

MARCH 2007 READER'S
DIGEST

A Hostage Comes Home

Returning to a normal life after 118 days as a captive in Iraq is far more difficult than James Loney thought it would be

BY DAVID HAYES

EARLY in December, Canadian James Loney was reunited with his friends Harmeet Singh Sooden and Norman Kember at St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in central London. A year earlier, the three men had been abducted in Baghdad while on a fact-finding mission for Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) and held hostage for four months. During that time, a fourth companion, Tom Fox, an American, had been taken away and murdered. Now, Iraqi officials say, the hostage takers have been arrested, a judicial process is unfolding, and the former hostages may be called as witnesses.

Some might expect Loney, Sooden and Kember to welcome retribution against the men who terrorized them, threatened their

lives and killed their friend. Instead, Loney sat in front of a crowd of reporters, TV lights blazing and the table in front of him filled with microphones, reading from a prepared statement that surprised many: "We unconditionally forgive our captors for abducting and holding us. We have no desire to punish them. Punishment can never restore what was taken from us... Should those who have been charged with holding us hostage be brought to trial and convicted, we ask that they be granted all possible leniency... We understand that some of our captors could be sentenced to death. The death penalty is an irrevocable judgement. It erases all possibility that those who have harmed others, even seriously, can yet turn to good."

This sentiment, reached by Loney, Sooden and Kember after three weeks of telephone and email discussions, reflects their committed involvement in the peace movement. Reached in London shortly after the press conference, Loney said: "We were asked what we would say to the next victim if we don't testify and these guys walk free. That's a false choice between the death penalty and letting them walk free. We'd like to see something in between."

Seeing the composed, clean-cut Loney, speaking with great deliberation on the TV coverage of the press conference, was quite a contrast to the newspaper photos and TV footage of

his return to Canada last March. Standing beside his brothers, sister-in-law and life partner, Dan Hunt, he was wearing an irrepressible, almost child-like grin and a startled expression, as though seeing the world and everyone in it for the first time.

Which is exactly how he felt 72 hours after being released. As he was riding in a tank to safety, shortly after British-led troops found Loney and two companions handcuffed to one another on a bed in a house in suburban Baghdad, a soldier gave Loney a packaged chocolate muffin he would normally regard as overly sweet, preservative-laced fast food. It tasted heavenly. At a compound at the British embassy in the Green Zone, he was mesmerized by the shimmering, turquoise water in the swimming pool, the leaves on the trees, the feeling of sunlight on his face. "It was like being intensely, absolutely alive," he later said. "Every cell in my body was buzzing with wonder and amazement. Every person was this shining temple of the Holy Spirit."

Loney, now 42, was Canadian coordinator for CPT, a nonprofit organization that has members in some of the world's hot spots—Colombia, the Congo, the West Bank, Iraq—to act as witnesses and advocates for innocent victims of conflict. The members of CPT, numbering about 200, are seen by supporters as heroic pacifists, put-

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an honorific Loney hoped would**



KEVIN FRAYER/AP

Muslim leaders, in Ramallah, West Bank, called for the release of the hostages.

ting Christian principles into practice, and by detractors as naïve, self-righteous bleeding hearts. Either way, the kidnapping of four of its members in Iraq—which led to the murder of one of them—plunged CPT into the worst crisis of its 19-year history, and put Loney through the most terrifying ordeal of his life.

He's since lost that childlike wonderment he had early after his release. Although a youthful-looking man, he's thoughtful and serious as he explains how he believed the strength of his faith would protect him and allow him to make the transition back to everyday life. Instead, he's struggling to work through a more complicated process than he'd imagined.

"Now I feel a kind of sadness," he says. "I remember mourning the loss of that intense, beautiful wakefulness. So how do I find a way to live life in ordinary times the way that I've seen it can and should be lived?"

AT ONE time Loney considered becoming a priest or a social worker, but he grew disillusioned by what he saw as a lack of dedication to the ideals by those in the field of those vocations. Instead he chose a radical brand of Christianity that led him to co-found a Toronto wing of The Catholic Worker, a movement committed to nonviolence, social justice and voluntary poverty. He joined CPT in 2000.

