Enemies and Friends: 
A Consideration of the Burnham Kidnapping

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Abstract
The relationships between the political and the spiritual, hostage-taker and victim, friends and enemies, the US and the Philippines are shaped and contested in the light of journalistic accounts of the Burnhams’ hostage crisis in 2001, and in particular Gracia Burnham’s reconstruction of it in her memoir. The following four distinct but related contexts are used as lens to explore the binarisms: 1) the psychosocial dynamics and literary traditions of captivity; 2) what used to be billed the “special” but has more recently and perhaps more accurately been called the “entangled” relationship between the United States and the Philippines; 3) the geopolitics of the “War (of and on) Terror” that broke out with full force during the Burnhams’ hostage days, and/or of the longer-term “clash of civilizations,” as it is sometimes called, between militant Islam and the globalizing Judeo-Christian West; and 4) the historic resurgence, in many areas of the world, of religion in personal and public life.

Keywords
Abu Sayyaf, In the Presence of My Enemies, religion, terrorism, US-Philippines relations

About the Author
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Many people in the United States and the Philippines remember it still. True, for most the episode is little more than a small bubble in the backwash of yesterday’s-turning-yesteryear’s media coverage. But with a little prompting it will rise with an audible pop to the surface of recognition. The names of the kidnapped couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham, are not likely to do the trick. Nor will the name of the group that abducted them, the Abu Sayyaf, party to so many high-profile cases in recent years and especially at the beginning of the current decade when this particular drama played out. One helpful cue might be the Burnhams’ occupation, missionaries; another might be the sheer length of their ordeal, over a year and many months after the release of all the other hostages but one. Then there is the historical event, 9-11, that erupted in the middle of their captivity and hovered in the global air over the remainder of it. For others the historical button to push might be the “Balikatan” exercises which brought US troops back to Philippine soil for the
first time since the bases’ closure in the early 1990s, in part to help with the rescue of the Burnhams; or perhaps it will be the controversies generated over the role of the Philippine military in the affair. Bookish types and pop culture watchers may have marked the 2003 publication of Gracia Burnham’s memoir, *In the Presence of My Enemies*, serialized in *Good Housekeeping*, launched with an author interview on *Dateline NBC* with Katie Couric, and climbing onto the *New York Times* bestseller list. The surest key to unlocking memory, though, and one which usually doesn’t need to be supplied but springs out from some recess in the interlocutor’s own awareness, is the narrative bottom line of the affair: “Oh, was that where, after all that time, the one survived but the other was killed when they tried to rescue them?” Aristotle defines tragedy as a sequence of events the bare recitation of which is enough to produce the emotions of pity and fear, and it surely seems that the tragic resonance of the Burnhams’ fate produces the deepest chime of recognition for their story. Finally, there is one more feature of this story that tends to get preserved as well, usually as an afterthought and perhaps with more national selectivity, although it has come up on both sides of the Pacific where I’ve lately been holding the kinds of conversations alluded to here: “Wasn’t a Filipino hostage also killed?”

Although it was only one in a series of similarly sensational events in recent years, the Burnham kidnapping is the one that seems destined to leave the boldest imprint on public memory in the United States and the Philippines. What’s more, behind the headlines, the special reports, and the controversies, within the classically tragic outlines of the event, and beneath the stark moral simplicity of the title of Gracia Burnham’s memoir, lies the record of an unexpectedly complex human experience. It is an experience that illuminates deeply if uncertainly relations between hostages and captors, Americans and Filipinos, terror and anti-terror, individual interest and political imperative, believers and their God, believers of different faiths, and, through all of these, the wavering distinction between “enemies” and friends. It is also an experience that raises profound questions about the possibilities and limits of change, within existing structures power, loyalty, and belief. These questions in turn bear on the ultimate significance of the Burnham kidnapping: whether it will weigh on the scale of mistrust and conflict that gave rise to it, or whether it will lift up new possibilities of understanding and behaving that may help to avert tragedies like theirs in the future.

In what follows, I seek to analyze the Burnhams’ experience, and in particular Gracia Burnham’s reconstruction of it in her memoir, within four distinct but related contexts: 1) the psychosocial dynamics and literary traditions of captivity; 2) what used to be billed the “special” but has more recently and perhaps more accurately been called the
“entangled” relationship between the United States and the Philippines; 3) the geopolitics of the “War (of and on) Terror” that broke out with full force during the Burnhams’ hostage days, and/or of the longer-term “clash of civilizations,” as it is sometimes called, between militant Islam and the globalizing Judeo-Christian West1 and 4) the historic resurgence, in many areas of the world, of religion in personal and public life. An additional, concluding section will attempt to contextualize patterns appearing within the four main dimensions of the analysis, making use of theory from cultural and religious anthropology. Throughout the treatment, the thematic focus will be on the dialectic, denied by the memoir’s title but plentifully evident in its pages, between “enemies” and friends. And the effort will be made to address, in particular within the concluding section, those larger questions having to do with the possibilities and limits of change and the implications of the kidnapping experience.

Before beginning on this consideration, let me offer three things by way of preliminaries. The first is a fuller narrative of the Burnham kidnapping than the summary that appeared obliquely in the essay’s opening; this is provided outside the text.2 The second is a personal word on what might be called my “subject position” on this event. I was initially drawn to the Burnhams’ story as an American who has, as they did have, personal and career connections to the Philippines, and as an American or Westerner who feels some degree of vulnerability to the abduction and captivity scenario to which they were subjected. To be sure, Americans or Westerners or foreigners have not been the only targets of the Abu Sayyaf and other groups perpetrating kidnapping and related forms of violence in the Philippines. Still, that hasn’t kept me from learning about the Burnhams’ experience with the question “What if … that were me or my family?” very much in mind. While I like to think I’ve moved on to more sophisticated, analytical questions, there can be little doubt that my original personal and national perspective has continued to shape my understanding—to take a simple but perhaps not trivial example, in following the common practice of referring to this as the “Burnham kidnapping,” when a Filipino victim, Ediborah Yap, was with them at the end.

The third preliminary consists of some characterizations of Gracia Burnham’s memoir. Although I have gathered some additional information on the kidnapping, this text remains the primary source for what is the ultimate focus here, the subjective experience of the event. In this initial assessment I wish to identify the aspect of the memoir that suggests my (play on her) title, and that more than any other defines the complexity of her experience and gives substance to the larger questions that it raises. This point will then become the theme or thread pursued through the different “contexts” for understanding, in the main body of the essay.
In many respects, *In the Presence of My Enemies* is not an especially literary, or even effective narrative. The language is flattened by the recurrence of such middle-American stock terms as “amazing,” “cool,” “weird,” and “guys” (although this last one grows on a reader). There are no memorable descriptive passages, at least of the natural landscape. The spectacular scenery and the formidably difficult terrain of the southern Philippines are hidden behind the all-purpose label, “jungle” (sometimes “mountains”). Deft character sketches are likewise not Ms. Burnham’s forte, and her analysis of situations at times lacks a sense of proportion. Take one example of this last. In response to a question asked frequently by Americans after her return, as to whether the Abu Sayyaf were ever cruel to her personally, Gracia relates, in an indignant tone, the story of a night when she developed LBM and her captors turned a deaf ear to her pleas to be unchained so she could do her business in the woods. For a woman who was neither tortured nor beaten nor given unwanted sexual attention during more than a year in captivity, it is difficult to see how being left to dirty herself can qualify as cruelty. She does, however, have a point when she prefices this account with the observation, “Of course, the whole kidnapping was cruel” (130).

In the book’s favor, both from a literary standpoint and as a source, is its command of concrete detail. This is especially remarkable in that Ms. Burnham did not come by any scrap of paper on which to make notes or keep a rough journal until December, 2001, halfway into the captivity. It also attests that she was vividly reliving the experience as she wrote (even with the benefit of a professional co-author) her memoir. What’s more, if her descriptions of the external environment fail to register, her descriptions of the inner landscape of emotion, especially as they are riveted to these discrete details, are often hard to forget. We learn how much it hurts to sleep on the ground, or chained to a tree, night after night, how vexatious to the spirit as well as the body it can be to ordered abruptly from a long-sought resting place to go “mobiling” (as the Abu Sayyaf called it) through the jungle, especially when one’s pack includes live mortar rounds. We feel how profoundly disorienting it is to be stripped of life’s accustomed appurtenances, not only bed, eyeglasses, toilet paper, toothbrush, hot water (and sometimes water itself), but also, in the Burnhams’ case, their Bible and their to-do lists and their career identities. We know what it means when a person, having endured through these adversities, is suddenly set upon by a swarm of bees and gives it all up (“I can’t go on!”), or when reviewing life choices, affirms them all but the choice to be born. We sense how deeply demoralizing it is for a person raised as a strict Christian to give way to this kind of despair, or to blaze with hate at the captors, or to steal from the common stock of rice to palliate a gnawing hunger.
Furthermore, the book has the merit of honesty, I believe. At least if we reverse George Orwell's dictum that “Any many who gives a good account of himself … is probably a liar,” then the author of this memoir is an honest woman, for she comes across in it as no paragon of endurance or virtue. Her husband Martin, whose story she says she wants principally to tell here, does embody these qualities, but not Gracia, who is the bearer of all the foibles and failings that have been mentioned so far, and a good many others as well. When admonished by an Abu Sayyaf leader to show a little emotion, for effect, in an upcoming interview for television, she shoots back, “How many days recently have I not cried” (211)? Later, after gaining her freedom, she responds to her daughter’s asking whether she’s going to have a “nervous breakdown” with the assurance, “I had [all] my breakdowns in the jungle” (296). How many there were is never quite said, but Gracia counts seventeen firefights between the AFP and Abu Sayyaf in which she and Martin were involved, and an alert reader can come up with at least that many instances in which the author, by her own account, totally loses it.

