

# Cell group: Held hostage in Iraq

by [James Loney](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

*Tom Fox, 54, a peace activist and a member of Langley Hill Friends Meeting in McLean, Virginia, was kidnapped in Iraq in November 2005 along with three other members of Christian Peacemaker Teams—Norman Kember, 74, of Britain; and James Loney, 41, and Harmeet Singh Sooden, 32, both of Canada. Their captors, a group called the Swords of Righteousness Brigade, accused the four of spying for Western governments. Fox was eventually separated from the others; his dead body was discovered in Baghdad on March 9, 2006. The other hostages were rescued two weeks later. The following article is excerpted from Loney's account of the team's time in captivity.*

In the beginning stages of the captivity, Tom Fox was our anchor, our stalwart. He had learned a lot about Iraq's kidnapping industry: how the field was played by both criminals and insurgents; how they were organized in a hierarchical network of power and influence; how hostages were put up for auction and sold up the ladder until the highest bidder secured the rights to extort princely ransoms—or murder their ideological prey in executions recorded on grainy videos. He knew all the most important Arabic words, like *hamam* (bathroom), *my* (water), *mumkin* (could I please), *la* and *nam* (no and yes), the numbers, the days of the week, various references to time. He knew a great deal about Iraqi culture, history and politics. His calm judgment was an invaluable resource.

During those first days of relentless, terrifying, excruciating uncertainty, Tom dove into prayer the way a warrior might charge into battle. He turned his captivity into a sustained, unbroken meditation. The chain that bound his wrist became a kind of rosary, or *sebha* (the beads Muslims use to count the names of God). He would picture someone: a member of his family, a member of the Iraq team or the CPT office, one of the captors—whoever he felt needed a prayer. Holding a link of the chain, he would breathe in and out, slowly, so that you could hear the air gushing in and out of his lungs, praying for the person he was holding in his mind. With the completion of each breath, he would pass a chain link through his thumb and index finger. During his first breath he would say to himself, *with the warmth of my heart.*

In the second, *with the stillness of my mind*. In the third, *with the fluidity of my body*. And in the fourth, *with the light of my soul*. At the end of each series of four breaths, he would pause and simply rest in the light with the person he was praying for.

Tom's vigilance in prayer was astounding. I sometimes felt ashamed. My mind would wander helplessly in self-preoccupation and garish tableaux in absurd cycles of repetition. His unrelenting focus called me back to prayer again and again, almost as if someone had suddenly taken hold of my shoulders, was gently shaking me and telling me, "Wake up! Come back to your senses."

Tom would exhort us to live in the present moment. The past and the future did not exist, he would say, we only have the now. He would remind us, despite assurances from our captors that release was imminent, that we could be held for months, even years.

On day 8, the second Saturday following our abduction, the captor we called Medicine Man paid us a visit. He earned that name when he brought blood-pressure medication for Norman. Medicine Man announced that we were going to be moved, one by one, in the trunk of his car: Tom first, then Norman, then me, then Harmeet. We would be separated and held in different locations.

Though my mind was perfectly clear, my body began to shiver uncontrollably. I hated when fear possessed my body and my mind was helpless to disguise or control it. Tom intensified his meditations. Just before they took him, he said, "I've been preparing for this for a year—thinking about it, praying about it, meditating about it," and then, "The way I feel now, I could do this forever." I turned to look at him, astonished that he could say such a thing. Serene determination illuminated his face. "Be strong," he said to us as they led him away, blindfolded and handcuffed.

Tom always took the hardest place. You couldn't argue him out of it. It was part of the fierce stubbornness that kept him going. Take our pillow collection, for example. We had five of them—three that were sufficiently comfortable and clean to rest your head on, and two that were so flat and grimy with body oils they were hardly fit to use underfoot (which we did, day and night, to protect our feet from the greedy, heat-sucking cold of the tile floor). Norman, Harmeet and I each had the luxury of our own pillow—only because Tom insisted on using the sweater he bundled into a makeshift headrest. From time to time we would check with him. "Tom, are you OK with not using a pillow? We can easily take turns."

“No,” he would say, “I’m fine. I’m actually very comfortable with what I’m doing.” I didn’t believe him, but I didn’t argue: one, there was no way of winning, and two, I loved my pillow and was secretly pleased I didn’t have to share it.

And then there was the matter of blankets. There weren’t enough of those either. The one blanket we had, a fire-engine red, double-lined fleece monstrosity (it had to weigh 15 pounds!), was just big enough to cover three of us, as long as someone didn’t pull an unfair portion in his direction. This meant that someone had to sleep outside the communal blanket. Our ever resourceful captors, seeking an immediate solution that didn’t involve spending money, unceremoniously yanked two dust-laden, ceiling-length curtains off the wall and thrust them into Tom’s arms. One of the curtains looked like a bridal train. Without blinking an eye, Tom fashioned them into a makeshift mummy bag and slid beneath them. Again we would check. “Tom, are you sure you’re OK? Why don’t we share sleeping in those things?”