Loney had last been to Iraq in March 2004, during which time he had been robbed by two armed men. In November 2005, leading a small CPT delegation to gather information about the everyday life of Baghdad's residents, he saw that the situation had deteriorated even further. Still, he knew the CPT team there believed in careful planning to minimize risks.

On the afternoon of November 26, 2005, Loney; Harmeet Singh Sooden, 32, a Canadian who had been living with his family in New Zealand; Nor-

make the captors recognize his humanity.

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man Kember, 74, a retired British physicist; and Baghdad-based CPT member Tom Fox, a 54-year-old Quaker from Virginia, visited the Association of Muslim Scholars. Just after they left, a white car pulled in front of their blue Volvo, forcing them to stop. Four men leaped from the car, pulled the driver and translator out of the vehicle and got in, forcing Loney and the others to sit on the floorboards. They had become four more of some 200 foreigners kidnapped in Iraq during the previous year and a half.

At the large house where they were taken, one of the captors, a young man the group nicknamed "Junior," offered the men water. The others declined, possibly because unbottled water can be contaminated in Iraq, but Loney accepted, the first step in his strategy of survival. "*Rahma ala waldayek*," he said, surprising his captor. Roughly translated, it means "May God have mercy on your parents," an honorific that Loney hoped would make the captors recognize his humanity.

As their captivity stretched into weeks, the men were kept shackled day and night and often blindfolded. Unlike the experience of other foreign hostages, however, some of whom were beaten or tortured before being killed, they were treated relatively respectfully. As many as 30 to 40 Iraqis are kidnapped each day in the country;

most are held for ransom, though some are symbolically—and often brutally—murdered as part of raging sectarian violence. For a short time an Iraqi man was held in the house. Loney heard him pleading in Arabic and sobbing. Then, several of their captors could be heard half-carrying the struggling man past the door of their room. Loney assumed he was a collaborator, almost certainly being taken to his death.

Months later, sitting in the safety of his Toronto home, he explained the shame he felt. "To preserve my life, I chose not to do something. With that man, not standing up for him, I lost something of myself."

As the weeks passed, a rhythm developed. Each day the hostages prayed and did exercises. Sometimes they played tic-tac-toe on the floor. Often Loney thought to himself, *I'm grateful because I'm not cold, I'm not in pain, I'm not being tortured. There's some meaning in all this, even if I don't understand it now.* Their captors spoke limited English, but whenever possible the hostages tried to communicate, using a combination of English, Arabic and hand gestures, believing that the more they were seen as human beings, the harder it would be for their captors to harm them.

As time passed, the hostages were able to establish a relationship with their captors. Knowing the reverence

Muslim men hold for their mothers, Loney would remind them of his own mother waiting for him in Canada. They would look pained and assure the men that their release was imminent. At one point, when a depressed Junior talked about becoming a suicide bomber, Loney, who had heard Junior complain constantly of neck pain, dared to give him a neck massage, an especially physical and intimate gesture. At Christmas, the captors brought a cake decorated with white icing and images of flowers and a palm tree.

When they began singing "Happy Birthday" in broken English, Loney realized they were referring to the birth of Jesus. In turn, Loney and the others sang "Silent Night" and other carols, much to their captors' delight.

A few months later, on February 12, 2006, the captors told the men they

would be released. Arrangements were made for them to be taken away, one by one, with the American, Tom Fox, taken first. But hours passed, and soon the remaining men realized they were not leaving. On March 9, Fox's body was found with gunshot wounds to the head and chest, news the hostages found out from the television the captors had on all the time in another room. It was a stark reminder of the terrible danger they were in.

Early on the morning of March 23, Loney heard a door crash in, and a team of British soldiers crowded into the room. They were free. The three surviving hostages were flown by helicopter into the Green Zone, where they were examined in a hospital and fed. Although it was 2:30 a.m. in his hometown of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., Loney's first phone call was to his parents. His mother, Claudette, answered.

Loney was surrounded by his loved ones when he finally made it back home.



"Mom, it's me, James. I'm out. I'm free."

When his father, Patrick, got on the line, he said to his son: "Thank God."

"Yes," Loney replied. "Thank God."

"And thank Allah," added his father.

FOR LONEY, the aftermath of his ordeal has been surreal, a series of baby steps back to normalcy. He spent two weeks in Sault Ste. Marie with his family, a period his mother describes as being "like all Christmases rolled into one," then he returned to Toronto.

