits the locale, the props, and the outerwear. Balletploitation is born.

This brings us to Aronofsky's heroine: his waify, whiny, bulimic little ballerina, Nina Sayers. Don't you just love her? The little swan who simply couldn't fly. And then we hear—over and over —that poor hard-working Natalie Portman had to actually lose weight and work really, really, hard—I mean really hard—for a number of months to pass, barely, as a professional dancer in the film, and only then between her neck and waist (don't look further down: it isn't there. Even her double—the one who actually did work really hard for several decades—is hardly on screen). A ballerina without her legs and feet is like a writer without words or a singer without a voice: not one. No wonder Portman looks so beleaguered in the film: she is perhaps the first amputee professional ballerina. But, hey, it's Hollywood, and she has already won a Golden Globe and will likely garner an Oscar for her dorsal efforts. (Her upper-body-only performance does, however, enable her to wear the first strapless tutus in dance history.)

“The world of ballet,” Portman told French Vogue after making the film “is *sick, sick, sick*.” Portman, however, has bravely overcome her distaste and is marrying, and reproducing, into the profession all the same. Portman is a lovely actress of considerable accomplishment in other films, but here her one-note earnest angst, denoted by furrowed brow from start to finish, is entirely unlike any real ballerina—a woman who “must have the nobility of a five-star general,” as Agnes de Mille once said—rather than Portman's insecure little misery. As *Black Swan* so clearly demonstrates, one simply cannot “act” being a ballerina. It is a state of being, of feeling, of mind, an externalized expression

of internalized discipline, faith, and good manners. And of course, one needs those inconvenient legs and feet.

While the result is one almost hilariously sensationalistic movie (Aronofsky even misses being either high or low camp), I have a sneaking suspicion that the director wanted his film, at least in part, to be about the Birth of an Artist. He wants to bludgeon his tutu and wear it too. In straddling his themes—a serious film about the making of an artist, and *Psycho* at the ballet—he misses both, and flaps around in no swan's lake.

This, of course, the public is lapping up, especially, I surmise, the vast audience caught in the fangs of vampire love (the *Twilight* books and movies, *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*.) *Black Swan* has all the same seductive red, white and black elements of blood, innocence, and death delivered with risible solemnity and repressed sexuality. Nosferatu gets a tutu! Besides, there is nothing quite like white feathers and tulle to slowly absorb and spread the blood of a nice deep, suicide stigmata. And what did Nina stab herself with? Oh yes, a shard of her smashed dressing room mirror. I get it, I get it, the mirror murder, death of narcissism by narcissism (the buzzword for those obsessive ballerinas.)

I don't care in the least that Aronofsky's depiction of the ballet world and its anxious protagonists uses every blatant cliché about this rarified world, where anorexia, bulimia, self-mutilation, suppressed sexuality (but lots of attempted masturbation!), jealousy, stage mothers from hell, and vulgar, violent, lascivious company directors predominate. And don't forget the requisite bloody toe close-up. Ewww! (For the record: A bloody toe for a ballerina is like a bruise for a boxer: ho-hum.)

Aronofsky displays neither respect, nor wonder, nor fascination, nor, alas, love for ballet in his film—he sees only half-clad wacko women: all four women in his mutilating misogynistic fetish are uber-crazy chicks. Predictably, he also repeats the truly absurd notion that a young female dancer needs drugs, alcohol, a wild tattooed girlfriend, and pick-up sex to the din of deafening disco music to “loosen up,” to be sexy and alluring on stage. This is a shameless manipulation (hello Hollywood!) to give regular teenage girls a point of connection to those rarified creatures. But the fact remains that reckless, self-destructive girls are simply not the ones who succeed in ballet—they are dropouts who must go to college. Aronofsky did, however, almost win me over with the prospect of skinny crazed lesbian ballerinas in sex scenes with themselves and each other (how else to get men to a movie about ballet?) But even here, the scenes are both passionless and humorless.

Despite all this—or, more likely, because of it—Nina Sayers is the first crazy ballerina to have reached across the elitist wall of the ballet convent into the general public's awareness, since 1986 when our own bona fide great ballerina Gelsey Kirkland wrote her bestselling memoir *Dancing On My Grave* (could

have been Aronofsky's title). Kirkland's real-life drama did include starvation, vomiting, drug addiction, rivals, failed plastic surgery, multiple obsessions, and bad sex with Baryshnikov. (Kirkland was diagnosed by the world-renowned analyst Dr. Otto Kernberg as having borderline personality disorder while under his inpatient care.) Suffice it to say that no real ballerina, Kirkland included, would survive, much less succeed, with such an illness. It is important to note that Kirkland was a very great ballerina before she unraveled—not, sadly, after.