At the same time, it may be that Ms. Burnham leaves her ingenuousness behind in the jungle along with her breakdowns. From the moment in the memoir that she is lifted out of the jungle and begins speaking to military officers, presidents, and the press, the former hostage adopts a more politic tone, saying what she regards to be “nice” (301), i.e., what seems to be expected by the powers protecting her. The title of the book, actually, may be the premier case of this revisionism. In the Presence of My Enemies, a phrase taken from the famous Psalm 23 (“Yea, though I walk through the valley of death”), flashes a vivid signal of Old-Testament-style righteousness and certitude. But the actual memoir is not so Old Testament in its sensibilities, and clearly not so secure in its moral judgments, as this. If there are elements of an us-versus-them worldview in it, there are also bewildering complexities of experience that deconstruct the stark opposition implied in the title between “enemies” and “friends.” In fact, the instability of this distinction, the way enemies and friends get defined and redefined over the course of a hostage experience in which unexpected intimacies and distances are established between them and the parties with whom they have to deal, and in which powerful, shifting forces come to bear on their fate, constitutes a recurrent theme in the body of the memoir. It also constitutes the recurrent point of focus in the following exploration of four contexts of the Burnham kidnapping: captivity, Philippine-American relations, global political and cultural conflict, and religion.

The literature on kidnapping, in particular the hostage experience, is growing exponentially with the nature of conflict in the contemporary world. To take the
contemporary scholar’s shortcut and key these terms into an Amazon.com search is to be inundated with titles of narrative accounts—*A True Hostage Story of Terror, Torture, and Ultimate Survival* (Joseph)—of studies of the psychological and political aspects of the phenomenon—*Hostage! Kidnapping and Terrorism in Our Time* (Taylor)—and even of self-help manuals—*How to Avoid, Prepare For, and Survive Being Taken Hostage: A Guide for Executives and Travellers*. To zoom in on the specific setting and time period of interest to this treatment, Gracia Burnham’s is one of three accounts of captivity at the hands of the Abu Sayyaf published in a three-year span; during that time, also, another of the group’s former hostages became well-known as an inspirational speaker in her country.3

Given all this material near to hand, it may occasion some surprise that this section reaches to a precedent more than three hundred years and thousands of miles distant in order to establish the captivity context of Burnham’s memoir. Yet Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God … Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, a frontier settler’s account of abduction by native peoples in colonial New England, published in 1682, presages with an almost eerie exactness many of the specific features of the more recent work. It also helps to situate Burnham’s text within an American literary and cultural context, the “captivity narrative” (headed by Rowlandson’s example), the earliest-emergent and longest-extant genre of New World writing.4

The parallels between Burnham’s and Rowlandson’s narratives include an unfamiliar wilderness setting for the captivity; frequent and arduous movements (including carrying unwonted loads) within this setting; flight from a pursuing force with which the captive is identified; pointed criticism of the tactics of the “friendly” force; severe physical privation and hunger, together with a progressive adaptation to the local and even “natural” diet (which in the Burnhams’ case extended to boiled carabao hide, eels, fish eaten raw from streams, and fresh-plucked jungle vegetation); loss of a loved one (for Gracia, her husband, for Mary, an eight-year-old child shot in the initial attack who later died in her arms); and lingering psychological effects from the ordeal (Rowlandson is one of the earliest recorded cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, Burnham one of the more recent). Not least of the points of connection across time is the role of religion in the two accounts. Both women quote from the Bible frequently, favoring the Book of Job as a source of analogies to their situations. And as we shall see, Burnham too effectively gives God the leading role in her narrative that is clearly implied in Rowlandson’s title.

But the parallel most relevant to this exploration is one involving a confusion between “enemies” and “friends.” For Rowlandson, at the outset of her experience (and narrative), there could be no doubt that her Indian captors represented a hated, feared,
and dangerous other: a “merciless Heathen” (69), spiritual as well as military enemy. However, over the course of months she received many individual acts of kindness from these people, “common mercies” (101), as she refers to them at one point. She was given food (including at one point a “Pancake” especially prepared to her taste), a comfortable place to sleep, condolences on the death of her child, even a Bible at one point. She also came to form personal relationships with a number of the tribespeople, putting her talents as seamstress at their disposal, inviting them to dinner, conversing with them familiarly. At the same time, she continued to be subjected to harsh and even malicious treatment: blows, threats of killing, being forced out into the cold, ashes from a fire flung into eyes, verbal and psychological abuse. “Sometimes I met with favour,” she writes, the shaking of her head almost visible on the page, “and sometimes with nothing but frowns” (85).

In the Presence of My Enemies, its black-and-white title notwithstanding, manifests a similar pattern. For Burnham, at the outset, the captors are “bad guys” and bad news. When she and Martin realize that it is the “dreaded Abu Sayyaf” conducting the kidnapping at Dos Palmas, their hearts sink; they immediately apprehend both a physical and a spiritual enmity. And yet, as with Rowlandson, time, proximity, dependence on the kidnappers for the necessities of their existence, and the human qualities of these men and the community behind them produce a more realistic but less consistent picture. The Burnhams cannot but admire the Abu Sayyaf’s endurance and courage, in alternately outrunning and facing up to the superior AFP pursuing forces. What’s more, the captives become the beneficiaries of numerous kindnesses: special foods (in one case a pancake made for Gracia, whose stomach has rebelled against rice, that seems almost a duplicate of one given by the Indians to Mary Rowlandson), assistance in “mobiling” at night (when both their defective visions slow them down), eventually a hammock for sleeping, and time for Gracia to talk, woman-to-woman, with a visiting TV reporter. As one Filipino reviewer of the memoir commented, citing these instances of generosity, Ms. Burnham has “even given the Abu Sayyaf a heart, for all we care” (Zamora). Yet the opposite behavior is plentifully evident, as well. It begins with the beheadings of four hostages and credible threats to do the same to Martin and Gracia. It extends to excessive chaining and handcuffing aimed to prevent their escape, confiscation of eyeglasses sent to Martin to remedy his seriously blurred sight, and forceful reminders that as Christians the couple has no protection of any kind under the Abu Sayyaf’s interpretation of Islamic law. The result of this mixed bag of treatment is predictable: confusion. “Of all the random things,” Gracia comments on a gift of Green Cross rubbing alcohol from one of the group’s leaders, Solaiman (132). Later, face-to-face with that leader, and faced with the prospect of his
departure, she acknowledges the complexity of the relationship: “You are an enemy, but at least you have been an enemy we could connect with ... Now you’re leaving, and we’re going to have nobody” (185).

Nevertheless, it’s “enemy” and that other label, “bad guy” (a term resurrected into American public discourse, it seems, from a pre-Vietnam moral universe of Westerns and cops and robbers) that Gracia sticks with in the end. For one thing, she proves able to keep the “random” acts of kindness at a psychological distance by the theological maneuver of chalking them up to God’s rather than human goodness. For example, the appearance of that pancake is attributed directly to divine intervention—“Thank you, Lord. You knew I truly couldn’t handle any more rice, and you sent me a pancake!” (158)—while a care package received from the Burnhams’ own missionary organization calls forth a tribute to human generosity. This happens to be a maneuver also used by Rowlandson vis-à-vis the Indians. In any case, Burnham has apparently little difficulty, especially after being released from captivity, reasserting her original judgment of the Abu Sayyaf. “We never forgot who the bad guys were and who the good guys were” (285), she says to the lieutenant in charge of the rescue force. She repeats the same assessment in her televised interview with President Arroyo, and embellishes it the next day in a statement to the press, charging that the hostages had been “repeatedly lied to by the Abu Sayyaf” (although deceit does not appear in the earlier portions of the memoir a major concern), who are “not men of honor ... and [who should be] treated as common criminals” (301, 304). So, in spite of the mixed experience of the captivity itself, there was to be no Stockholm Syndrome for Gracia (referring to the tendency observed in certain cases for hostages to form loyalties to captors extending beyond the time of their release). The eventual title of her book was already falling into place.