“No, no,” he’d say, “really I’m OK. I’m a hot sleeper and I’ve got myself a system here that’s working really well.” But when the nights got cold in January and as our metabolisms slowed from lack of food, Tom found it impossible to keep warm. The lack of sleep began to take a visible physical and psychological toll. Still, the course had been set, and Tom was going to keep to it.

On December 23, day 29 of captivity, we began the discipline of a daily check-in in which we talked about how we were doing physically, emotionally and spiritually. I led our first worship service, and Tom led our first de memoriam, Bible-less Bible study. The format was simple. The leader would recall as best he could a Bible passage, and we would reflect together on it according to a series of four questions: What is the main point of this passage to me? Is it true in my experience? What is difficult, challenging or confusing about the passage? How might this passage change my life?

We took turns rotating through a schedule, so that the days became more like regular days. There were tasks, responsibilities, decisions to make (when shall we have worship today—before or after lunch?)—a little structure to mark our progress through the endless gray-wash of time. And perhaps most important, through our prayer together we could reach outside the paint-peeling walls of our second-story dungeon, reach with our hearts and our souls to all those imprisoned by despair, poverty and violence. It was a way for us to counteract the creeping self-absorption that inevitably accompanies captivity.

Tom's prayers were profound. They brought our suffering into dialogue with the vast suffering of the world. Again and again his prayers brought to mind other prisoners—security detainees in Iraq, illegal combatants in Guantánamo, the lost and forgotten souls in American penitentiaries. And every time we heard a bomb explode, near or far, Tom would stop to pray for those whose lives had just been destroyed. Every time, without fail.

Between Christmas and New Year's, something shifted in Tom. Perhaps it was the lack of protein his body craved, the absolute lack of solitude or the relentless cold. Perhaps it was his inability to sleep, the burden of fear that came with his U.S. citizenship, or the extreme boredom. The intransigent strength and unflagging leadership of those first weeks evaporated. He asked for a sedative to help him sleep, and the captors obliged.

Tom took one, then two pills each day and still complained of being unable to sleep. His mind lost its suppleness. He seemed to be more fixed on his own ideas, less able to incorporate new information, his perceptions more rigid. We would frequently have to repeat things. He was either stone-silent or helplessly garrulous. His emotional life, which heretofore he carefully guarded, became an open book. "You know," he once said, "I've shared more with you guys than I have with anyone else in my life." Sometimes his sharing sounded more like verbal floundering.

We started to worry. Tom no longer seemed himself. Something had to be said. As if on cue, he voluntarily cut back to one capsule a day. He'd discerned that the sedation was pulling him deeper into a vortex of depression. "I don't like what it's doing to me," he said. I was relieved because his realization saved us from a confrontation.

Of course, none of us was at our best. Each of us, in our respective struggles to cope with the confinement, fear and hunger, took turns carrying, and being carried, by the others.

At the end of a check-in one day, I embarked on a carefully prepared speech. "Early on, I figured out that there's no way I can defeat this boredom. It's just too big, too vast. It doesn't matter how many mental puzzles I do, how many prayers or mediations I say, there's just no way to win against it. I don't have enough will, or enough strength, or enough creativity, or enough of whatever it takes to manage or control or moderate what we're going through, or my reaction to it. It's just too big.

If I'm going to get through this, it's going to have to come from something outside of me, something beyond me. It'll be because God carried me, and not because of anything I did."

Tom's theology was unfamiliar to me. In comparison, I found myself in the unusual position of feeling rather old-fashioned and orthodox in believing that Jesus is the Son of God, the unique incarnation of God's love; that we are destined to live in communion with a God who loves and knows each of us by name; that the place (or state of being) where that happens forever is called heaven; and that salvation is an unmerited consequence of God's unconditional love.

For Tom, God was a kind of nonpersonal energy, an energy of love, perhaps best described as light that suffuses and imbues everything. There is no limit to this energy, this light. It can—and wants to—grow and expand infinitely. We each have a little bit of that light. Or, as Quakers say it, "There is that of God in everyone." While not the Son of God, Jesus had a unique and privileged understanding of his connection to God. Though this spiritual connection is accessible to all of us, Jesus perfected that connection by going all the way in the spiritual life. Our task is to follow the example of Jesus and work to increase the amount of love energy in the universe as much as we can, so that one day everything will be transformed into love. This task requires tremendous effort, sacrifice and hard work so that we can grow into a perfect understanding of our connection to God. It was effort, not grace, that seemed to animate Tom's ceaseless spiritual quest.

It's my hunch that Tom was haunted by a dread fear that the stresses and privations of captivity would irrevocably sever his connection to the divine, that he would eventually succumb to the temptation to hate and dehumanize his captors, and thus everything he worked for in the spiritual life would be lost. In our desperate circumstances, his answer was to strive harder, to hold fast with every last ounce of strength lest he fall helpless into the abyss of negativity.

It pained me to watch him in this struggle. I wanted to tell him, "You don't have to fight. God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. You don't have to do anything. Your connection with God is permanent and irrevocable. You cannot not be in the light."

The morning after Tom was taken, the commonplace routine of folding away our bed and arranging our chairs against the wall for the long day of sitting changed. Now,

instead of four chairs, we needed only three.