What is even sadder is that the only glimpses of the ballet world that most of the general public sees—and then believes—are these extreme aberrations. I have heard it said of *Black Swan*'s popularity: "But at least ballet is going on people's radar." Better ballet stay off their radar, if so inaccurately represented as a world of insane perfectionists, rather than what it is: a world of masterful devotees to beauty.

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years and is the author of five books including "Winter Season, A Dancer's Journal" and "The Surrender, An Erotic Memoir." She is a Guggenheim Fellow, and her story "The Bad Lion" was recently published in "Best American Essays 2010."



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The Real Reason the U.S. Didn't Rescue Bowe Bergdahl

After a second escape attempt, the American hostage was being moved so often, American commandos would've had to raid a dozen safe houses in Pakistan at once.

The Pentagon rejected the idea of a rescue mission for Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl because he was being moved so often by his Taliban captors that U.S. special operators would have had to hit up to a dozen possible hideouts inside Pakistan at once in order to have a chance at rescuing him.

That's according to U.S. officials, who also say the Obama administration did not want to risk the political fallout in Pakistan from another unilateral U.S. raid, like the Navy SEAL raid that killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in 2011.

Bergdahl had also twice tried to escape, so the militants guarding him had stepped up their numbers, further complicating any potential rescue attempt.

"A rescue mission would have been fraught politically as well as tactically," according to a senior defense official briefed on the Bergdahl case.

The lack of information about Bergdahl's whereabouts shows how few choices the administration had, and why officials

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felt negotiations with the Taliban were their best option. His repeated attempts to escape also call into question those who call him a deserter who did not intend to return to the U.S. army's ranks.

The White House released five high-ranking Taliban members from Guantanamo Bay prison over the weekend in return for Bergdahl's freedom, sparking outrage from lawmakers who were kept in the dark until the trade was done. Law requires Congress to be given 30 days notice before a prisoner is released from

Guantanamo, but White House officials say Bergdahl's deteriorating health necessitated the rapid action.

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Senators shown the Taliban's proof of life video Wednesday that was pivotal in the White House's decision making process say he did not look well, but argue that should have been shown to them before the release was negotiated.

At the same time, many soldiers who served with Bergdahl have spoken out against him—blaming Bergdahl for wandering off his post, and for diverting needed intelligence and surveillance resources to hunt for him. Some soldiers even blame Bergdahl for the deaths of a half-dozen troops, although those claims have been disputed.

Bergdahl was turned over to U.S. special operations forces by Taliban fighters in eastern Afghanistan last Saturday, an event the fighters filmed and turned into a propaganda video released on Jihadi websites Wednesday.

Two more U.S. officials and a former Afghan official said Bergdahl escaped his Taliban captors twice during his five years of captivity, once in the fall of 2011 as then reported The Daily Beast, and a second time, believed to be sometime in 2012. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

In his first escape, Afghan sources said he avoided capture for three days and two nights before searches finally found him, exhausted and hiding in a shallow trench he had dug with his own hands and covered with leaves.

In his second bid for freedom, which has not been previously reported,

In his second bid for freedom, which has not been previously reported, Bergdahl made it to a remote village in the mountainous part of Pakistan. The villagers simply returned him to his captors in the Haqqani Network.

Bergdahl made it to a remote village in the mountainous part of Pakistan, the former Afghan official said. The villagers simply returned him to his captors in the Haqqani Network. The U.S. officials were not familiar with details of the second escape attempt, though they knew Bergdahl had briefly slipped away from his captors.

Three special operations officials say rescue missions to bring him back were contemplated multiple times over the

years.

When Gen. Stanley McChrystal was in charge in Afghanistan, the U.S. had a better idea of his general location, and a mission was mapped out and briefed to senior officials.

They rejected it, the officials say, because the mission planners warned of a high probability that Bergdahl and at least two to three special operations troops would be killed in the operation, so well-guarded was he by Haqqani fighters in a hard-to-reach mountain hideout on the Pakistani side of the border.

But a former senior U.S. Official said the U.S. government never pinpointed his location in a way that enabled them to plan a Bin-Laden-style raid—and therefore was never able to present to the president with a plan to go get him. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly.