Equally if not more critical to an understanding of the Burnham kidnapping is its Philippine-American context. This is of course obvious in one sense. The Burnhams were Americans who, even though they had lived for many years in the Philippines, carried with them much cultural baggage from their homeland (apparently including, like a generic imprint, the conventions of the captivity narrative). At the same time, the hostage drama was largely a Philippine event, played out on Philippine soil and seas. Indeed, the vast majority of hostages were Filipino; this only became the “Burnham kidnapping” as the others were ransomed out, leaving only Martin and Gracia (and eventually Ediborah Yap, who was taken after the hostage group had been transferred to Basilan). What’s more, it took place against an immediate background of other similar incidents in the same general setting, and against a longer background of Mindanao and specifically Basilan politics and
unrest. Marites Vitug and Glenda Gloria, in their book *Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, document scores of kidnapping incidents in Basilan alone, preceding the flurry after the turn of the century, incidents whose targets included Catholic priests, Chinese business people, and even some Muslims (291-3).

Yet in a deeper sense, as well, this event proved ineluctably a part of what historian Sharon Delmendo has recently called the “entangled” relationship between the two countries. The more than century-long history of what Delmendo characterizes as the mutually determinative interaction of American and Filipino governments, militaries, peoples, and cultures framed the perceptions and motivations of actors at every level of the Burnham situation from beginning to end. It also shaped the dialectic of enemies and friends.

These perceptions and motivations were, on the one hand, very immediate, practical ones. For example, the Abu Sayyaf were on record about their desire to capture Americans; this may have been what led them to make an unlikely victim of Jeffrey Schilling, an African-American and a devout Muslim, married to a Filipina Muslim cousin of one of the group’s leaders (Mydans). When they discover Martin and Gracia have been swept into the net at Dos Palmas, they quickly see opportunity. “Yours will be a political ransom,” Solaiman tells them in those first hours. “We will make demands, and we will deal with you last” (13). On the other hand, the weight of practical considerations can easily shift the other way in what has always been an unbalanced power relationship. Later in the course of the event, when one of the remaining Filipino hostages (Ediborah Yap, as it happens) learns that the Burnhams have not mentioned them in an audiotape about to be released to the public, she lashes out: “Well, then, you know what’s going to happen, don’t you? You’ll be ransomed out, and we’ll be left here, and everyone will forget about us, because Filipinos don’t matter. You are the ones the world cares about” (170).

When the “entangled” relationship is mediated by culture, however, the effects tend to be more subtle. Take first the degree to which all parties to the kidnapping shared elements of culture. This is something easily taken for granted by Filipinos and Americans who are used to dealing with each other, but it is surely exceptional by world standards, and it represents a major determining factor in the conduct of the crisis and in the Burnhams’ experience of it. That they could communicate freely in English with their fellow hostages and with the leaders and some others among their captors, while it obviously did not ensure a happy outcome, eased tension, uncertainty, and isolation considerably over the course of their captivity. The communication extended from language per se to the idiom of popular culture: games, jokes, and especially music. At
one point early in the ordeal, out at sea in transit to an unknown destination, the hostages join in a medley of Beatles’ songs, with even the Abu Sayyaf joining in a little, “although such music was technically forbidden by their faith.” When the group comes to John Lennon’s “Imagine” and the line “Imagine all the people, living life in peace,” tears stream down Gracia Burnham’s face for the first time since the abduction. “As we lay there in that moment,” she writes, “a bond began to form, connecting us with one another, even our captors” (21). Finally, religious traditions form a bridge, primarily of course with the Christian Filipinos with whom the Burnhams can share Biblical references and hymns. And even though faith operates chiefly as a barrier between them and the captors, the couple is surprised to learn that, owing to some prior spillover in religious training, a few among the Abu Sayyaf can accompany them in their favorite sacred music.

Perceived differences in culture play a salient role, as well. Martin and Gracia find themselves amused, in otherwise dire circumstances, when in the middle of a firefight with AFP troops a brawny Abu Sayyaf fighter displays classic Filipino politeness, murmuring “Excuse me … excuse me” each time he steps over hostages’ legs to move to a new firing position (89). Other perceptions carry criticism rather than appreciation. Predictably, lack of planning and efficiency are sore points. Gracia comes down hard even on the Abu Sayyaf on this score, complaining that they seem to have no plan, are “mak[ing] it up as they [go] along” (165) and conveying the ironic impression that, if she were in charge, this kidnapping would get results.

More serious still is a critique advanced of Filipino ethical values, or the want of them. This view first comes out in the open at Lamitan hospital, when the other hostages ransack patients’ rooms, taking what they need by way of clothing and personal supplies. Gracia voices disapproval of the behavior, which does nothing to deter it, then sits down to reflect on it: “Up to this point I had assumed we hostages were the ‘good guys.’ Now I had to admit … .that [the others] had suddenly become as unscrupulous as our captors” (88). She resumes the thread months later with Ediborah (in another context, where it is the Abu Sayyaf doing the misappropriating of others’ property) and receives the explanation, “If we need it, it’s not really stealing” (206). Faithful to her code of honesty within the memoir, Burnham acknowledges her own ventures into theft when personal need supervenes. But she presents these as lapses from a strict standard, while implying that for Filipinos moral laxity is a way of life.5

So, invidious distinctions begin to emerge within these perceptions, and with them the possibility that presumably “allied” Filipinos in the situation could take on the role of “bad guys,” “enemies” with respect to the Americans’ well being. It appears to work the
other way around, as well, although of course we do not get a first-hand account of the perceptions. Gracia does report a certain amount of prejudice against her simply for being “not Filipino” and a good deal of contempt on the part of fellow hostages and captors alike for lacking fundamental elements of Filipino cultural knowledge, for instance, how to build a fire, relieve oneself without benefit of a bathroom, and gracefully cadge little items and favors from others (langaw, as the practice is known locally). “I got tired,” she writes, “of being viewed as incompetent and stupid—a lower life-form” (159).

Many of the cultural perceptions that have now been touched on play into a most practical aspect of the “entangled” relationship, one that presents the friend/enemy dialectic in its most life-or-death form: the Burnhams’ position vis-à-vis the Philippine military. From the first, the AFP’s efforts in the situation seem to the couple misguided—far less likely to rescue than to do them in. The troops come in with guns blazing, from a distance. Later, the tactics escalate to artillery barrages, then to air attacks using helicopters and A-10 gunships. The Americans are uncomprehending, and terrified for their lives. In a live radio interview, Martin asks the AFP to “please stop” the rescue attempts. “[You] cannot rescue [us] with … artillery … and [you] cannot rescue [us] with an air strike. We will only be killed, and our children will only be orphans” (199-200).

The plea has little effect, and the couple is left to wonder about the reasons for such a reckless approach. Their speculations gravitate toward the “Filipino inefficiency” hypothesis, especially since the reliance on long-range firepower is matched by an apparent inability or unwillingness to conduct follow-up attacks or mount operations at night or in inclement weather. They also entertain a version of the “no-account foreigner/lowest life-form” view, when they reason that the government in Manila is using the army to “squash” the Abu Sayyaf. “The fact that they held innocent bystanders as hostages was a complicating factor…. But the battle had to go on” (108).6

One other line of inquiry that Martin and Gracia pursue leads into the area of ethical values, the perception that in a Philippine context self-interest can easily take precedence over principle. At one point Solaiman tells them that the Abu Sayyaf orders its weapons and ammunition from the army, through back channels. “We pay a lot more than it should cost,” the narrative quotes him as saying, “so somebody is making a lot of money. But at least we get what we need” (160). Along the same lines, television reporter Arlyn de la Cruz warns Gracia that any consideration of a negotiated ransom for their release will be complicated by the need for Philippine generals and government officials to get their cut. Still later, the group’s food supply improves notably, and the Abu Sayyaf report this is because they have entered into active negotiations with the local military commander,
who is demanding 50% of a possible ransom payment. But the two parties cannot agree, and the army attacks resume. In short, by this testimony from the midst of the captivity experience, it appears that the Philippine military (or elements within it) either a) illustrates the proposition that with “friendly” forces like these, the Burnhams didn’t need enemies, or b) had entered into some sort of complicity with the designated “bad guys” in the affair, the Abu Sayyaf. Once again, the lines become as blurred as Martin Burnham’s uncorrected vision.