A great hole opened in our lives. It was like the soul had gone out of our group. We labored through the day in a collective stupor. None of us wanted to acknowledge the horrible implication of Tom's departure.

I remember going into the bathroom and seeing only three toothbrushes. I had always enjoyed looking at them when there were four. There was something complete about them standing together in their square, grungy Tupperware container, each a different color (chosen purposely by Medicine Man so we wouldn't confuse our toothbrushes—red, green, blue and purple—there was so little color in our lives!). They somehow represented our individuality. But now the purple one, Tom's, was gone. For just a moment, grief broke through. That little forest of toothbrushes I loved had been decimated.

Check-in, worship and Bible study ceased. After a handful of days, I suggested that we resume check-in. After another handful of days, we returned to daily worship. Neither were ever the same. It always felt to me like we were merely going through the motions. As for Bible study, without Tom it was impossible.

On March 7, day 102, Medicine Man made a house call. "Do you have any news about Tom?" I asked.

"Yes, he is still at the other house. We have some problems so we separate him. You know his government will not negotiate for him. The CIA is trying to prevent the negotiation. They do not want the [prisoner] exchange to happen so the negotiations are going very slow. We will make some announcement that we kill him—to separate your case. They do not know he is still alive. But we not kill him—he will be released with you. We make this announcement to the media, to put pressure on your governments, but we not kill him."

I said nothing. I looked at Medicine Man, nodded, received his news with a blank face. A poker face.

The next clue came four days later, on March 11. We were watching TV in our captors' living quarters. It had become something of a routine—they would unlock us around seven p.m., take us downstairs and feed us supper. That was nice because we could eat with our hands free, like regular human beings. If we were lucky they'd have a pirate-edition DVD for us to watch. Otherwise it was an evening of Arabic

channel surfing. At ten they'd return to us our room and lock us up for the night after we brushed our teeth.

We were watching TV when we saw it, a preview of the day's top news story, a poster board with each of our pictures, a close-up of Tom's picture, a cut to the last, ghostly video image of Tom in captivity. Then a road under construction, a piece of heavy equipment in the background, a close-up of a particular spot on the ground. That was all we saw before they changed the channel. I involuntarily shivered. Harmeet asked the captor we called Nephew why Tom was on TV. "Oh, this is normal," he said. "They are showing about your life on the news. Every night a different one of you. Tonight they are showing Tom." We knew he was lying. We stopped asking about Tom after that.

We didn't know for sure until the day of our rescue, 14 days after Tom's body was found. It was the first question I asked the British soldiers who busted us out. "Where's Tom? Is he free or has he been killed?" I still clung to the hope that he might have been released.

"No, he was killed." The voice was hesitant, apologetic.

"Are you sure? Did they find his body?"

"Yes. They found his body."

"They found his body? You're sure?"

"Yes, they found his body."

Why are we here? It's the ultimate question, really. Whether we're cleaning up after dinner or facing a captor's gun, the earth turns, the sun rises and sets, the seasons come and go. We all have to find our way through, to somehow make sense of the turning, the rising and the setting, the coming and going of our lives, whatever the here is that we've been given to live. It's the task that God has breathed into us.

On this Tom was clear, as he tried to be about anything that was important. Clear in the sense of being open, seeing, paying attention, pushing the clutter away. Clear in the sense of letting the light within him shine. He reflected on that question in something he wrote titled "Why Are We Here?" on November 25, 2005, the evening before we were kidnapped.

The answer, he wrote, is “that we are to take part in the creation of the Peaceable Realm of God,” a realm we help create when we love God, our neighbors, even our enemies, “with all our heart, our mind and our strength.”

In the context of Iraq, where “dehumanization seems to be the operative means of relating to each other,” and where U.S. forces kill innocent Iraqis in “their quest to hunt down and kill” those they’ve dehumanized as “terrorists,” Tom defined love positively as “a profound respect for all human beings simply for the fact that they are all God’s children,” and negatively as “never thinking or doing anything that would dehumanize one of my fellow human beings.

“The first step down the road to violence,” he said, “is taken when I dehumanize a person. . . . As soon as I rob a fellow human being of his or her humanity by sticking a dehumanizing label on them, I begin the process that can have, as an end result, torture, injury and death.

“Why are we here?” he asked again. It was not a rhetorical question. “We are here to root out all aspects of dehumanization that exist within us. We are here to stand with those being dehumanized by oppressors and stand firm against that dehumanization. We are here to stop people, including ourselves, from dehumanizing any of God’s children, no matter how much they dehumanize their own souls.”

Every time I read these words, shivers ride up and down my arms. Amplified by their uncanny timing, these words were his last will and testament. His will, fierce and indomitable, to root out all aspects of violence within himself was the unceasing struggle of his captivity. His testament, what the arc of his life pointed to, the why of his “why are we here,” was what he called the Peaceable Realm of God, where the lion lies down with the lamb, where every division is healed and fear is banished from every heart, and where rich and poor feast together at God’s banquet table. That vision was the light that guided Tom Fox.