Subsequent commanders decided it was better to keep tabs on him via spies and satellites as best they could until he was moved to an easier-to-reach location, or negotiations with the Taliban freed him.

The situation was even worse for Pentagon planners considering rescue options in 2014. After Bergdahl's escapes, the Taliban stepped up security around him, and with the rise in CIA drone strikes in Pakistan's ungoverned tribal region, constantly moved him among roughly a dozen safe houses; successfully rescuing him would've meant launching as many as a dozen raids simultaneously—dramatically increasing the risk.

The Pentagon had put Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations Michael Lumpkin in charge of the negotiations last year, after previous attempts to broker Bergdahl's release had broken down.

Other special operations officials also maintained back channel communications with his captors through former Taliban officials, to keep tabs

on his health and explore options for getting him back.

BOWE BERGDAHL



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UNFAIR TRADE

TALIBAN ARE WINNERS IN BERGDAHL

The senior defense official said the Pentagon stepped up negotiations with the Taliban via the government of Qatar after seeing Bergdahl's proof-of-life video last December.

"We could see he looked rough, from the way he held his body and slurred some of his words," the official said. "We got other accounts as well that his health was deteriorating," he added.

U.S. Army spokesman Col. Steve Warren declined to comment Wednesday on the reports of Bergdahl's attempted escapes or debates over whether to rescue him.

Eli Lake contributed to this report.



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The Heart of Bleakness

By Jason Mojica, Vice News, Published June 1, 2011. Sifting through the wreckage of Congo's conflict economy.

Walking through the jungle in the dead of night with a group of Rwandan rebels best known for their expertise at rape and murder wasn't exactly what we had planned for our first trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo. All we wanted was to make a little film about the controversy surrounding the so-called conflict minerals that make our cell phones work, drop a couple Conrad references, and drink a Primus. Just one Primus.

A week earlier, our team landed at N'Djili International Airport in the capital of Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville. The place looks like it hasn't had a scrub since Muhammad Ali dropped by for the Rumble in the Jungle in the early 1970s. After having our yellow-fever cards checked for the first time in our well-traveled lives, we ran a gauntlet of sweaty police officers and other officials—

each with his own laundry list of infractions that we had apparently already committed. In an amazing stroke of luck, they were willing to overlook all these violations for a small fine, payable in person, to them.

We'd come to Congo to try to find out more about the developed world's thirst for coltan, cassiterite, and the other colorfully named minerals that make the electronics industry go round. These are part of a group of natural resources that have been dubbed "conflict minerals" because of the alphabet soup of armed groups (FARDC, CNDP, FDLR, PARECO, etc.) who have found them a very portable and highly profitable way to fund their activities—which mostly consist of killing people. Since 1996, these guerrilla insurgencies have led to the deaths of more than 5 million people, and in one particularly horrific year—2006—the rape of approximately 400,000 women.

After giving up on ever seeing our luggage again, we stepped out onto the streets of Kinshasa. The city is probably the closest real-world equivalent of a zombie apocalypse—an oppressively hot, dusty, and decrepit landscape where somewhere between 7 and 10 million people try to eke out a living any way they can, whether that's selling knotted plastic bags of water to the thousands of people caught in the never-ending snarl of traffic on the city's crumbling roads, or the occasional late-night ambush of out-of-towners dumb enough to go walking around on their own.

It was difficult not to be rattled by the crushing poverty: amputees, shantytowns, and hustlers on every corner. We wondered, "How the hell does a place like this get to be a place like this?" Can you really just blame it all on "colonialism" like some dreadlocked freshman anthropology student? In this case... maybe you can.

In 1885, Leopold II of Belgium established the Congo Free State, a little project that involved stripping the Congo of its natural resources as fast as humanly possible. Actually, the king liked things to be done faster than humanly possible, and he motivated some of his "workforce" by chopping off their hands. Fortunately for Leo, his adventure in Congo happened to coincide with the advent of the automobile, which meant that manufacturers were clamoring for Congo's plentiful supply of rubber. He managed to get very rich while halving the population, but soon a group of more-civilized Belgians reined in the king's entrepreneurial activities and ran Congo as a colony that they felt they could be proud of. And why shouldn't they be proud? When Congo took its first baby steps as an independent nation, in 1960, the Belgians had left the country with 16 college graduates, a military consisting of 25,000 low-ranking troops, and over half its population illiterate.