At first he found himself living entirely in the present, never sure how he should feel, unfocused and unable to make plans. Walking around his neighbourhood seemed miraculous simply because he was free to do anything he wanted. Doing dishes or a load of laundry became wondrous acts, yet he couldn't meet many people or take phone calls because it was too emotionally demanding. Surprisingly, he didn't have nightmares—but sudden loud noises made him jump, instantly alert, adrenaline pumping.

When I first met with Loney last June, he pondered the ironies of his rescue. In the Green Zone, he was astounded to discover the resources and manpower marshalled to save his life. "I was rescued by the very system that, as a peace activist, I'm in conflict with," he says today. "I was saying thank you to the minister of Foreign Affairs, but I could as easily have been outside his office with a megaphone and leaflets. So it's this paradox of the pacifist Christian anarchist rescued by the state."

Loney recalls the comforting air-

force crew flying him from Baghdad to the United Arab Emirates and the RCMP officer shedding tears of happiness that he was safe. "I've seen the goodness of people that I might not have seen otherwise, their integrity about serving their country. So it's more complicated in a way."

Asked what he'd learned from the experience, Loney thought back to the Iraqi man carried struggling from the house in Baghdad. "That I'm really weak and fragile," he says. "The desire to live was so powerful in me that I compromised what I believe."

Although Loney knew his captors were committing crimes and were capable of brutal acts, his attitude towards them was one of concern. Knowing that one of them had been arrested and had led the military to them, he withheld some details from authorities about the captors, worried about the system of violence that surrounds detention, extracting information and punishment.

WHEN I spoke to him again in early September, he was surprised to find himself still wrestling with his feelings. A recent investigative report by *The Christian Science Monitor* suggested that the kidnapping ring responsible for Loney's abduction had also been behind three other hostage takings, including the abduction and murder of Irish aid worker Margaret Hassan, a woman Loney had met and admired.

"I can see the brutality and ruthlessness of what my captors were about more clearly through what hap-

pened to Margaret,” said Loney. “She has become a lens through which I can see what happened to the three of us, and what happened to Tom [Fox].” But, he added, “that doesn’t change what I feel about our captors being human beings, first and foremost, with good and bad in them.”

Loney was struggling with his words, trying to explain to a stranger what he was having trouble understanding himself. In psychologist Judith Herman’s landmark book, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, which Loney has read, the author writes: “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness.”

While Loney and his colleagues weren’t physically brutalized, Loney says they developed a kind of “emotional disconnect” in order to survive. The process of resolving and integrating those feelings continues today. Loney met with a traditional therapist but decided his spirituality is so profoundly part of him that he was better off seeing a Franciscan brother who is an experienced counsellor.

Rather than go back to work with CPT in the fall, Loney decided to write about his experience and to accept the dozen or so speaking engagements he was being offered. In September he spoke at the Faith and Social Justice caucus meeting during the federal NDP convention in Quebec City. Other events included a conference in October in Edmonton called “Building World Peace: The Role of Religions and Human Rights,” co-chaired by former senator Douglas Roche, and, in

November, a United Church of Canada conference in Peterborough.

Loney isn’t sure whether this new profile is a blessing or a curse. One day he received an invitation to a party hosted by then Liberal Opposition leader Bill Graham. Graham had voted to extend Canada’s mission in Afghanistan, a move Loney opposes. Referring to his goals as an activist, he says, “I had an image the other day of this big rock that needs to be moved. Before, I might have had a little crowbar to try to move it and now I have this bigger tool that can be used. But the important thing for me is to remain grounded, not to become lost in the galas and invitations.”

Throughout our conversations, there were long pauses as Loney tried to put his thoughts into words. “I’m still in the process of understanding what the experience means and how it has changed me,” he says. “It’s not a finished work by any means.”

THREE months later, after the London press conference, Loney reflected on the latest development: the possibility of testifying against his captors. “Is justice punishment or is it the restoration of a relationship that has been broken or harmed by violence?” he asked softly. “We originally went to Iraq to speak about peace and breaking the cycle of violence there.

“Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: ‘There’s no future without forgiveness.’ I believe that. Forgiveness opens up the possibility that something new and different can happen in the future.” ■