

Joy and Woe...and Anger, Too

Jean M. Rowe, September 16, 2001
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We here at Neshoba have run through a full range of emotions this week. Big emotions. Last Sunday, joy. Great pride and joy in celebrating the beginning of a new program year, and more so in the afternoon, when with trumpets, trombones and flutes, chimes and a 32 voice choir, we celebrated the dedication of this lovely building. I grinned so much my cheeks hurt. We drank champagne. We laughed at clowns. We planted a tree in hope and faith for the future. We had a merry, merry day and drove home happily.

Just as I drove into the parking lot Tuesday morning at 8 to meet a Bellsouth telephone installer I heard the news on NPR...little news, then. It was thought that a commuter plane had hit the World Trade Center. An hour later I learned, from the builder and a painter, that there was more. All hell had broken loose. You know the rest.

We felt it... and with all America continue to feel it: anger, pain, sorrow, shock, rage, betrayal, as well as despair, fear, anguish, horror and broken-heartedness (which is, I think, a feeling beyond sorrow.) Broken heartedness is that dreadful feeling that grabs hold of your gut and keeps a lump in your throat while you feel powerless and numb and realize that the grief you feel is real and won't go away. The relatives of the missing people in New York who walk the streets with posters of their dear ones, hoping without much hope that they will turn up in a hospital bed are feeling broken hearted. We grieve for them and those who died. What a Pandora's box of horrors has been loosed this week and we are reeling with feelings!

A poem by William Blake has run through my head all week. It's in our hymn book, #17, set to music. The second line goes like this: "Joy and woe are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine." I have felt a range of emotions from joy to broken-heartedness. But not anger. Not yet, anyway. The growing amount of anger and rage out there just increases my fear and concern, as I know it has for many of you.

We Americans are not alone.

We get word from all over the world that people in other lands are feeling attacked, and horrified and saddened as well. The rush of emotion and prayer has been global.

From the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem—the Christmas Church, the pastor, a Palestinian named Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb writes:

"Dear Brothers and Sisters, we are stunned at the enormous tragedy that hit the USA yesterday and caused great suffering to the American people. As we grieve the loss of so many lives, we share your sorrow, fear and concern for your loved ones and all innocent people, victims of hatred and sick minds. The extent of the catastrophe reveals the vulnerability and weakness of human beings and governments in the face of terror."

Yes indeed. We are all brought to our knees.

Now. Now in this dawning of the new millennium everyone on the planet knows that none of us are completely safe from terrorist attack, and all of us are in this vulnerable state together.

All of us.

The rules and regulations and military codes of honor so painstakingly worked out over the centuries to protect civilians and hold identified tribes or nation states accountable for their aggression are ignored by the terrorists. It's like living in the wild again. The civilized, orderly people of good will are prey to marauding bands of wild animals or robbers or pirates.

Perhaps these enormous attacks on big strong buildings in our national centers of power have led us to feel again the elemental feelings that ancient people felt as they lived in precarious housing surrounded by ferocious animals and wild storms. Life wasn't gently lived back then. It was rude and abrupt and tough. It was hard-edged and full of brutal reality. For a century or so we've been shielded from starkness by thickly insulated walls, central heat and more recently cooling, convenient supermarket food, abundant toys and easy transportation.

Except in wartime, and most of that on foreign soil, most of us haven't lived precariously, at least those of us in the middle class or higher. There are Americans among us who through dire poverty or ill fortune have lived in urban jungles of gangster warfare.

Perhaps we lucky American moderns have just come home to the truth of human existence, once again. Perhaps it was life's way of saying to us: don't forget to be humble. Don't be up in the air too much. Get back to basics. Stay rooted in what's real and what matters. Restore balance in the world. Life is damned fragile, don't take easy things for granted, evil is real and living can be very, very hard. Muck abounds. All of us on the planet must now band together as people of good will.

We really are all on the planet together. **We cannot ignore, belittle, mistreat, fail to listen to others without somewhere, somehow, in some way being bitten.** Once again this truth comes home. **You cannot have peace without justice.** And where injustice is allowed to fester, there will be violence. This is the human condition. When people have nothing to lose, they strike back.