After we spent a few days in our own stink, our bags finally arrived and we were able to start our journey in earnest. We knew very little about Congo before we came, but the one thing that had been drilled into our heads was "*do not fly on Congolese airlines.*" Conventional wisdom says that between the

beat-up Russian planes and their drunken Russian pilots, and the occasional crocodile in the overhead, if you fly a Congolese airline—you *will* die. But what else could we do? Walk? This is a country the size of western Europe, with the infrastructure of rural West Virginia. As it turned out, our Congolese Airline flight would be the most comfortable experience of the days that followed.

When we arrived in Goma, the capital of the North Kivu province, the atmosphere was considerably better than in Kinshasa: cleaner air and nicer weather, and we were now working with a brilliant and brave Congolese fixer named Horeb and the veteran conflict photographer Tim Freccia. Having failed to prepare for the possibility of cold weather in Congo, we hit some secondhand-clothing shops in Goma (there did not appear to be any firsthand clothing shops), which were stuffed with donated fashions from the past few decades. We left for our journey into the mountains a few dollars lighter and one bootleg Wu Wear jacket richer.

Our crew piled into a Land Cruiser and rumbled toward a mining town called Numbi in South Kivu. We were told that the mines around Numbi were a good example of conflict-free mines: government-controlled, no rebels in sight.

When we arrived at the mine trailed by a few local government minders, there were in fact no rebels in sight. Government troops were also nowhere to be found. No child laborers, either. In fact, there were no laborers of any kind—the place was empty. Evidently, the West's sudden concern about the money trail of the Congo's mineral trade had folks around these parts spooked. A provision in the recently enacted Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2010, requires American companies to disclose their use of “conflict minerals,” which is basically like asking them if they still beat their wives. In anticipation of the new rules, big corporations have simply avoided purchasing minerals from Congo altogether. Congolese sales of tin ore—used to solder circuit boards together—fell more than 90 percent in May alone.

We decided to ditch our minders and get an unvarnished look at an active site by spending the night in Numbi and sneaking out at the crack of dawn. Consequently, we had to climb to an altitude inhospitable to city folk. As we tried to keep ourselves from vomiting, we wondered if it was really necessary for us to *personally* see where coltan comes from.

After reaching the summit, we looked down on a shockingly primitive scene—workers wielding pickaxes and shovels, sifting soil through their callused hands. It's something they call “artisanal mining,” which kind of makes it sound like the work of snooty craftsmen who wax their mustaches. In reality, it's a bunch of mud-caked guys in galoshes hacking at the earth for \$3 a day. If they're lucky.

This was mining in the eastern Congo on a good day, when the country is

ostensibly at peace. But should fighting break out again, conditions will rapidly shift from primitive to barbarous, as different groups of very patriotic armed men with a strong interest in minerals move into the area.

For the time being, these rebel groups have been pushed deep into the bush and are held at bay by joint military operations conducted by the UN and FARDC—Congo's poorly paid and poorly organized armed forces.

Naturally, after hearing so much about these armed groups and how our addiction to Twitter was somehow enabling their murderous tendencies, we wanted to meet them. So Horeb and Tim pulled some strings and managed to make contact with a Mai Mai group in North Kivu known as the Patriotic Alliance for a Free and Sovereign Congo (APCLS) and led by General Janvier Buingo Karairi. The term *Mai Mai* is shorthand for the wide assortment of local militias in eastern Congo who have collectively terrorized the region over the past decade, frequently accused (but rarely convicted) of employing child soldiers and massacring and raping civilians in Katanga's "triangle of death." The Mai Mai claim to possess superhuman powers, say that bullets pass through their bodies as if through water, and, if the situation warrants, that they can morph into animals. They are the African-guerrilla version of the Wonder Twins.

The notion of heading into the dense Congolese jungle in search of superpowered Mai Mai was terrifying enough without the local UN troops upping the ante by politely asking us to copy down our personal information, specifically our passport numbers. It was, they insisted, "just a formality"—one that would assist American embassy officials in figuring out where to pick up our mutilated corpses.

In Africa, you have to be careful what you ask for. As we wound our way through the humid jungle, in what immediately felt like our own Bataan death march, we encountered—you guessed it—a group of armed men. But when it became clear that our fearless fixer and his armed interlocutor were each speaking a different language, we realized that these guys were not the local militia we were trying to locate, but members of the FDLR, a group of Rwandan Hutu rebels far from home.

