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### [Guest viewpoint: Inquiry into use of torture can cleanse our national soul](http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/news/sevendays/15393898-35/story.csp)

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**BY DANIEL BRYANT**

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In 1980, I spent an extraordinary week working with 60 young adults from Germany doing chores in Auschwitz.

We read SS files recording thousands of deaths and spoke with two survivors of the concentration camp. In the exit debriefing, every one of those young Germans said, "I am not responsible for the sins of my parents. I am responsible, as a German, to see to it that such horrors never happen again."

I wonder if many in this country would say the same.

On June 9, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., stood on the floor of the Senate and told his colleagues that, based on new information he had received, the story we have been fed about "waterboarding" is false.

"Everything we know," he forcefully reported, "is wrong."

Whitehouse's admission illustrates why the full story of the torture done in our name needs to be told. Aside from the current controversy over more damaging photos showing abuse of prisoners, there is much we do not yet know of the terror we implemented against others in our response to the terror aimed against us.

Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, chief of staff for former Secretary of State Colin Powell, reported that the "harsh interrogation in April and May 2002 ... was not aimed at pre-empting another terrorist attack on the U.S. but discovering a smoking gun linking Iraq and al-Qaeda."

Jonathan Shell makes a compelling case in the May 27 issue of The Nation magazine that the war in Iraq didn't produce the torture so much as that "torture ... produced the war": The "evidence" produced by torture provided the justification needed for the war.

The only problem? Much of the evidence was false.

For many compelling reasons, we need complete, honest and nonpartisan disclosure of what our government has done in our name. But the greatest reason is simply that torture is a moral issue. It is contrary to our nation's values, and only by fully telling the story of what we have done can we cleanse this wound on our nation's soul and redeem ourselves as the true leader of democracy, liberty and justice in the eyes of the world.

Torture, always done under the cloud of secrecy, corrupts everything and everyone it

touches. Only by piercing that secrecy can we protect ourselves from its evil.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has powerfully said, “We must not allow ourselves to become like the system we oppose.”

For these and many more reasons, a large and growing group of religious leaders came together June 11 in Washington, D.C., to call for a Commission of Inquiry on torture. The sponsor, the National Religious Committee Against Torture, includes the leaders of 250 religious organizations and faith communities.

The committee’s letter to President Obama states, “As people of faith, we know that only the truth can set us free. We must therefore, as a nation, be mature and honest enough to examine fully and disclose completely the wrong doing that has been committed.

“The transparency and openness of a Commission of Inquiry will help to hold us all accountable for the policies and acts of torture carried out in our name. Accountability is essential in a nation of laws.”

In delivering this letter, 33 of us met with seven members of the White House staff in a respectful conversation. We expressed our appreciation that President Obama responded positively to our earlier request for an executive order banning the use of torture by our government, which he did on his second day of office. We called upon the president to initiate a Commission of Inquiry, which he currently opposes.

We believe that such a commission will help us to heal the damage done to our standing in the international community and will be the only means by which we can guarantee effective safeguards to prevent the use of torture by our government ever again.

As religious leaders, we believe that this is critical to the well-being of our soul as a nation. The traditions of our faith teach us that confession is essential for forgiveness and that healing comes through truth.

We are learning slowly of the torture methods employed by our government. The question no longer is: Did our government engage in torture? Now the question is: Who is taking responsibility to see that it never happens again?

We may not be responsible for all that was done in our name. But as Americans, it is our responsibility to see that it never happens again.

*Daniel Bryant is the senior minister of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Eugene. He attended the June 11 event in Washington, D.C., as a past president of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon.*