Once again, too, upon emerging from the captivity, Gracia’s clarity returns to her. Her statement to the Ranger lieutenant, “We never forgot who the bad guys were and who the good guys were,” must have required some effort to make, given the fear and suspicion of the preceding months, and the fact that the dreaded outcome of the rescue strategy had in good part occurred. But she follows up, eliminating ambiguity if not offering praise: “I don’t think of you as the bad guys” (285). The next day, in Manila, a mentally rehearsed speech to President Arroyo, letting the leader of the country know that “her military was on the take,” dies in her throat when the TV cameras are rolling (301). The following day’s press statement comes close to promoting the AFP to full “good guy” status, “especially thanking the military men … who risked and even gave their lives to rescue us” (304). And a statement issued in 2003, after the publication of the memoir containing the various allegations concerning military conduct had re-stirred a hornet’s nest in the Philippine press and politics, completed the rehabilitation: “I was only reporting what I was told [about military collusion] by the Abu Sayyaf … The soldiers were doing their best to get us out of there. Their agenda was to get us out of there safely” (Olsen, “Gracia Burnham Book”). Thus an episode that threatened to produce another snarl or two in an already “entangled” bi-national relationship ends, if Ms. Burnham’s after-action reports are to be believed over her dispatches from the lived experience of the event, with something like that Abu Sayyaf fighter’s exaggerated politeness—except of course toward him and his fellow “common criminals.”

From a binational we move to an international context, the seemingly global confrontation between militant, fundamentalist Islam and what is often perceived by the fundamentalists to be a secular (although nominally Judeo-Christian), modernizing West. Gracia Burnham shows herself to have been aware of this context when she writes, shortly after the identity of their abductors has become clear, as they shout “Allah Akbar!” (Allah is supreme), “I didn’t know a lot about the Abu Sayyaf, other than that they were terrorists.” “Terrorists” from then on becomes a synonym of “bad guys” and “enemies,” to be used whenever she wants a term less dispassionate than “captors.” Now this characterization
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raises a lot of questions, as to whether the Abu Sayyaf ought really to be considered an agent of international jihad (as opposed to a local group with roots in traditional Muslim separatism in the Southern Philippines, and roots as well in local traditions of banditry—which is the view of Under the Crescent Moon authors Vitug and Gloria), and whether its brand of violence satisfies the definition of “religious terrorism” put forward by Jessica Stern in her recent book, Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill. It is interesting to note in this regard that the group’s stated intention to seek a “political” ransom for the Burnhams never materialized; a monetary figure of $1M emerged early on and remained on the table to the end. But the questions became moot in the actual event, because the operative perception of the most powerful players in the situation, the Philippine and American governments, construed the group as part and parcel of the Terror War.

This held particularly true, of course, after September 11, 2001, which as Gracia learns from reporter Arlyn de la Cruz, has changed the nature of the landscape in which the kidnapping drama is being played out and brought the United States much more forcefully into the picture. These developments, the Filipina journalist warns, “will really hurt [your] chances,” and at least in the short-term she is proven right. The magnification of the US role also has a major impact on the Burnhams’ calculations of friendship and hostility in the situation.

For one thing, the Bush Administration’s “no negotiation” policy in hostage situations, reinforced by the mood in Washington and in the country post 9-11, steeled the resolve of Manila to stick by its own stated similar policy and heightened tension in the affair, inevitably putting a greater premium on a military solution. Then, too, the arrival of the American “advisers” in the South, in addition to opening a new chapter in the “entangled” relationship, lent a new edge of planning and coordination, technology, and peering-over-the-shoulder pressure, to the AFP’s pursuit of the Abu Sayyaf and their hostages. The Burnhams’ reaction to these developments was one of fresh alarm. They had already, before September 11, willingly signed on to an Abu Sayyaf petition for ransom money to the Muammar Qadhafi Foundation in Libya, the agency that had intervened on behalf of the Sipadan hostages the year before. This in itself represented another reversal on the enemy/friend spectrum, a rogue state and ostensible national antagonist turned potential savior from the ordeal of captivity. Nothing had come of that overture, but now, in early 2002, they renew their appeal for a ransom to be paid to the captors, and in so doing set themselves up to challenge their own government.

It is Gracia who makes this appeal, and the challenge, in a letter to her sister, who
has traveled to Zamboanga to work for the couple’s release:

> The whole situation is so difficult. *Everyone* is being stubborn … we are caught in the middle … the Abu Sayyaf will not let us go without ransom … the governments say “no ransom.” This is an endless circle, and to be honest, we do not want to be rescued, as they come in shooting at *us*. If someone can’t give somewhere, we will die. Thank you for coming here and reminding the world that we are *people* … we are being treated as only political pawns and it is very sad. (237)

It appears from this message that the US government has joined the ranks of “*everyone*” arrayed against the Burnhams’ interests, and even survival, in the situation. The category of potential or actual enemies, treating them as “pawns,” has expanded by (a big) one.

In fact, it seems that Gracia’s plea, which became public when it was read on Zamboanga City’s Radyo Agong, might have had an effect. Not long after, $330,000 is put up for the Burnhams’ release by a US philanthropist and, in accordance with a simultaneous shift in Bush administration policy, allowing case-by-case consideration of ransom in civilian hostage situations, paid to the Abu Sayyaf (Olsen, “Did Martin…?”). However, the captors, proving themselves more “stubborn” than the other parties to the situation, hold out for the remainder of the million demanded. American military advisers then apparently nix any further payments, and the drama from then on moves inexorably toward its conclusion, with the US continuing to play a quietly active role. It is FBI agents who manage to plant an electronic homing device in a backpack used by Sabaya, the Abu Sayyaf leader at that time. Following that signal, a detachment of Scout Rangers arrives at the edge of the rebel group’s camp and, in a pouring rain (a detail that may bespeak American advising pressure; Ms. Burnham cannot bring herself to believe that the AFP is launching an attack in this kind of weather) fires the shots that kill Martin and Ediborah and that wound, but also liberate, Gracia.

But if the survivor bears any suspicion or resentment of her government’s role in this Pyrrhic outcome, it quickly dissipates. When being lifted off by helicopter, she cranes her neck to see whether the pilot is American. She can’t tell, but she is impressed by the first view she has of American troops, and highly impressed by the level of planning the Embassy in Manila has put into arrangements for her stay there. Once back in the States, there is no hint of the criticism of intransigence and the reliance on military options that animated the letter to her sister in Zamboanga. Actually, that’s not quite true. In a 2003
Kansas television interview, Gracia expresses her “one regret” about choices made during the captivity. “We should have appealed directly to you guys (meaning, probably, the public, or the Christian public) to get a ransom together,” in contradiction of government policy at the time (“Gracia Burnham Talks”). At the same time, though, there is a new patriotic bravado. The American military, which wanted to launch a special operation for us … would of course have done the job far differently. They would have moved into action at, say, two in the morning instead of two in the afternoon, wearing night-vision goggles and all the rest to snatch us out safely (325).

Finally, reconciliation with America appears to include enlistment in the War on Terror. Meeting with President Bush in the Oval Office, Gracia listens with evident approval as he vows that the only way to make America safe for its children is to “fight terrorism now” (334). Later she would echo his words, in a 2004 statement made in the Philippines, where she had traveled to testify in court against a number of her Abu Sayyaf captors: “I’m not out to get these men, only to combat terrorism in the Philippines” (Philippine news story). Thus in this international context, too, with the slight exception of that unregenerate remark on a private ransom effort, all the lines that had been rubbed out in the memoir have now been re-drawn, and all enemies and friends are back in their assigned places.

This brings us to religion, arguably the heart of Gracia Burnham’s memoir and the most fundamental context for understanding her and her husband’s experience of captivity at the hands of the Abu Sayyaf. Religion figures in two critical respects in the story of the Burnhams. The first is their faith and the practice of it. The second has to do with the relation of that practice to the very different faith of their captors.

As to the Burnhams’ religious commitment, a word of background is in order; that they were “missionaries” does not sufficiently explain them. By virtue of their respective family histories, their educations, and the culture or subculture that surrounded this nexus of family and education, the Burnhams were evangelical Protestant Christians. Evangelicals, sometimes also known as Fundamentalists, have surged back into prominence in American public life over the past several decades, after a half-century’s retreat into their own institutions—congregations, Bible institutes, mission societies and the like—following the apparent triumph of the forces of religious liberalism and secularism in the Scopes Trial on the teaching of evolution in 1925 (Butler, Wacker, and Balmer 347-418). A map of the contemporary evangelical belief system might well be found in Rick Warren’s bestselling The Purpose Driven Life, with its premise that the “purpose” driving an individual believer’s life is not his or her own but God’s, and with its emphasis on
spreading the good news of Christianity, after the manner of the original “evangelists.”