We stood around trying to act casual, avoiding eye contact with a group of soldiers who appeared too young to remember the 1994 Rwandan genocide upon which the group was built. Meanwhile, one of them radioed ahead to Hutu troops at a camp down the road to allow us safe passage through their territory—and to visit a guerrilla group that, we'd thought, were avowed enemies of the FDLR.

Things didn't become any more clear when we finally met the Mai Mai and sat down with General Janvier. One of his group's primary demands is that all Rwandans leave Congolese soil immediately. So why did Rwandan FDLR

troops escort us to his camp? How did General Janvier's Rwandan secretary feel about that? You might find this strange, but as we sat there surrounded by Janvier's men... well, we didn't really feel like asking those questions.

VICE cofounder Suroosh Alvi asked General Janvier what he thought about the world's addiction to electronic devices—and, necessarily, coltan. The general was forthright at first and said that the average Congolese citizen does not benefit from mineral extraction, which was “one of the reasons why we are fighting.” He seemed to imply that if the Mai Mai controlled the mines, they would redistribute the wealth. But when asked to expand on the issue, the general played coy, saying that minerals “may be around here... but we don't dig,” flatly denying that his fighters have any sort of interest in the mineral trade.

Congo is a complicated place, but not so complicated that we should write it off.

It's easy to pin the country's problems on the past—the Belgian colonialists, kleptocratic rulers, and grievances with neighboring nations—but that doesn't make any of them go away. Maybe if we demand conflict-free electronics the rebel groups will simply melt away into the jungle, or maybe we'll only succeed in making the poorest country in the world a little poorer.

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WORLD NEWS 06.04.14

Christopher
Dickey

Cardinal O'Malley: Pope Francis Knows Immigrants Are the Future of the Church

As the United States and Europe try to cope with a flood of immigrants, many of them children, Pope Francis and Boston's Cardinal O'Malley work for an end to 'globalized indifference.'

NEW YORK CITY, United States — The children are coming, illegally and alone, and they are coming by the tens of thousands. They are crossing the borders of the United States and they are risking the high seas to reach Europe. They trust their lives to criminals—to smugglers and traffickers. Many are effectively enslaved. Many do not survive.

On Monday, President Barack Obama issued a memorandum meant to address the “urgent humanitarian situation” on the southwest border where the number of children from Mexico and Central America trying to cross without their parents may reach 60,000 this year.

On the waters of the Mediterranean, each summer brings tide after tide of migrants from Africa, the Middle East

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and Asia, but this year the wave started much earlier than usual. About 30,000 migrants have arrived in Italy so far. Some 3,000 of them are children without their parents.

Yet for all the talk of urgency in government press releases, this crisis is presented in oddly sanitized, depersonalized and distant-seeming language. Obama's "urgent" directive to relevant agencies calls on them to respond to "the influx of unaccompanied alien children (UAC)," thus reducing terrible suffering to a set of initials.

In fact, along the high fences and walls built around the rich nations of the world, the poor and dispossessed, the terrified and the suffering, the ambitious and the hopeful are gathering in scenes that look like they're straight out of hell.

Maybe you've seen the stunning photographs of immigrants and refugees trying to storm the borders of Spain at the enclave of Melilla, or the tens of thousands awaiting deportation from American detention centers. Or, maybe, you read the stories about the 12-year-old Ecuadoran girl who committed suicide in Mexico when she could not reach her parents in New York.

In the midst of this massive tragedy, the most human and humane voices are coming from the Catholic Church: from Pope Francis himself, and from Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, who has spent his life working with immigrants, both those with papers and those without.

When I first met O'Malley in the late 1970s he was running the Spanish Catholic Center in one of the poorer corners of Washington, D.C., helping undocumented workers find housing, jobs, and a future in the United States. He wore the hooded brown habit and sandals of a Franciscan Capuchin friar. "Padre Sean," they called him.

Today he still wears the habit much of the time, but his title is "Eminence," and when required he dons the cardinal's miter. At the last conclave to select a new pope, the "Vaticanista" press corps touted him as one of the leading candidates. And the man who finally was chosen, Pope Francis, has made O'Malley one of his most high-profile advisors on everything from organizational reform to the scandal of children sexually abused by priests.

But there is no subject that brings the pope and Padre Sean together more closely than immigration.

