Invigilating, it was called in the British educational system: Sitting at a desk in front of a roomful of examinees, carefully watching for any sign of cheating: a drab and dismal occupation!

How different now is standing vigil on the sidewalk in front of the federal courthouse with a bagful of another kind of sign: posters, handheld, on sticks or strung around the neck, in protest of the continued war on the Iraqi people, of the governmental 'leadership' that prosecutes and the people who support it. Once a week for one hour is not so much, even in the cold and the wet; and the responses are heartening, even when they are negative, as inevitably some are.

A kid on a bike rode past, wheeled, came back mulling his words, then turned again and blurted,

"If I had my way, we'd bomb them all!"

What to say? Thank goodness he doesn't, but acknowledging that wouldn't help. I was at a loss. Best I could come up with was,

"So sorry for your loss!" and leave him to wonder, if he would, what I could possibly think was missing from his life.

"Aren't you ashamed?", another once taunted. Well, yes, but of rather different things, you and I, I gather.

This week was the annual holiday parade. Separately two old codgers drifted by, surveying the inscriptions: Stop Bush's War; Out of Iraq Now; War is not a Moral Value, etc.

"Don't you feel silly now?", one inquired thinking of the election's results perhaps? The issues remain the same! No, not silly; noble, although perhaps with a hint of superiority I'd be loathe to admit to him. To be right and in the minority is bracing against the cold wind.

"What are you fellas in favor of?", another asked later on.

My companion on the left responded, "Peace!"

"Ha!", the questioner replied, "Let me know if you find it!"

Amen. He didn't leave his contacts.

But then, a mother walked by, led by a child of perhaps four, who stopped, read the first poster carefully, planted her feet firmly and turned to her parent,
"It says STOP!"

Intending not to move until it said "GO"? Well brought up! She reads and attends to the message. Nice to know some are so affected!

At least a couple of times each week someone stops to thank us quietly for "the work you do!" That's enough to keep me going and reminds me to do the same for others when I see them so engaged.

A young woman stepped out of the company she kept and asked if she could take our pictures.

"Sure!" She did so, twice, flashed a beautiful smile and beamed, "I'm taking these back to France to show some people: we're not so bad as they think!" Some of us, anyway.

This vigil has been going, off-and-on, since the days of Vietnam with varying constancy, a life of its own though the personnel change. What a sorry statement about our country and the severity of its learning disability! And a happy statement about the resilience and persistence of some of its citizens. I am reminded of the mantra of little Nkosi, the South African AIDS activist, who died at twelve but left his mark:

"Do all you can, with what you have, in the time you have, in the place you are."

This week, for the parade, we stayed an extra 20 minutes to catch the crowd. Toward the end, a clerical collar I didn't recognize walked up - "Thank you for your ministry!" - and walked away. I'd never been called a minister before. Wasn't so bad, although I prefer to think of it terms of reasserting Orwell's dictum:

"If freedom means anything it is the freedom to tell others things they don't want to hear!"

Do all you can.

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