Whether Martin and Gracia were in any way influenced by the new evangelicalism, or whether their spiritual formation took place more in the earlier environment of retreat and marginalization, is not certain. But the beliefs they carried with them to the Philippines were of a solidly evangelical cast, and the choice of a career with the New Tribes Missions demonstrates how earnestly they held those beliefs. NTM seeks to bring Christianity to some of the most remote peoples and areas of the world, and the organization demands a great deal of its field workers, who must not only accept these far-off postings for long stretches of time, but must themselves raise funds for all costs of their mission (New Tribes Missions). So tight was the Burnhams’ budget that Gracia almost canceled the couple’s fateful one-night reservation at the Dos Palmas resort, for fear they might not be able to absorb the expense of the room. As it happens, the two were not engaged in direct pastoral contact with tribal villagers. Rather, Martin flew aviation support for those pastoral efforts within a given region in the Philippines, and Gracia coordinated communications and logistics for the regional network. Nevertheless, the work they did and the lifestyle they and their three children led, give ample evidence of the strength of their commitment to evangelical principles and to their religious faith generally.

This commitment is severely tested by the captivity ordeal. Gracia, in particular, suffers bouts of depression and undergoes at least one pronounced crisis of her belief in a benevolent and protective God. The crisis takes a specifically evangelical form, reflecting the conviction that the Supreme Being’s purposes work directly into all earthly life. “I was really mad at God” (151), Gracia writes of that moment, and in her more recent book, To Fly Again, explains:

I blamed the terrorists; I blamed the Philippine military for their ineptness; I blamed the American government for not waving some magic wand to free us; I even blamed God because … well, he’s in control of everything, isn’t he? (43)

In other words, God becomes one more power, certainly the most important in her world, to go over to the other side, join the enemies list. With Martin’s help, however, Gracia is able to surmount this crisis. She accepts that God’s purpose, if not her own (or not one she can immediately appreciate), is being served in this situation, and she then surrenders to that larger will.

For his part, Martin, undergoes a “struggle” (268) with his faith, as well, although the cause of it seems less despairing thoughts, such as those that trouble Gracia, and more
sheer physical strain. He undergoes radical weight loss due to his exertions on the trail, and struggles with poor vision during the first part of the captivity and fickle bowels during the second. The most intense struggle takes place near the end, as the group is pursued through the unfamiliar mountains of Zamboanga. There is no meal per se for nine days. Captors and hostages alike eat raw rice and jungle foliage to survive. Yet on the last day, a few hours before the fatal rescue, with the rain pouring down, Martin rouses himself to reflect to his wife:

I really don’t know why this has happened to us. I’ve been thinking a lot lately about Psalm 100—what it says about serving the Lord with gladness. This may not seem much like serving the Lord, but that’s what we’re doing, you know? We may not leave this jungle alive, but we can leave this world serving the Lord “with gladness.” (280)

Gracia then joins him in prayer and in commitment to this vision of Christian living, in extremis. It is a moment of extraordinary triumph of the human spirit—or, as they would understand it, of extraordinary yielding of the human spirit before the grace and strength of the divine. God remains with them and they with him; the end of captivity is not required to affirm that relationship.

Yet this climax does not end matters of religion in the memoir. For the Burnhams are in contact with the practitioners of a different faith, a faith which these people have likewise come to via family, education, and culture, and which, although their interpretation of its doctrines may be extreme, they practice devoutly. It is also a faith that has recently surged to public prominence, as the Burnhams’ evangelicalism has, in context of a worldwide revival of religious fervor. At the same time, of course, this contact is a highly problematic one. Their Muslim counterparts are also their kidnappers, subjecting them to the unquestionable “cruelty” of captivity, to physical privation, mental anguish, and a good deal of capricious and malicious treatment, leavened of course by acts of “common mercy.” A huge question for them is how to comport themselves toward these captors.

Predictably, Martin takes the lead, and, just as predictably, the answer he arrives at constitutes a deep, uncompromising embrace of Christ’s literal teachings. He begins this conversation indirectly: “You know, here in the mountains I’ve seen hatred; I’ve seen bitterness; I’ve seen greed; I’ve seen covetousness; I’ve seen wrongdoing” (228). Gracia nods vigorously, thinking back to incidents in which the Abu Sayyaf have displayed these
behaviors, only to be surprised to discover that her husband is not talking about the Abu Sayyaf but himself, and by extension her. Acknowledging the sinfulness in their own disposition toward their captors, Martin then draws the rectifying lesson:

But Jesus said to love your enemies … do good to those who hate you … pray for those who despitefully use you…. He said we were to be he servants of all—and he didn’t add any exception clause like, except for terrorists, whom you have every right to hate. (229)

Once again, Gracia joins him in this commitment, and they begin to put it into practice with greater kindness to even the most ill-disposed of their captors—which has the result, in one case, of melting harsh into gentle treatment.

Later, when she is in the US reflecting on events, Gracia goes through her own thought process similar to Martin’s. She begins with a self-assessment:

When you stop and think about it, the Abu Sayyaf are not the only “bad guys,” are they? We all have pockets of darkness inside ourselves. Recognizing how much I carry inside me was one of the most difficult parts of my entire ordeal in the jungle…. I knew, for example, that I was supposed to forgive my captors, but the truth is that I often hated them. I despised them not only for snatching me away from my family and the simple comforts of a life I loved, but also for forcing me to see a side of myself I didn’t like. (328)

And when, like Martin, she finds a corrective to this flawed attitude in Christ’s commandment to replace hate with forgiveness and love, she extends the principle beyond her Abu Sayyaf captors to the larger, militant Islamic world.

My experiences in captivity have made me think long and hard about an appropriate response to the challenge of the aggressive wing of Islam. I wouldn’t presume to make any recommendations about public policy, but to my fellow Christians I feel compelled to say: We need to find ways to defuse the raging resentment and hatred that fuel “holy war” and introduce a God who does more than demand rituals—he truly loves us…. They need to know what it feels like to be forgiven…. What will impress them is the genuine love in our hearts (326-7).
These reflections would seem to signal a breakthrough. We can mark a shift, first of all, from an Old Testament approach to dealing with enemies, evoked by the memoir’s title, to the spirit of the New, defined by Jesus’ teachings. More than that, this appears to be a response to the captivity experience that goes beyond a redrawing of original lines in the sand. By identifying themselves as sinners—in effect, enemies (“bad guy[s],” in Gracia’s revealing phrase)—and by directing toward their perceived antagonists in the situation an emotion and a behavior ordinarily reserved for friends, the Burnhams would seem to be dissolving the two categories, or at least any necessary opposition between them. In addition to illustrating their own fidelity to radically literal Christian principles, this position appears to exemplify what Jessica Stern refers to as the “spiritual and universalist” potential of religious belief generally (xxvii). As such, it suggests that some new vision of reconciliation may have emerged from the violence, hatred, and tragedy of the kidnapping episode.

But before celebrating it as an outcome of the experience, it will be well to consider whether this “position” is the final one, or whether this statement of it is complete. Certainly we have observed Ms. Burnham, in other contexts, finding ways to re-embrace the distinction between enemy and friend and initial loyalties within it, lost for a time in the heat of the experience. In fact, something of the kind does appear to take place around her appeal for Christian love to be extended to Muslim extremists. I want to tread lightly here. The critique that follows is not intended dismiss the authenticity or significance of the “breakthrough,” the Burnhams’ realization of a degree of spiritual democracy existing between themselves and their captors, and their resolve to return kindness for harsh treatment. Nevertheless, a close reading of the memoir suggests that the transformative effect Gracia Burnham holds out as a possibility of Christians’ “showing their love” and “acting their love” toward Muslims includes more than “defus[ing] … resentment and hatred.” It also includes, even presumes, as a necessary first step, an additional transformative effect: the conversion of Islamic believers to Christianity. True to her missionary vocation and her evangelical colors, she quite literally hopes that Muslims will, individually and perhaps collectively, “turn to Jesus” (Bagby).

Indications of this hope crop up at intervals throughout the memoir, but two from near the end (actually one of them from outside the text), and after the gracious initial reflections on meeting the challenge of the “aggressive wing of Islam,” are especially telling. Speaking of the new life she and her children are trying to make for themselves back in the States, Gracia notes that their routine will include one special objective.
Inside our home, we’ve declared a little jihad—on our knees. The kids and I continue to pray for the Abu Sayyaf … we ask that each of them would have the chance just once to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in an understandable manner in his own language, so he can make an intelligent choice…. A dream [has been] born in my heart … What if someday one of my kids would get to stand beside an Abu Sayyaf member who had come to know the Lord? … I don’t know if that will ever come to pass. But we can pray about it (339-40).

Then, in the back matter of the book, appears a prospectus for the newly launched Martin and Gracia Burnham Foundation, containing a detail that gives a practical turn to the “dream” shared with the children. In addition to providing funding for missionary aviation and tribal mission work, the focus of the Burnhams’ previous efforts with New Tribes Missions in the Philippines, the foundation looks to support “Christian ministries to Muslims.”