The first pastoral trip that Francis took outside of Rome as pontiff, in July last year, was to the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa, where so many refugees and immigrants have first made landfall on European soil, and where so many have died trying.

“In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference,” said the pope as he stood in a playing field that served as a makeshift detention center.

“We have become used to the suffering of others: ‘It doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t concern me; it’s none of my business!’ ... The globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!”

In April of this year, O’Malley went to Nogales, Arizona, on the border with Mexico, and with other bishops distributed communion through the slats in the tall fence that separates the countries. He took a lot of flak for it. Right-wing Catholic pundit George Weigel criticized him for holding a “politicized” mass.

But other Catholic commentators leaped to O’Malley’s defense. “This place that is the border is precisely where our bishops should be because it is where Jesus would be,” wrote Michael Sean Winters in the National Catholic Reporter.

When O’Malley met with Pope Francis in Rome shortly afterward, the pontiff commented on the photographs that had come out of Arizona. “That’s a powerful picture,” he said to O’Malley.

Indeed. It’s not just the spiritual message, it’s the way of delivering it that is so striking in Francis’s church. “He’s a man who speaks in gestures,” O’Malley told me last week over lunch in New York City.

When I walked into the restaurant I was curious, of course, to see if O’Malley had changed much over the decades, and saw instantly that, apart from the whiteness of his hair and beard (he will turn 70 later this month), and the fact he was wearing a conventional priest’s collar that day, he seemed exactly the same.

We talked about the refugees and priests of Latin America during its wars, including El Salvador’s martyred Archbishop Romero, shot with a bullet through the heart while performing mass at a hospice in 1980. But mainly we talked about rationalizing immigration policy as a matter of common sense, and common decency, not partisan politics.

RELATED: Immigrants Rush the Spanish Border (PHOTOS)

*Santi Palacios/AP*

The fear and hatred of foreigners is nothing new in the United States, nation of immigrants though it is. O'Malley said he'd been reading up on the Know-Nothings of the 19th century who wanted to limit severely the immigration of Catholics, require them to wait 21 years for naturalization, and allow only Protestants to teach in public schools.

There is a reason there are few stained-glass windows in the Philadelphia cathedral, he said: "Because they knew they would be broken with bricks." (Indeed, the building was designed during Know-Nothing violence in the 1840s with no windows at all at street level).

In the 20th century that same sort of xenophobia was turned against immigrants from Latin America and Asia, O'Malley said, with the added factor of racism.

Bigotry, as religious scholar Reza Aslan points out, is not the result of ignorance so much as it is of fear. Yet most of the fears directed at immigrants are unfounded. There is ample proof, for instance, that first-generation immigrants do not increase crime, they help to reduce it.

"Obviously," said O'Malley, the fear is "not rational, and I think we are dealing with it in an irrational way." In his opinion, the "path to citizenship" for immigrants, which is anathema to many conservatives, is absolutely essential. "If anything, the United States should capitalize on people's desire to become part of this country," he said. "They become great contributors."

But if their children grow up seeing their parents treated as, well, as "aliens," they will be full of resentment.

What used to be called "the Protestant work ethic" is now better understood as

an immigrant ethic, and it is not just about work. O'Malley sees it as “about the family and the common good and the values that have been eroded by our extreme individualism in this country.”

“The reason we have 11 million undocumented workers here is because we need them,” said O'Malley.

The cardinal clearly is frustrated with Washington, where sensible immigration bills go to die. But in the power of gestures, he sees some hope. The mass at the border is just one of many.

“I don't think it will make any difference to the politicians,” said O'Malley, “but to the 11 million undocumented immigrants, we need to let them know we care, and are doing something to get this fixed.”

And, so, the fight against global indifference goes on. And the children keep coming.



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Bill O'Reilly, Muslim-Hunter

Bowe Bergdahl's father practices Islam because...he has a beard and speaks a foreign language. Yes, Fox News's has some real super sleuths.

Bill O'Reilly isn't just an awe-inspiring successful television host, he's also "The Muslim Hunter." His Islamadar is so strong he can instantly tell if a person is a Muslim.

We saw O'Reilly's superhuman Muslim-hunting powers on display Wednesday night as he made the case for why Robert Bergdahl, the father of the POW released by the Taliban, was likely a Muslim. Sure, Bergdahl can claim all he wants that he's a devout Presbyterian, but Bill won't be taken in by that spin.

