

## **Privately Speaking**

by Shukri Abu Baker

Warning: This essay contains offensive images. Reader's cringing is advised.

I'm aggravated. My privacy is constantly being violated. I don't mean the strip searches where I face a male officer and follow his orders, undressing myself one clothing article at a time until all skin and coverings have divorced. It's a moment of truth. Nothing to hide. We're all grown men. No time for reflexive embarrassment. There is plenty of time, however, for the dazzled monkey dancing act.

- Raise your hands. (Thank God no Amazon jungle in my armpits)
- Open your mouth. Say ahh. (I have a big mouth; I'd rather say nothing)
- Show me your ears. (Say what?)
- Lift your sack. (What? Sack of what? Are you NUTS?)
- Turn around. (My behind is your frontal view, now?)
- Bend over. (Now I'm getting a little nervous)
- Spread your cheeks. (What the \$#@\*&%??)
- Lift your left foot. (Flamingo style?)
- Lift your right foot. (But first, did I lift my left foot right?)
- Bend over. Cough. Cough harder. (What are you hoping might drop?)

If you have caught the nastiness in this picture, please don't let it get under your skin. Just cringe once or twice, then shake it off your psyche.

Neither do I mean the phone monitoring in place. Actually, listening to inmate calls enables staff to intercept all sorts of illicit activities such as the introduction of drugs and cellphones into the prison complex. Some inmates do take the risk and get their hands on such items, especially during in-person visitations. They use what body cavities they may have at their disposal (I can only think of one) to smuggle the stuff in. Then it is capitalism at work: big money. Their mostly female visitors walk into the visitation room with the "goodies" on (or in) their bodies. But as to the actual mechanism of things, it is up to a gynecologist, not me, to walk us through.

Though I'm not into contraband of any sort, like everyone else I'm being monitored, and I don't mind it in the least. I believe that, especially in my case, the government has the right and the duty to learn more about me and my family: who (or what) we really are; what makes us laugh, cry, sweat, swear, sing, scream; who we root for—the little Palestinian boys or the bullets that pronounce them dead, etc. All such a wealth of personal data that may be of paramount importance to our country's mutual cooperation with its primary ally in the Middle East. And, as patriots, what is good for our country is good for me and my family. This reminds

me of what a wise poet (I) once said: "Ask not what your country has done to you (at the behest of another country); ask what you have done to yourself (tried to supersize my humanity)."

Not the strip searches, nor the phone snooping. It is my poor self that is constantly violating my own privacy—and I'm ticked off by it. My problem is that I just ask myself too many questions and keep answering them, so much so that I'm no longer able to keep anything from myself (it's like a deep inner self strip search) and I don't know when or how to stop. I want to stop asking myself questions like why I always wake up on the wrong side of the bed. But I know well that so long as I'm in prison, it will always be the wrong place, the wrong bed, the wrong time, the wrong everything. Besides, the other side of my bunk is a solid wall.

What am I supposed to do about it? Ask the Israeli military to come over and demolish it? They only do Palestinian homes. Good and busy at it, too. And I must stop asking myself crazy things, such as why I don't feel as bad anymore when I see a body (dead or dying) being carried away in front of my eyes. In this stabbing-centric underworld, it is improper to exhibit any true human emotions; thus like everyone else, I must look steel-tough (gangster-like). BTW, what do you look like? And on what side of your bed do you intend to wake up for the next 65 years?

I bet you even the honorable judge who gave me that sentence doesn't know the answer, either.

And I must stop asking why, every time I hear my wife whimper in pain, I lose my keens. I feel less like a loving husband and more like a stranger forced into oblivion. Is that fair? What are you umming and uhing about?

Is it fair? I ask.

And I must stop asking myself whether I have forgiven my tormentors. Have they asked for forgiveness? And after being chopped up to pieces, am I supposed to look for some working fingers on me and wipe clean my butcher's ax? Relax. Relax. I'm not grinding an ax. I'm not another Arab angry at the civilized world, only at myself, because I ask too many questions and give too many answers. I can't stop being inquisitive. I can't stop being imprisoned. I can't stop being vulnerable. I can't help being myself (but please, don't feel sorry for me or for yourself).

Now can I please have a private moment to myself? I feel I want to bury my head in my arms and cry, or laugh, or just blow my nose, whichever may come

first. But why am I feeling this way? What happened? Am I being emotionally unbalanced, biased, disturbed? Anyone? Any questions? Any answers?

03-06-2023