



# *Crossings Reflection #1*<sup>1</sup>

## **The Inconvenient Gray of Life: Maintaining Faith in Humanity**<sup>2</sup>

— *Everette J. Freeman, Senior Vice President & Provost*  
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The British Fabian Socialist and playwright George Bernard Shaw once wryly observed that “we learn from experience that men never learn anything from experience.”

History overflows with sad instance after instance of our failings to get along as members of one human family. In this hour of war, it is tempting to wonder if Shaw may be right. It may not be at all strange for many to ask the stark question *Why do human beings kill each other?*

Indeed, this has been the unanswered question since the dawn of civilization. Why war? Why bloodshed? Why violence?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an apostle of non-violence, was fond of quoting a line from the Harvard notebooks of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Writing as a Harvard undergraduate, Kennedy said that “wars will not cease until that glad day when the conscientious objector has as much prestige and is respected as the military men of today.” These are powerful words from a young man who would one day become president of the United States. Like our current president, Kennedy would find himself facing a military crisis. In Kennedy’s case that crisis nearly precipitated a nuclear war.

Here we are today, no closer to an answer to that seemingly unanswered question than we were 40 years ago when Kennedy placed our troops on the highest nuclear alert.

Here we are today, each of us trying to make sense in our minds about this business of human beings killing other human beings

in war. Here we are today, facing the inconvenient gray areas of our national life and body politic. Here we are having to examine our basic beliefs about good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust, and finding in the breach this inconvenient gray of choices where nothing is fully black or white.

It certainly isn’t a simply matter of black and white for me. I have no stock answer that keeps my inner voice quiet at times like these. I have no sound bite that I replay in my mind that brings clarity to the unanswered question. I have only the question: the existential *Why?*

At 52 years of age, I see more of the inconvenient gray of life than the black and white.

When I was 16 years old, I was required to participate in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC) as a Washington, D.C. high school student. I loved marching in formation. I loved the elegance of the military command structure. I loved being a member of the school’s rifle team. I loved the smell of gunpowder and the harsh report of gunfire in my ear. I loved it all but had absolutely no wish to kill or be killed on some foreign battle. That battlefield happened to be Vietnam in 1966.

What I did not know at the time, what none of us knew at the time, was that Vietnam and Cambodia would become massive killing fields after the U.S. left that troubled region of the world. What would my response to the Vietnam War have been had I known that the skulls of innocent men, women, and children would be on display for the pleasure of ruthless gangsters masquerading as freedom fighters and liberators? I have no answer. It remains my personal unanswered question, my own inconvenient gray.

<sup>1</sup> *Crossings Reflections* are occasional essays by members of the University community on various topics that contribute to reflection about questions of vocation, professional identity, and human flourishing in the context of the University’s motto of “Education for Service.” Published by *The Crossings Project*, copies of these occasional papers are available upon request for use on and off campus.

*Why do human beings kill each other?* I do not know.

What I do know is that you must come to terms in your own mind about this business of war and you must do it while simultaneously getting on with life. You must in the face of the most horrific challenges and the most unspeakable horrors—wherever they occur—resolve to see the meaning *in* life rather than the meaning *of* life.

I had a mentor once—Ernest Rice McKinney. He became my mentor and friend when he was 86 years old and remained my dear and close oracle until he died at 97 years of age. One day, sensing that I was fretting overly much about things far beyond my control, “Mac” said to me: “Everette, to be a human being is to have problems. Cockroaches have no problems.” He laughed a knowing laugh and I laughed a 35-year-old laugh of utter surprise. And he knew right there that I knew that the unanswered question had been brought in the open for me to see through the eyes of an old man.

As you leave this ceremony, do not be dismayed if you do not have in your possession the answer that brings together all the contradictions that the present moment presents. That is how it should be, must be.

But do yourself a favor if you need something more to reflect upon.

Find a copy of Charles Ives’ musical composition *The Unanswered Question* and listen to it. We oftentimes find ourselves in the company of poets and composers at times of great stress and uncertainty. They seem always to have the voice we lack. Ives’ piece is terribly important and beautiful. It is written by one of America’s greatest classical composers who, like you, wondered why do human beings kill each other. It is a contemplative work and at the same time an atonal composition. The strings, symbolizing eternity, carry the symphony forward with repose and anxiety. The trumpet asks plaintively the eternal question only to be answered at every turn by the dissonance of the strings and woodwind instruments representing the winds. In the end, no answer emerges. There remains the unanswered question as the strings give way to silence.

Do you support or oppose this war? I can’t answer that for you. Experience teaches us that we must search for our own answers and do so with the hope and faith that humanity will find its way, steady itself, and move on together again. It is this faith that holds the answer.

Pray for the safe return of our troops. Pray for the innocent men, women, and children of Iraq and other troubled places in the world including here. Work for a just world. But, most importantly, live your lives as you seek your answers, answers that no faculty member or parent can provide. Taste life and its entire inconvenient gray and remember its sweetness every day!



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<sup>2</sup> Provost Freeman offered these remarks at “A Gathering in Time of War” held in the Atrium of Schwitzer Hall on Thursday, March 20, 2003, the afternoon after the U. S. attack on Iraq had begun. At the beginning of his address to the University community, Provost Freeman clarified that President Israel was away from campus traveling to Washington, D.C. on University business.