Instead, O'Reilly, in his typically insightful style that has made him the darling of angry, old white people across the country, stated: "The reason I said that Robert Bergdahl looks like a Muslim is because he looks like a Muslim." Bingo! Journalism at its best!

Bill then graciously shared with us a glimpse into his Muslim identifying genius. He listed three O'Reilly factors that prove his theory about Bergdahl: "A) He absolutely looked like a Muslim. B) He talked in Pashto, the language of the Taliban. And C) He thanked Allah."

Being a more mortal who lacks O'Reilly's keen Muslim hunting skills, I would've never realized that Bergdahl looked like a Muslim as he stood next to

President Obama earlier this week at the White House. Bergdahl was dressed in a white dress shirt with a blue tie and sporting plain pocket khaki pants. Could this mean that every assistant manager at The Gap is a crypto-Muslim?

But then I saw what O'Reilly meant: Bergdahl has a beard! Yes, of course, how could I miss that?! Bergdahl hadn't grown a beard like he told reporters in 2012 as a way to better understand the world his son was being held captive. Nope, he did it because he's a Muslim. Apparently, the hipsters I see in Brooklyn are not trying to be cool, they are actually Muslims. And the *Duck Dynasty* dudes must be really, really devout Muslims.

O'Reilly, of course, nailed factor #2: Pashto is the "language of the Taliban." Some would argue that Pashto is simply the language spoken by the 50 million plus Pashtuns who live in primarily in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Or that Bergdahl learned Pashto so he could make a direct plea to his son's captors via YouTube videos to save his life.

Just
yesterday I
claimed a
local deli, a
small poodle
and a Bed,
Bath and
Beyond.

And lastly, O'Reilly noted that Bergdahl thanked "Allah." To be honest, that was a gimme. Everyone knows that if you thank "Allah," you're clearly a Muslim, including the thousands of Arab Christians who use the word Allah for God every day. It moments like these that make me realize that O'Reilly is very special.

But O'Reilly is not alone at Fox News in possessing super powers in understanding Muslims. There's also Sean Hannity and Fox News contributor Allen West. Fox News is like the X-Men when it comes to Islam.

West, the former one term Republican Congressman, thankfully exposed Bergdahl's nefarious Muslim plot which most of us would have missed. You see, while Bergdahl was standing next to Obama at the White House, he stated in Arabic: "In the name of God, most gracious, most compassionate." So what, you ask? Don't you get it?! As West noted, by saying those words, Bergdahl has claimed the White House for Islam!

Damn, that West is good. I have to admit being a Muslim myself, although I don't sport a beard, West has figured out our greatest power. By simply saying those nine simple words we can magically claim anything for Islam, presto-chango. I do it all the time. Just yesterday I claimed a local deli, a small poodle and a Bed, Bath and Beyond. Plus we can claim people. In fact, boom, I just claimed Allen West for Islam—look forward to seeing him at the meetings.

Not to be out done, last night on Fox News, Sean Hannity showed off his Muslim explaining powers by claiming that these nine magic words are actually a, “war cry for Allah.” And then something horrible happened: one of Hannity’s guests said those words out loud and inadvertently claimed Fox News for Islam. Awkward.

The reality is that the phrase that has caused West’s and Hannity’s Islamadar to start flashing, is simply a blessing from the Koran. It’s similar to the Jewish blessing that begins “Baruch atah Adonai” that praises God or the opening lines of the Christian “Our Father.”

BOWE BERGDAHL



BUM DEAL
**U.S. PAYS HIGH
PRICE FOR LAST
AFGHAN P.O.W.**



OPEN DOOR
**HOW MANY
MORE TALIBAN
WILL OBAMA
FREE?**



UNFAIR TRADE
**TALIBAN AR
WINNERS IN
BERGDAHL :**

Now, what super Muslim sleuths Hannity and West must know, but for their own superhero reasons didn’t want to reveal, is that this Muslim blessing was likely first said in the White House in 1805 when Thomas Jefferson held the first Iftar, the meal that breaks the daily fast during Ramadan. And Iftar dinners have been an annual traditon at the White House starting with Bill Clinton and continuing every year in both George W. Bush and Obama’s administrations. That means the White House long been claimed for Islam!

Despite that, we should be thankful we have people protecting us like O’Reilly, West and Hannity. Without these Muslim-hunters, we would be left unable to identify Muslims amongst us or their magical powers.



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