

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

On the morning of September 11, 2001, humanity arrived at a moral crossroads.

Acts of such extreme disregard for the sanctity of individual lives, for the values of civilization, and for the tenets of every religion must not, cannot, occur without a powerful, immediate response. The question the entire human race faces now is: What response do we make?

Could the collective thinking of the entire free world even begin to arrive at a response sufficiently horrific to be equally impactful on the minds of terrorists who have absolutely no respect for life and consider suffering and death for their own cause noble? Could we call it revenge, and feel satisfied? How much horror would it take to “make up for” the horror we have just witnessed? Is it possible for people who cherish human freedom and care deeply for human beings and practice faiths based on love, charity and forgiveness even to contemplate vengeance without sacrificing their own spiritual integrity? If we ferret out and destroy nations and individuals or groups who are filled with hatred and blood-lust for those they hate, will that forever end hatred, or will it simply end the sordid lives of those who openly hate now, taking with them the innocent lives of countless others? Will that address the source of such hatred? Will the awful deeds called forth by vengeance imperil the sanity and well-being of the perpetrators of such vengeance? How does killing people who kill people ever put an end to killing?

The moral crossroads are: War, or peace? Hatred, or love? Vengeance, or transcendence? Power, or empowerment? Suffering, or grace?

Those who plotted, planned and executed stupendously brutal acts of mass destruction were willing to inflict massive death and die themselves for their ideas, ideas that represent a twisted interpretation of a compassionate religious doctrine. They were consumed with arrogance and immersed in their own conviction that their gross, unconscionable deeds will be rewarded by the deity they worship. But we cannot hate them without the context of understanding that they are not alone. Brothers have shed the blood of brothers, families have shed the blood of families, sects have shed the blood of sects, races have shed the blood of races, nations have shed the blood of nations throughout history -- and continue to do so today -- for the same reason: reckless, unwavering devotion to an idea that appeared more important to them than life itself, with no understanding of where ideas come from, or why they seem so important.

Vengeance is such an idea. Anger is such an idea. Defense of a proud nation is such an idea. (And do we not know in our heart of hearts that this proud nation needs no more “defense” before the rest of the world than the sight of hundreds of brave men and

women in New York risking their own lives fearlessly for the fragile hope of saving even one other life in the face of overwhelming, stinking death?)

Within the ancestral memory of our own vibrant nation is a civil war so brutal, so miserable, so devastating to those who fought it that we can barely tolerate, today, the reading of the words they wrote to describe the horror of that war or the cruelty of the slavery that precipitated it. As many people died in the battle of Gettysburg alone as are estimated, now, to have perished in the World Trade Center. Within the ancestral memory of our own vibrant nation is the genocide of Native Americans justified by a stance of racial and religious superiority so reprehensible that we have buried the true history of it in euphemisms and platitudes. And we are not alone, either. These are harsh memories; they are but fragments of the collective harsh memories of mankind. From the dawn of time, the unspeakable has occurred side by side with the sublime and we have known that humanity is capable of anything.

No individual, no culture, no race, no nation can claim perfection of thoughts or deeds. Yet every human being, every culture, every race and every nation can claim the perfection of the purity of the energy that precedes all thoughts and deeds, of whatever universal power they will call God, before the forms they give it to name it. And every human being, every culture, every race and every nation can claim access to the infinite perfectibility of those forms, which still can neither describe nor proscribe the ultimate perfection of the formless from which they were formed.

And that is why, within the ancestral memory of our own vibrant nation is Ellis Island heralded by the Statue of Liberty and a sincere welcome for many races, many cultures, many creeds. And that is why, within the ancestral memory of our own vibrant nation, is the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, that created the most extraordinary opportunity for the expression of freedom, creativity and opportunity ever seen on earth. We celebrate so many triumphs of the spirit, victories small and large over oppression, tyranny, violence, greed, hatred and fear. In that, too, we are not alone. Not alone at all.

The human race is connected not by common beliefs, not by common deeds, not by common history, but by common ability to conceive of its own ideas and bring them to life to create history – any ideas, any history. The human race is connected at the source, by the flow of perfect formlessness into all that has been formed, is being formed, shall be formed. The human race is not alone, but part of the whole of creation, a tiny fragment of the oneness that is the universal all.

If we do not understand that our own ideas are merely metaphors of the process of creation itself, then we cannot understand the power of ideas, the elemental force of thoughts as they form to impel actions and create the realities in which we live. Failing to understand that, we are doomed to repeat history mindlessly, lost in our memories. If we come to understand the formless power from which ideas and impulses spring, and come

to appreciate the gift of that power to allow us to be capable of absolutely anything, we are empowered to create new stories, to step beyond the boundaries of our memories and the constraints of our familiar thoughts, and live the lives we want, regardless of what has happened in the past, even the recent past, even yesterday.

Nothing we can do as a nation can bring back the life we had on Monday, September 10. But we as individuals and as a nation have a choice about the life we will have on Monday, September 17, and on Monday September 24, and beyond. We do not have to wreak vengeance, declare war, and commit violence to atone for the violence committed. But we can. We do not have to find peace and comfort in our souls and seek new understanding that allows us to express our strength without force. But we can.

On Monday, September 10, I was engaged in a conversation with the leadership of The Sydney Banks Institute for Innate Health. Sydney Banks was a part of it. "People do not understand the enormity of the implications of understanding the principles behind life," he said. When he said it, I thought I did at least glimpse it, but I wondered if I was missing something. Within 24 hours, I knew I had been missing something, and I began to glimpse it: We either see how to create love in the world and understand the cycle of thinking that leads to both hatred and love, or we don't. The difference between we do or we don't is enormous. The implications for the future of mankind are enormous.

We stand on the brink of declaring a war that could end life as we know it. In doing so, we are declaring that the thinking of angry, vengeful people willing to sacrifice as many lives as necessary at any cost is justified -- when it is *our* thinking. We are declaring the actions of angry people who agree with us good; the actions of angry people who disagree with us evil. We are declaring that anger is power and we are declaring that we will give up whatever it takes to prove that our anger is more powerful than another's.

Does that make sense? Does that resonate in the soul as a wise, insightful, strong response to cowardice and terror? Is more terrible terror the antidote to terrible terror?

Like all of us, I have been getting well-meaning e-mails advocating "beautiful" sentiments — reminiscent of the "make love, not war" of our youth. Like all of us, I have been getting well-meaning e-mails advocating war and the utter destruction of our enemy. All those ideas, the beautiful and the awful, are compelling ideas that have arisen via the power of thought. There is a spiritual logic deeper than ideas and deeper than sentiment. It is the understanding that sets people free from their most disastrous thinking and empowers them to follow their most ennobling thinking. That logic separates thoughts we have had and the thinking we are now doing from the spiritual knowledge of our ability to keep doing it, to think beyond our current ideas, to know what we have never known before, to continue to respond to life with deeper and wiser ideas.

We can use our minds freely, in any way we see fit, at any moment. We can use our minds in pursuit of new wisdom, or in slavish devotion to old ideas. We can use our minds to create a magnificent Phoenix arising from the smoldering ashes of horror. Or not. The knowledge of that choice is the freedom to turn our back on the nightmares of mankind and live the life of our dreams. We can make that powerful, immediate response to everything we abhor, and choose to change the world. If not now, when?

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