In the masses of words I read on websites and in emails this week, I came across these words in a statement by the Legislative Committee of the Society of Friends:

"The people who planned these suicide attacks were able to draw volunteers from a growing number of people around the world who harbor deep resentment and anger toward the U.S. It is important that we in the U.S. try to hear and understand the sources of this anger. If we in the U.S. do not seek to understand and address the roots of this anger – poverty, injustice and hopelessness—then the violence may well continue, no matter what the U.S. does to try to prevent it."

Emilio Viano, a terrorism expert at American University in Washington, says *"The most constructive response...would be to become much more engaged in the Middle East. The region has been neglected, and to the extent we have been involved, it has been increasingly interpreted as acting on the side of Israel. There is tremendous rage among Palestinians, and that has fueled the fires of fundamentalism,"* says Professor Viano. *"It would be more constructive to go to the root of all of this, and that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."*

And, I would add, the continuing conflict with Iraq.

I repeat: We really are all on the planet together. We cannot ignore, belittle, mistreat, fail to listen to others without somewhere, somehow, in some way being bitten back.

In the decades after World War II we learned how to turn enemies into friends. We paid attention. We spent time in Germany and Japan. We spent money trying to help them rebuild. We spent energy learning to understand their culture. We became friends. There is a lesson here.

One Jesus taught us so long ago: Blessed are the merciful, for in return theirs is the gift of giving. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall be at one with themselves and the universe. Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is a kinship with everything that is holy. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for the truth will set them free. (paraphrased by Forrester Church)

Our government will take military action as we are able. I believe our government must take strong action, but our leaders must be very wise in discerning how to do this. This is a cunning and sophisticated enemy and our response must be wise and politically cunning. This is my prayer for our leadership: that they may have the heart, courage, wisdom, delicacy and power to find the right responses. Our impulse is to be quickly decisive in an indecisive situation, and the right response may be long range and strategic and cunning, as well. **The rules of battle are unclear and the enemy hidden.**

And at the same time, we need to befriend. There is a poem by Edwin Markham that is appropriate: "They drew a circle that shut me out, heretic, rebel, a thing to flout; but love and I had the wit to win: we drew a circle that took him in." We need to learn more about Islam and Arabs. We need to find ways to reach the people in the middle east as people who suffer and hurt and get angry. We must work in all ways to bring people together. This week your Board of Directors voted to send a letter of friendship to the three Muslim mosques in Memphis and offering safe space to meet in if needed.

This is the message of hope. This is the song of peace in the midst of wartime. And this is wartime, let us be clear about that. There is no longer "business as usual." We are going to see many changes in security, vigilance, military and economic spheres. **We've been smashed into a new era during this first year of the new millennium.**

Yet we are alive and we are strong and we can choose life and understanding and hope. We can speak the language of understanding. We can sow seeds of peace and kinship with all living things. We can say words that cool hot heads and rash rhetoric, and we can witness for a

perspective on people and cultures that is inclusive, not militant. **We can stare down and outpray the impulses to hatred and revenge; and we can speak up to bullies and the excessively righteous who engage in the rhetoric of bad theology. We can do this. You and I are not powerless.**

"This day I have set before you life and death," says the writer of Deuteronomy. "Therefore, choose life that you and your descendents may live." Therefore choose life, and inclusiveness and understanding.

Our choices matter. From this day forth, we must choose life for the world's sake, for freedom's sake, for our country's sake, for our children's sake, for truth and goodness. Now we are awake to the extent of misery and meanness and hatred in our world. It is in our midst. Joy and woe are woven fine in this life we live. Now we know. Now we know. And now we must act on what we know.

Every night and every morn some to misery are born;

Every morn and every night some are born to sweet delight.

Joy and woe are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine;

Under every grief and pine runs a joy with silken twine.

It is right it should be so: we were made for joy and woe;

And when this we rightly know, safely through the world we go.

May God bless us everyone in the weeks and months and years ahead, and especially our President and those who must make difficult decisions on our behalf. Amen. Amen.