What are the implications of this evangelical impulse, toward the captors and apparently toward larger segments of the Muslim population, as well? Does it contain the “breakthrough,” reconstitute after all the original opposition on the basis of faith? The answer to that question depends on the answer to another: Theologically speaking—or psychologically or politically—is conversion a hostile or a benevolent act, something wished upon one’s friends or one’s enemies? No doubt it can go either way, with the determination resting on actual motives in a given situation. The memoir does not offer a good deal of direct evidence on the Burnhams’, especially Gracia’s, orientation on this score, but a couple of oblique inferences may be possible. For one, the couple find themselves under occasional pressure from their captors to convert to Islam. These efforts make them acutely uncomfortable, and they find ways to resist or evade them. It is clear they range the overtures under the heading of harsh treatment rather than “common mercies.” Secondly, there is Gracia’s choice of terms for her and her children’s (and her foundation’s) spiritual initiative: “jihad.” It is a term she chooses even while expressing the hope, in the earlier passage quoted, that the “aggressive wing of Islam” may be deterred from waging their “holy war.” Nor does her insistence that this jihad will be conducted “on our knees,” through prayer, offer complete reassurance that it will be different, purer or more innocent than the one that the Abu Sayyaf and similar groups feel themselves to be waging. For prayer and earthly power have often been linked, in the history of imperialisms as well as in the current (counter-) clash of civilizations. No less a religious spokesperson than Rick Warren appears to realize this, when he urges evangelicals to
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follow literally the Christian injunction to make disciples of all nations, considering prayer to be their most important weapon: “People may refuse our love or reject our message, but they are defenseless against our prayers. Like an intercontinental missile, you can aim a prayer at a person’s heart whether you are ten feet or 10,000 miles away” (298-300).

Now, it is unlikely that Ms. Burnham would be drawn to such an indelicate simile as Warren’s. But the logic of her “jihad” (and that of her children and of other Christians who may be inspired by her message) is not so very different. It appears that she has indeed enlisted in the “War on Terror,” not only in offering polite support for the strategic objectives of the American and Philippine governments but in taking up, with a will, the weapon of her choice in the struggle. From this angle, it appears that Gracia comes to stand, in the end, on the “side” of religion that Jessica Stern characterizes as “particularist and sectarian” rather than “universalist.” And, in this as in the other contexts within which it has now been explored, the memoir would seem ultimately to reaffirm—if more tentatively and after an especially earnest reach toward a position beyond enemies and friends—the divided moral universe implied in its title.

It seems clear that the first task of any final reflection on the Burnham kidnapping must be to provide additional “context” for the pattern, of temporary relinquishment and eventual reaffirmation of familiar value orientations that assert itself in all the preceding categories of analysis. For if we take the pattern at face value, the two overarching questions proposed for consideration at the outset—the one asking about the possibilities and limits of change within existing structures of power, loyalty, and belief, and the second looking to chart the trajectory of the kidnapping experience, whether toward further mistrust and conflict or toward new ways of relating—have already been answered. The prospects for such change are indeed severely limited, or Gracia Burnham has proved personally incapable of realizing them; and the Burnhams’ kidnapping is big with the seeds of future tragedies like theirs. If, however, some deeper or more complete understanding of the pattern should be available, then the inquiry remains open.

Such a potentially rich perspective can be found, I believe, in the anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of the “ritual process.” It is a context that highlights spirituality and religion, again arguably the most fundamental dimension of the kidnapping experience. Turner distinguishes three phases in traditional rites of passage and other of what he terms “transitional” experiences: separation (of the subject[s] from the society of origin), marginalization (or “liminality”), and reincorporation into the social order. He pays special attention to the liminal phase, an ambiguous state characterized by seclusion, often in a “wilderness” environment, a stripping away of known comforts and resources, threats
of either or both infantilization and death, and a suspension of customary social structures and status markers in favor of more fluid, egalitarian, and intimate relations that Turner characterizes as “communitas” (94-6). In the liminal state the subjects experience their own “weakness” and behave in a “passive or humble” manner, accepting arbitrary treatment and punishment. “It is as though they are being ground down to a uniform condition,” Turner writes, “to be fashioned anew … [for] their new station in life” (96, 99, 103).

This description, both of the overall arc of the transitional “process” and of the specific characteristics of the liminal state, match well with Gracia Burnham’s account of her and her husband Martin’s captivity ordeal. Even the anecdote she tells of the group huddled together on the deck of the speeding getaway boat, connecting emotionally with each other through the words and music of the Beatles’ song, “Imagine,” takes on additional significance in light of the idea of “communitas.” The particulars of “reincorporation” likewise fit this record. Returned to a relatively stable social environment once more, the subjects have “rights and obligations of a defined, ‘structural’ type,” and are “expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social positions … in a system of such positions” (95). Here, it appears, is the immediate post-captivity Gracia Burnham: saying what seems “expected” to military officers, presidents, and the general publics (Philippine and American), playing the role of the grateful rescued hostage, and restoring the “positions,” most particularly of enemies and friends, “in a system of such positions.”

The profoundly conservative implications of this view of reincorporation, which reflect an important part of Turner’s understanding of the ritual process and its social function, do add depth to the pattern observable in context after context of the kidnapping experience. From this perspective, Gracia does not appear to have been moved to her re-embrace of the status quo ante so much by any religious or political conservatism she may have espoused, or by weak-mindedness in the face of unconformable information,15 as by a viscerally human need to recommit to a known social order upon rejoining it.

But this is not the whole of Turner’s understanding of ritual process, or the extent of his theory’s relevance to the Burnhams’ captivity and its aftermath. For he insists as well on the possibility of an alternative, potentially progressive, even emancipatory outcome to the ritual scenario. Liminality in particular represents an “extreme yet high-potential state” (“Excerpts”) which not only endows subjects with “additional powers” (95) to perform in the higher social stations for which ritual process is intended to prepare them, but can generate unpredictable powers and clear the way for “stations” for which no definite precedents exist.
A commentator observes that, through this insistence on its possible role in social change as well as on its long-acknowledged function in maintaining an existing order, Turner’s thought altered the way in which ritual is viewed by social scientists (“Description”). Turner himself explored this dynamic potential of transitional experiences primarily through study of the lives of “religious heroes” (“Victor Turner”), such as the Buddha, St. Francis, Tolstoy, and Gandhi. Figures like these attempt to carry aspects of their liminal experience back, or rather forward with them, into their reintegration with the ordinary world. The effort can spark profoundly creative, often revolutionary consequences. In stark contrast to the majority of reincorporated subjects, they “strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing, and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination” (“Excerpts”). According to Turner, the revolutionary energy in these cases is not ideological in nature and is not aimed at toppling specific social or political structures. Instead, and in keeping with his or her essentially religious animus, the spiritual activist seeks more simply to “create or identify instances of communitas [that key aspect of liminality] and provide them with increased force or intensity” (“Excerpts”).

Could this bold corollary to Turner’s thesis possibly apply in some measure to the post-captivity reincorporation of Gracia Burnham? Certainly we observed, and took a note not to discount it, her affirmation when already back in the United States of two Christian principles seemingly surfaced from the depths of the liminal experience, and emblematic specifically of “communitas.” These were the acknowledgement of her own sinfulness (“bad guy” status) and the determination to meet with forgiveness and love even the treatment that would seem to identify their captors as “enemies.” However, we also saw that apparent breakthrough contained, within the memoir, by a linking of the turn-the-other-cheek principle with an evangelical conversion project, and by a connection of that project in turn with a perhaps lightly offered but (against the background of a worldwide “clash of civilizations”) metaphorically belligerent notion of Christian “jihad.”

In fact, in order to see a more faithful adherence to the “extreme but high-potential” spiritual lessons of the liminal phase of captivity, and to see Gracia Burnham assume something of the role of “religious hero,” it is necessary to look further into the post-captivity period: specifically to her second book, To Fly Again, published in 2005. This is not an obvious proposition. Given the evidence in the original memoir of a dramatically swift pattern of reincorporation, and given the conservative nature of the overall process in the majority of cases, we might expect the author to be pulling into a still more “particular and sectarian” posture in this second foray into print: a stiffer salute thrown to the leaders of
the “War on Terror,” a more defiant fist shaken toward the “terrorists” and the “aggressive wing of Islam,” and a stouter appeal voiced to fellow Christians to enlist in “jihad,” at least through their prayers and evangelical activities. And it does happen that certain of the positions taken in the memoir remain operative in the more recent book, most especially the ardent hope for conversion, of Abu Sayyaf members and Muslims generally.16

But in other respects, To Fly Again is a subtly different kind of book from In the Presence of My Enemies, and one indicative of the continuity with the liminal experience that Turner regards as indispensable to generating a creative rather than simply a restorative spiritual outcome. To begin with, the new book is primarily a work of religious inspiration and guidance. The kidnapping and the various maneuverings of enemies and friends do not constitute the focus here, but figure rather as a springboard for meditations on principles applicable to the author’s and her readers’ everyday lives. What’s more, those lessons are of a decidedly less ideological and more spiritual—and markedly gentler—cast. While conversion remains a theme, there is no renewal of the call to even a prayerful jihad. Ms. Burnham devotes many of her pages to exploring the spiritual opportunities of the state of “weakness” that she experienced in captivity. Acknowledging the chagrin that she, who once prided herself on her strength and self-sufficiency, felt upon discovering herself to be the “weakest person, at least physically, in [that] whole ragged brigade” (80) of hostages and captors, she also reports on the value she found in this quality: “God is attracted to it … Our weakness, in fact, makes room for his power” (Cymbala qtd. 82). This insight links her with a prominent theme in what is coming to be known as “emergent” theology (Crouch 34); it has also apparently created a bond between Gracia and the many cancer patients before whom she has spoken.

