

Coping With Trauma and Hatred: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Let me begin with a story, adapted from Melanie the Senarchie, in the Rocky Mountain Storytellers' Guild Newsletter:

A youngster tells grandfather how angry he is at a schoolmate who had done him harm. Grandfather responds:

"I too have hated people who have done me wrong, but it did not help me. It is like me taking poison and thinking that will harm my enemy. There are two people in my breast, one is good, gentle, friendly, lives in harmony with neighbors and nature. The other is resentful, does not think clearly, because he is too angry. It is hard for me to live with these two aspects in me. Each tries to dominate."

The boy looks intently into his grandfather's eyes and asks, "Which side wins?" Grandfather replies "The one I feed".

On January 18 2001, 8 months ago, my minister, the Reverend Randy Becker wrote prophetically:

"What seems to arise in people who have a sense of powerlessness? The energy they have within themselves is insufficient, so they seek more energy and find it in hating. What is the recourse in the face of hatred? It is to refuse to feed the energy in that direction, and to strive to help the individual or culture to be empowered."

And here is Randy's punch line: "No one needs to hate when they feel whole in themselves."

At our Williamsburg congregation, we met the evening of September 11, the day that the Towers came crashing down upon thousands of our brothers and sisters. We shared among ourselves what we were feeling. We were not yet ready to look for answers, for solutions. We needed to be in touch with our feelings.

When it was my turn, I said: "I feel helpless, as helpless as the day when my President, John F. Kennedy was assassinated, as helpless as when my brother, brother Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis." I broke down in tears, for several minutes, I sobbed.

Powerlessness can lead us in different directions. In the case of the terrorists, they perceived themselves as powerless, resulting in anger, hatred, and eventually an orgy of destruction. In my case, powerlessness fed deep sadness, along with anxiety about the future of my children, my grandchildren, and in a grandiose way, even the future of civilization.

The fact that I allowed myself to genuinely feel my feelings of helplessness, grief, and despair, enabled a catharsis, letting go, moving on. I needed to own my feelings, and equally important to

do so in a safe environment, among co-religionists and friends, a gift for which I am deeply grateful. Today, five days later, I am able to stand before you without the heavy burden of repressed feelings.

The opening story and Randy Becker's comments about the nature of hatred, express very well the predicament in which we find ourselves. "Which side wins? The side that hates, or the one that is ready to rebuild upon the ashes and the rubble of the World Trade Towers?" I hope we will not build monuments to human pride, but reconstruct in humble awareness of how vulnerable we are, physically and spiritually, how vulnerable our civilization is.

By way of analogy: The wounds of Vietnam and the post-traumatic stress have been very deep, but instead of glorifying that terrible war, the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, with the names of the victims, in its utter simplicity, has helped us deal with our grief and anger, irrespective of whether we were for or against the war.

As I see it, our administration notwithstanding, we are not faced with a simplistic fight between barbarism and civilization. I am not prepared to yield to jingoism that parades as patriotism, I refuse to be a front-line soldier in the "first war of the new millennium." My struggle is for harmony, harmony among the world's religions and the nations of this planet.

Lest this be perceived as utopian, I stand with Muhammad, who after establishing Islam in the Arabian peninsula, warned that henceforth jihad, did not mean holy war against an enemy out there, but to strive inwardly to be the best we can be, attuned to the principle of unity, oneness, and peace.

Have we learnt nothing from the century-old conflicts in Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle-East, and other perennial trouble spots on the globe? Is it not obvious to all who have eyes to see how revenge only leads to more revenge?

Let us not engage in a vicious spiral of mutual destruction, sucking into a blackhole of blinding hatred whatever tender seeds of compassion and humanity were nurtured through the ages.

Our President has been repeating the mantra "We are at war." At the rhetorical level, the drumbeat has invites us into a war against terrorists, and those who harbor them, wherever they are.

In a moment of calm reflection, it seems more like a war of the demons of self-righteousness against the angels of our better nature.

I have been wondering why does our administration invoke the imagery of going to war? I fear that the reason might be to eliminate any restraints that derive from the War Powers legislation, to eliminate the checks and balances so vital to the functioning of a democratic form of government.

Why do we as a nation tolerate that legitimate public outrage and genuine world-wide sympathy be turned into unleashing the hounds of war? Why do we not deal with the situation as crimes

perpetrated by a band of fanatics rather than issue a warlike call to arms. It seems to me that it makes more sense to bring terrorists to justice, than to mobilize 50.000 reservists and prepare the public and our armed forces for an all-out attack with no concern for potentially excruciating collateral damage to civilians.

We claim to be a nation of laws, and in that spirit I would propose that the United Nations (not just Pakistan) prevail upon the Afghanistan government that it hand over Bin Laden and his co-conspirators to the International Court of Justice in the Hague. Why not take the high road of bringing suspected terrorists to court, rather than plunge the world into the abyss of war?

Let me close with with words from Project Ploughshares, adapted:

Lead us from death to life, From falsehood to truth. Lead us from despair to hope, From fear and anger to faith. Lead us from rumors of war to peace with justice. May love and compassion fill our hearts, the hearts of our nation and the world.

Enough said from the pulpit. It is your turn to share your feelings, experiences, and insights.

Closing benediction by teenager Anne Frank, Holocaust victim:

"In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever-approaching thunder which will destroy us too. I can feel the sufferings of millions, and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think it will all come out right, that this cruelty will end, and the tranquility will return again. In the meantime I must uphold me ideals, for perhaps the time will come, when I shall be able to carry them out."

The time to uphold our vision, the time to carry it out is now and forever more. Amen