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COMMENTARY

My History With the Rope

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I have now watched both the official and the infamous unofficial cellphone video of Saddam's Hussein's execution. Both were on the Web soon after the event. I had the choice of watching them or not. I watched, with the same horrid fascination that I felt seeing ultimate fighting on television -- disbelieving that gladiators are legal when cockfighting is outlawed in just about every state save for New Mexico (where I saw my first and last cockfight).

When pollsters knock on my door, they will find that as a physician I am against capital punishment, ultimate fighting and cockfighting because they run counter to our sense of being a civilized society. But the disconnect between what I will watch and what I claim I am for is more common than most of us care to admit; I blame the camera.

The lens now peers into every nook and cranny of human existence, and it is now in the hands of every man. A digital image of interest spreads on the Internet like a drop of India ink in water. Police brutality, a bully on a school bus, an abusive nanny -- we see them all. It isn't surprising that there is a cellphone video of Saddam's hanging; it is surprising there is only one. While on rounds in my hospital (where I work as an infectious disease specialist), I caught sequential bits of the television show, "Dr. 90210" in the course of going from one patient to the next. I had no idea!

We (my patients, their visitors and I) saw an actual breast augmentation; even more edifying was the opportunity to peek into the personal lives and the marital struggles of the brave practitioners of this craft who eke out an existence in that zip code. My vicarious presence in Beverly Hills and Baghdad in the same week was not because of prurient tastes; it was because these ubiquitous images are all but unavoidable if you have eyes and any curiosity about your fellow human beings.

The uproar over the Saddam video -- both its existence and its content -- is particularly hypocritical. Given all the ways and all the weaponry that could be used to execute someone, hanging is a most inhumane choice. The condemned person will be terrified and anxious, not about death as much as the manner of death. Hanging of the 'short drop' version practiced in Iran is really a slow choking

to death; in the standard or long drop method that was used in Iraq, unconsciousness is supposedly instant when the spinal cord is severed, but a misplaced knot could rip skin and muscle and cause an agonizing death. Instant or not, let's not kid ourselves; hanging is a vengeful, brutalizing, psychologically terrifying act with which we humans have a long history; in the past it was carried out publicly (and still is in countries like Iran) with the aim of serving as a deterrent. If we condone hanging a mass murderer, is it not hypocritical to want it to be conducted with "decency" when hanging is by its very nature indecent?

Saddam's hanging disturbs us because it was perverse, vengeful, furtive, hasty, carried out under cover of darkness and in front of a hoarse, excitable male audience who acted as if they were at a carnival, or, to be more precise, as if they were at a lynching. Part of the discomfort the video generates here may lie in these echoes of our own short history with the rope.

As an expatriate child growing up in Ethiopia, I saw my first hanging when the military leaders of an abortive coup were put to death in a public square. We happened to be driving by. Or perhaps, in those pre-Internet days, my parents wanted to witness the spectacle; I don't remember. I do remember the chanting, ululating crowd, dancing under the swaying corpse, the choked, congested faces and the oddly angulated heads, but most of all I remember how the dead men's shoes were filched. The bare feet seemed inconsistent with the rest of the image. That element of violation, of savagery, stayed with me. I saw a few more hangings in that country as I grew up, and the fresh bodies of people who met violent deaths in the aftermath of Emperor Haile Selassie's fall and the advent of Mengistu, the Stalin of Africa.

The Saddam video recalled these memories of witnessing violence and savagery. With the video I felt just as I did as a child witnessing an actual hanging: That the condemned man gets perverse revenge because there is a shame that accompanies such a spectacle; it spreads and stains all who are there, all who drive by, all who watch it on television, or who, like me, download it with a click of the mouse; the killer being executed has suddenly become noble, and turned us into killers.

This cellphone video will be the most viewed hanging video in history. We as a nation should watch it before washing our hands of it, and certainly before pontificating about our brand of justice versus other brands. Only by watching can the debate about capital punishment move from an abstract discussion to what is real, to what is palpable, to what is shameful, to what is actually happening whether you watch it or not.

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