Another prominent theme in the later book is forgiveness and reconciliation. The most fully developed instance of this takes place in connection with a temporary “enemy,” in the heat of the captivity experience: the Philippine military. Gracia reports speaking, back in the States, with Captain Oliver Almonarez, leader of the Scout Ranger detachment which had staged the controversial rescue operation. He explains some things about the efforts he and his men made, volunteers that he is himself a devout Christian, and apologizes for the outcome. At the end of their conversation, she “realize[s] once again that forgiveness is a choice,” and decides to forgive the captain once and for all, even if it should turn out that his was the bullet that struck Martin (45-7).

With respect to the more fundamental enemies who figure in the memoir, the Abu Sayyaf and militant Islam generally, the opportunity has not yet presented itself for this kind of after-the-fact personal reconciliation. Nor of course would these others bring to
such an encounter, as Capt. Almonarez does, the assurance of a common commitment to the Christian faith. Still, Gracia records an impressive gesture of forgiveness to them. She recounts being asked to speak before a citywide observance in Wichita, Kansas, of the first anniversary of the 9-11 attacks. “What should I say on such a solemn occasion?” she recalls asking herself (51), and indeed the question is of interest to a reader who has followed her varying positions on the War on Terror and relations between Christians and Muslims. It is of interest additionally because, as Thomas Frank has recently shown, Kansas lies in the heartland of the religious right in America. The audience for her talk that day would likely include many who, by Gracia’s own account, were openly calling for Martin Burnham to be recognized as a “martyr for Christ” (26), and who according to Frank have proved eager consumers of much culturally conservative and patriotic rhetoric.

When her turn comes to speak, she reaches back to the captivity to retell a story (not mentioned in the memoir) that she once shared with other hostages. This is a story from the Bible which illustrates the theme, as the title of this chapter of To Fly Again puts it, “Rising Above Revenge.” She follows this with an anecdote that does make the memoir, the one involving Martin’s and her kindness to an especially surly Abu Sayyaf captor, and the resulting turnaround in his attitude toward them. She leaves the Wichita audience with Christ’s words, partially quoted by Martin in a key juncture during the kidnapping—“love your enemies … do good to those who hate you…turn the other cheek…If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also” (55). In the book, she adds her own thoughts: “How much better [than taking revenge] to do something truly radical…to return good for evil, and to watch the surprise on people’s faces. It frees them up to think in new and healthier ways. It keeps our own spirit clean” (56).

This is the message Gracia Burnham offered, on this charged occasion and in that charged venue. It is a message of forgiveness, remarkable first of all, coming from a woman known from the closing chapters of her memoir to say publicly only what her auditors expect to hear, for the radical challenge it issues to fellow Christians. In this moment Gracia appears to stand as one of those “liminal and marginal people” Victor Turner writes about, still resonating with the lessons of their time of crisis, “who strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing, and enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination.” The statement is also noteworthy for its resolutely non-ideological character. Not only is there no reference to the War on Terror, nor any call to jihad, there is no promise held out here of conversion as the reward for the extension of forgiveness and love to an enemy (only immediate psychological and spiritual benefits for both parties). Here would seem
to be what Turner refers to as an activism aimed not at specific social or political ends but “seek[ing] to create or identify instances of communitas and to provide them with increased force or intensity.”

Whether Gracia went on to extend the reach of communitas from this one individual to a presumed collective enemy, she does not say, but given the nature of the occasion her listeners surely could have made the inference that groups like the Abu Sayyaf and al-Qaeda and the forces of militant Islam generally were to be included. Ms. Burnham’s readers will recall that the most powerful and direct invocation of communitas in the memoir does so extend to her “enemies”: “As we lay there in that moment [listening to John Lennon’s “Imagine”], a bond began to form, connecting us with one another, even our captors.”

Out of Gracia and Martin Burnham’s “liminal” experience of captivity, then, a genuinely religious vision appears to be emerging. “Spiritual and universal,” in Jessica Stern’s terms, the vision is one that would reach over the oppositions between enemies and friends as these operated in the situation. And it is one that could possibly counter the cycle of “jihad” whose emotional logic is so palpable in Gracia’s initial attempt to make sense of the kidnapping. At the same time, the vision appears to be a tentative one, only coming into focus in a second book, and very much contested by the more conventional pattern of Turnerian reincorporation that dominated Ms. Burnham’s early post-captivity responses and has by no means lost all its sway over her. In short, the “struggle” that Martin referred to continues for Gracia, if on different terms. The ultimate significance of the Burnham kidnapping, like the ultimate part its survivor will take in the political and spiritual crisis in which she has been caught up—“role player” bound to the familiar definitions of enemies and friends, or “religious hero” drawing new visions of transcendence from the depths of the crisis itself—is still in process of determination.
NOTES

1 The term “clash of civilizations” derives from Samuel F. Huntington’s 1993 article of that title. A more recent commentator, Tariq Ali, notes that Huntington appears to have distanced himself from the more popular notion of “Terror War” (307-8). However, the two usages would seem to remain functionally compatible.

2 In a span of just over two years early in the current decade, the Abu Sayyaf, a group based in the southern Philippines, espousing a radical separatist Muslim ideology, and alleged to have links with the international Islamist militant organization, al Qaeda, conducted a series of high-visibility kidnappings. In March of 2000, 53 students and teachers of a Catholic mission school in Basilan were abducted. The majority of them were held (with six killed, apparently by the captors) until rescued a month and a half later by Philippine troops, in a military action which left a number of hostages wounded. In April of 2000, the Abu Sayyaf took 21 mainly international hostages from a resort in Sipadan, Malaysia, and brought them to Sulu. By September of that year all had been released, through the intervention of the Malaysian and Libyan governments, including payment of an estimated total of $17.5M in ransom monies. African-American Muslim Jeffrey Schilling passed into the hands of the Abu Sayyaf in August 2000 and, after being held for a stated ransom of $10M for eight months, was safely rescued by Philippine Marines (Various media sources, most helpful Whitmore, “Jolo Diary,” “US Hostage”).

The fourth of these episodes began in the early morning hours of May 27, 2001, when members of the Abu Sayyaf group swept up 22 people from the Dos Palmas Resort near Puerto Princesa, Palawan. The hostages included American missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham, who were spending one night at the resort to celebrate their wedding anniversary, one other (naturalized) American citizen, and 18 Filipinos. The hostages were conveyed by sea to the Abu Sayyaf stronghold of Basilan Island. Within two weeks of landing on Basilan, 3 Filipino employees of the resort and the other American were beheaded. The other Filipinos all arranged for ransoms and were either immediately or eventually released; the Burnhams were regarded as “political” hostages for whom $1M ransom was demanded.

In the meantime, the Abu Sayyaf, under pursuit by the AFP, temporarily occupied then escaped from a hospital in Lamitan, Basilan, taking with them four additional (Filipino) hostages, one of whom, Ms. Ediborah Yap, remained in captivity with the Burnhams until the end. Philippine ground and air forces made numerous attacks on the group over the next ten months, while it moved around in remote locations on Basilan. On September 11, 2001, the allegedly al-Qaeda-sponsored attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon took place, eventually drawing increased attention from the US government to the Burnhams’ situation. In January of 2002, 660 American troops arrived in the Southern Philippines, to provide additional training to Philippine forces in anti-terrorism operations and assistance in the rescue effort. In March the Abu
Sayyaf, in response to a partial ransom payment, crossed over to the Zamboanga peninsula. There, separated from their home base, and enduring worsening survival conditions in mountainous areas, on June 7, 2002, the group was surprised by a US-assisted Philippine Scout Ranger detachment. Martin Burnham and Ediborah Yap were killed, and Gracia Burnham was wounded, in the initial volley of fire.

Ms. Burnham was evacuated to Manila, where she was briefly housed in the US Embassy, participated in a televised interview with President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and then was flown to the US to join her children and other family members near Witchita, Kansas. She and the children eventually met with President George Bush in the White House. Her memoir of the event, *In the Presence of my Enemies*, co-authored with Dean Merrill, was published in 2003. Its account of the role of the Philippine military in the pursuit and rescue operation sparked political controversy in the country. A subsequent book, *To Fly Again*, viewing the captivity episode from greater distance and offering spiritual reflections on it and on Burnham’s subsequent life in the US, came out in 2005 (Burnham, *Enemies*; Olsen, “Did Martin Die Needlessly?” Capulong; “Tragic End”; “Between Hostage and Captor”).

