

PREFACE

by Lance Lindsey

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Andrea: Unhappy the land that has no heroes.

Galileo: Unhappy the land that needs heroes.

—*Galileo*, Bertolt Brecht

The book you hold in your hands is extraordinary on many levels. It is first and foremost the story of an extraordinary life, and an extraordinary man who insists on his ordinariness: *Just Call Me Mike*. This genuine modesty stems not only from a strong belief that despite his celebrity and the public recognition of his many personal accomplishments he is really no different than other caring, thoughtful citizens committed to making a difference in the world, but also from the conviction that most people, no matter their situation or calling, can be inspired to care and think deeply about what it means to be human—which is essentially what Mike's book is about and what it achieves. This is a man who has woven together art and conscience into a phenomenal life of absolute integrity.

Mike's book is also the story of our times. It is a compelling and often disturbing document that explores the best and the worst in us: at once a celebration of personal courage and human dignity, and a passionate indictment of the much too frequent moral cowardice and political maliciousness of our day. It is a clear-eyed, straight-talking critique of contemporary events, from Vietnam to 9/11 and the war in Iraq, and a transfixing depiction of Mike's struggle to come to terms with the human condition in an age of increasing global immiseration of the human spirit. It is, finally, an enthralling coming-of-age story

and powerful memoir giving us fascinating insights into Hollywood and the entertainment industry, including of course the pinnacle of American television programming, *M*A*S*H*; providing a unique perspective on national and international political and human rights activism; delivering a riveting account of the formidably engaged life and mind of a man made for these complex and challenging times.

B.J. Hunnicut, the character Mike played on *M*A*S*H*, lectured Hawkeye (Alan Alda) after he surgically neutralized a bloodthirsty U.S. commander in the “Preventative Medicine” episode: “You treated a symptom. The disease goes merrily on.” Mike has dedicated his life to exposing the appalling symptoms and eradicating the diseases of human injustice and violence that destroy so many lives wherever they are explicitly or complicitly permitted to go “merrily on.” He has spent a lifetime traveling the world to confront, witness, document, and report on the brutalities, suffering, and unremitting horror brought on by war, poverty, sickness, and the barbaric practices of governments more concerned with maintaining death-dealing power than maintaining the life-enhancing health and welfare of their people.

His has not been, and is not now, a quixotic journey: Mike is too much the unflinching realist to mistake windmills for dragons; he sees clearly the truth in all its many-sidedness, whether in Rwanda, Cambodia, El Salvador, Washington, D.C., Texas, or California. Confronting this truth and speaking it to power comes as naturally to Mike as talking to Bill O’Reilly on FOX News or addressing hundreds of protesters at the gates of San Quentin the night of an execution. To struggle ceaselessly against the bloody tide of violence and injustice is not misguided idealism, but a fundamental moral imperative and the most pragmatic of commitments if we honestly refuse to lower ourselves as a society to the worst that is in us and surrender to fear, hate, and the hopelessness of the inhuman.

The ultimate inhuman and degrading practice by any society, which Mike has spent a lifetime opposing, is the state-sanctioned killing of prisoners. The brutal and brutalizing use of torture and

death—whether as instruments of a government’s social policy or as a cunning political strategy to win votes from a media-numbed and fearful electorate—is a fundamental human rights abuse and is profoundly spiritually corrosive to individuals and societies. Mike is not afraid to connect the dots for us if we won’t or can’t ourselves:

Killing serves no human purpose. Killing in America’s prisons is a cleaner-appearing, more “acceptable” version of the butchery in Rwanda’s churches. As one dies at the hands of another, the killer dies in part as well. In this civilized, sophisticated, God-fearing, law-abiding country, those who stand by in silence, whether they understand it or not, are part of the killing (page 303).

While Rwanda no longer executes its prisoners (and neither do the majority of nations in the world), the U.S. continues to condemn men and women to death “in a freakish and discriminatory manner,” as Supreme Court Justice William Brennan once put it. Mike’s journey, our journey, must continue as well.

Just Call Me Mike: A Journey to Actor and Activist is manifesto for *tikkun olam*, Hebrew for “repairing/perfecting the world;” and as the great Quaker William Penn once wrote, “To help mend this world is true religion.” The book should be nailed to the office doors of every politician who thinks that leadership is expressed in the building of walls, the conducting of wars, and the construction of death chambers. But it is not just a call to action, what the Buddhists call “heart-work,” though it does serve that important purpose. It is also an old-fashioned call to find goodness in our lives and in the lives of others, no matter who they are or what they have done. Mike quotes from Nelson Mandela: “Man’s goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.”

We are desperately in need of heroes like Mike, who speak to us not just from the barricades but from the bottom of their hearts about the lessons they’ve learned in their courageous engagement with the world, and in their fight for the survival of decency and human

dignity in our “unhappy land.” For Mike it comes down to something simple, modest, like himself, but often forgotten among all the slogans and banners of professional activism: “Love, respect, and attention” are the necessary conditions for mending the world, and unless we find the will and the courage to activate them in our daily lives, our activism remains hollow and ineffectual. By this standard alone, Mike Farrell is the most extraordinary activist and citizen of our time.