3 The other published accounts include Sipadan hostage Werner Wallert’s German-language memoir and American Greg Williams’ *Thirteen Days of Terror: Held Hostage by al Qaeda Linked Extremists*. Questions exist, in my view, concerning the authenticity of Williams’ narrative, which purports to relate a brief captivity in 1996 that began when he was kidnapped from Cebu City by Abu Sayyaf members. Monique Strydom, also a Sipadan captive, reportedly became one of South Africa’s most popular inspirational speakers, drawing lessons from her “life-changing” experience as a hostage (“Monique Strydom”).

4 Of the scholarly literature devoted to the captivity narrative, the most directly relevant to the links between Rowlandson’s and Burnham’s memoirs may be Michelle Burnham (no apparent relation), *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682-1861*.

5 In a statement quoted in a magazine article, Burnham emphasizes the deliberateness of this critique. Referring to the episode in Lamitan hospital, she reflects, “Part of my goal [in writing the book] was to get them [Filipinos] to think through their culture … We [Americans] have this Judeo-Christian culture that says certain things are wrong and certain things are right. In their culture, you can explain anything away, and it’s not wrong any more” (Olsen, “Gracia Burnham Book”). Perhaps some perspective on this matter may be found in a study of notions of justice in two Filipino barrios. Researcher Fernando Zialcita (28-30) asked respondents in both settings whether stealing in cases of extreme need ought to be considered an offense (*basol/sala*), and/or a breach of “honor.” Most respondents did answer no, but the survey revealed differences by class and social position. Nearly all in precarious economic circumstances said the action would be justified, but propertied people and those in positions of authority within the barangay government tended
to hold that it would be wrong. The size of the survey sample was too small to offer any conclusive result, but a suggestion possible from it is that Gracia Burnham’s view reflects a relatively privileged American perspective, and Ediborah Yap’s “If we really need it, it isn’t stealing,” reflects a Filipino perspective conditioned by scarcity and oppression.

Perhaps a Gemino Abad poem, “Balikbayan,” makes the same point, without the social science but more eloquently.

O, I exaggerate to stress a different logic,
for laws and rules have less sway with us
than an instinct for decency which like a volcano
lies dormant—in our hearts, where we know
that laws, such as they are in our history, bear
more oppression than justice, serving the interests
of those who have the power and the wealth
and so much more to lose (128).

It is also true, however, that those helping themselves to patients’ belongings in the hospital came by and large from more affluent backgrounds than did the Burnhams, who were in the Philippines on a shoestring missionary budget.

Additional information lends possible support to each of these explanations. The Philippine Army at the time appears to have been either committed to or only capable of big-unit tactics, involving heavy weaponry and ponderous movements, which not only put hostages at risk but generated substantial numbers of civilian refugees. Only recently have changes in approach been initiated (Wall Street Journal, qtd. in Burnham, Enemies 249; Morgan and Symonds, “Military Scales Down”) In addition, President Joseph Estrada’s handling of the Sipadan hostage crisis the year before, in which large sums were paid (by the Libyan government, primarily) to free international hostages, had outraged a considerable portion of press and public opinion in the country, columnist Max Soliven, for example, proffering this advice for similar scenarios in the future: “No tears for the hostages—go in and blast the Abu Sayyaf” (“Philippines: Lucrative Hostage Trade”). When the Burnham kidnapping unfolded, the Arroyo administration adopted a conspicuously hardline stance: “No ransom. No deal. No suspension of the military operation” (Morgan and Symonds). However, it happens that in the interim the Philippine military had staged a successful shooting rescue of Jeffrey Schilling—who had likewise voiced urgent pleas against armed action—and it may be that this outcome encouraged the planners to persist with their strategy.
The Abu Sayyaf’s actions in this kidnapping do meet Stern’s definition of “terrorism”: violence aimed at noncombatants and intended for dramatic effect, presumed to be more important than the actual physical damage. Whether the goals they sought were religious or “political” ones is far less certain. In the earlier case of the hostages abducted from the Basilan school, the group did at one point demand the release of three men convicted of the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 (“Two Hostage Dramas”); but, as noted, the monetary ransom appears to have been the principal consideration in the Burnhams’ case almost from the start. On the other hand, Stern concedes that a mix of abstract and material goals is often present in the motives of “religious terrorists” (xx).

With respect to the issue of ransom, it is worth noting that not only the US and RP administrations, but the Burnhams’ own New Tribes Mission organization maintained a “no negotiation” policy, which the couple subscribed to, for reason that the precedent of paying ransom could “endanger others” in the field. But, as Gracia explained in an interview given in 2003 to a Kansas TV station, “when you are a hostage yourself, things look different” (“Gracia Burnham Talks”). While one hesitates to pass judgment on individuals in such an extreme situation, it may be remembered that Gracia passed some judgments herself, on Filipino ethical choices under duress, and it is hard to see how the principle she invokes here is different from the one explained to her by Ediborah. To paraphrase: “If we need it, it isn’t really paying ransom.”

This is an understanding given to Gracia Burnham some time after her rescue, by the officer in charge of the Scout Ranger detachment that conducted it (To Fly Again 47).

Religion is thus central to this inquiry, but at the same time problematic for it. In fact, this is probably another point at which my personal relationship to the subject deserves to be brought into view. First off, I have no formal expertise in theology or the study of religion. Moreover, I have given the area a generally wide berth in my previous academic experience for roughly the same reason I have, in my life, kept at arm’s length overtly religious people like the Burnhams, pushing copies of The Watchtower in my face or, with more subtlety, earnestly recommending Rick Warren’s The Purpose-Driven Life as a transformative book. Not interested. Yet recently I have been becoming more open to spirituality, not as a result of the conversion efforts of these kinds of people, but to the effect of a new respect for and curiosity about them. Undoubtedly this development helps explain my attraction to the Burnhams’ story, as does the common connection with the Philippines. Equally surely, this transitional personal state, as well as the lack of formal academic training in religious matters, will be reflected in the treatment that follows.

A sample of the Old Testament “approach” can be located in a psalm (#3) not far distant from the famed #23 from which the memoir’s title is drawn; the New Testament notion of turning the other cheek is
nowhere in view: “Arise, O Lordl/Deliver me, O my Godl/For thou dost smite all my enemies on the cheek,/Thou dost break the teeth of the wicked” (New Oxford Bible, 657). That Gracia subscribes to this understanding of divine retribution, at least at times over the course of her captivity, can be seen in a memo she writes to herself at one point: “Vengeance is God’s. He’ll repay” (198).

12 This quotation is taken from a later source, an interview conducted at the time of the publication of Burnham’s second book (in 2005). However, similar language can be found in the memoir itself, as will be evident from material cited below in the text.

13 Nor is it likely she would descend to pronouncing the kind of *fatwah* the noted televangelist Pat Robertson recently issued, calling for the assassination of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. A widely circulated political cartoon by Thomas Boldt depicts Robertson making his call from a pulpit, followed by the cry of “JIHAAAD!!” while a figure representing a lady parishioner asks from the congregation, “Does that mean Saturday’s bake sale is off?” (“In Pat Robertson”). Still, as with the Warren ICBM simile, the logic of Burnham’s intent to conduct jihad, discussed below in the text, touches on the same buttons of overcoming the other in a spiritual struggle.

14 A significant obstacle to applying the notion of “ritual process” to the Burnham kidnapping lies in the fact that Turner derived his concept from and addressed it primarily to formal, controlled ritual events. Of the categories of such events that he distinguishes, the Burnhams’ ordeal perhaps fits most closely under “life-crisis rituals” or “rituals of affliction” (Deflem). Of course, they were not going through the paces of a ritual scenario, no matter how demanding, but an unpredictable actual experience. However, it appears that others and even Turner himself have addressed, under the heading of “ritual process” and a related term, “social drama,” various types of unscripted experiences. That the Burnhams’ kidnapping ordeal fits within the overall umbrella will, I hope, be clear from the discussion below in the text.

15 Both of these are explanations which the treatment in earlier sections, much of which was drafted before the Turner model had come to my mind, may still imply.

16 It is also the case that “Christian ministries to Muslims” remains a mission area in the prospectus for the Martin and Gracia Burnham Foundation included in the back matter of *To Fly Again*. There has been an addition, as well, which might seem to sound the note of jihad: the “persecuted church around the world.” However, in the text Gracia distances herself from what she notes as a widespread inclination to regard Martin as a “martyr for Christ,” countering that “neither he nor I was targeted *because* we were Christians; we just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time as a band of kidnappers were [sic] rounding up their bargaining chips” (26).
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“Tragic End to a Hostage Ordeal.” Newsweek 17 June 2002: 34.


