

## IF NOW ... THEN WHAT?

Hatred, or love?

To reflect on these alternatives calls us to dive below the surface ripples of our accustomed thinking, below the shadowy, half-lit waters of the assumptions that drive it, and into the still, unlit depths beyond the reach of our senses but within the grasp of our souls. Perhaps this seems to be asking a lot – or too much – but we are surrounded with examples of many who have done this and risen to the surface inspired.

The thousands of stories of love and compassion emerging from our national tragedy are shining threads in the rich tapestry of many more thousands across the world who have set aside their initial hopelessness, anger and fear to discover their capacity for positive, gentle, caring responses to the most negative of horrifying circumstances. We are moved and deeply touched by these stories, even as we are troubled by the handful of stories of vengeful hate crimes and murder. Those among us who exploit and explode are few, we know, in comparison to those of us who love and serve.

When we look within ourselves, we see our unity and our generosity. We do not judge ourselves and mankind by the exceptions to that, by the predators among us. The qualities of concern and compassion that bind us together and elicit good will and good deeds are spiritual qualities, not national, ethnic, religious or political qualities. They are the common qualities of the innate health in humanity, so natural that they surface as readily in the worst of times as in the best. We take them for granted in the best of times; we are reminded of what Joseph Campbell called “the divinity in all people” when they manifest in the worst of times. We especially appreciate them with awe and gratitude for what becomes possible when we allow them to work within us, even against all odds, without losing faith in the good that can come of it, often in surprising ways.

Laying claim to these essential, spiritual truths in the name of a nation, an ethnic group, a religious doctrine, or a political system diminishes them, pulling them down from the neutral realm of the spiritual into the fractious realm of the secular. Boundaries and differences are man-made, variable products of the human imagination. The minds that establish boundaries and differences can change them, discard them, or cling to them. As we single-mindedly covet or hate or admire or love the particulars our thinking has created, we drift away from faith that the truth of the process of creation is a boundless, deeper mystery, beyond our comprehension because we ourselves are part of it, not it. No man-made idea is eternal; spiritual truth is eternal.

Spiritual truth makes mankind, makes the imagination possible, makes the human mind available to look both ways, before it has thought and after it has thought. Looking before

brings the humility of recognition that we do not know everything we want to know, and the ability to sustain hope and faith that we can discover wisdom beyond our present knowledge. Looking after brings the arrogance of believing that we have only what we already know to rely on and the desperation of searching for answers from our past. Looking before brings security in the face of circumstances. Looking after brings insecurity in the face of circumstances. Looking before puts us in a state from which surprising ideas, sometimes miracles, bring grace to our choices. Looking after holds our present thinking in place, offering no promise that we can do better than what we have done, or see more than what we have seen, to make our choices. If we live in the world we have formed, without reference to the formless which makes it possible, we are doomed to stay fixed in the best understanding we have come up with so far.

There are answers in that understanding. But to the degree that there is suffering in the world, that human beings are divided by the ideas they have made up about each other, that atrocities are tolerated (or worse yet applauded), then we have to admit that they are not the best answers. In all humility, at any moment, any person on earth could see beyond today's answers to fresh solutions filled with promise, just as any person on earth could become dispirited and lost in destructive, negative thoughts.

My parents' parents were grateful immigrants who took great pride in their new citizenship. I would not want to live anywhere but in the United States. I cherish our freedoms, our vitality, our strength and our opportunities. I would love to see the best of what this country has to offer available to all people who want it, everywhere. But I recognize that ours, like every country, is a system of common beliefs, held together by the continual regeneration of ideas about it among all its people. And I recognize that others, elsewhere, love their countries as much as we love ours, and hold dear their ideas, as well. That is the human condition; we are bound to experience our own ideas as real and important. It is easy to forget that countries, like individuals, change only as their thinking changes, and that they can change for the worse (towards insecurity, fear and alienation) or the better (towards security, love and connectedness) depending on the direction of that thinking.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century enlarged the family of man beyond the boundaries of nations, ethnic groups, religions, political systems. At its best, the family of man cherishes the uniqueness of national, ethnic, religious and political differences and enjoys sharing its rich diversity from the deeper stance of the spiritual unity of all mankind. Some members of this global family lose their footing in that unity and stumble, clinging desperately to differences. As alliances of nations formerly at odds have joined in a united voice against terror, we see more clearly the potential strength of the global family. Even as those who have stumbled away from the family scorn death and passionately invoke differences, the global family seeking peaceful resolution echoes the common ground of all faiths. That includes one tenet of Islam which prohibits murder, saying to kill one person is to kill all,

since all are one. That includes the Sixth Commandment: Thou shalt not kill. The global family echoes the spiritual essence at the heart of all faiths: love.

As difficult as this is to speak into the winds of war, the spiritual essence of all people is eternally present, even when it is lost to some. Can we go to our separate places of worship, which, in every corner of the world, in every shape and practice, teach us that God is Love, and imagine that we are greater than God and should therefore hate selectively? Can we cherish our deepest human qualities of compassion, understanding and forgiveness and imagine that we will find peace by getting in touch with vengeance, contempt and judgment? Can we revere the gift of life and imagine that we can advocate taking some life freely because of a righteous goal?

On our day of terror, September 11, I was in Baltimore in a meeting with an extraordinary group of people deeply committed to eliciting the innate health in the most “hopeless” members of our family of man and changing our world. Together, just before we watched in breathless horror the attack and conflagration and collapse of the World Trade Center, we had watched a videotape of prisoners in California who had rediscovered their innate health and reconnected to their spiritual essence. Some of these people had been capable of atrocity. In their criminal life, they had been coldly, boldly willing to do anything to get what they wanted. Transformed, they spoke openly of the release of their minds into the freedom to express love and respect for others; of their hope to contribute to the world now, even if from behind prison bars; of a change in them so deep they could scarcely imagine themselves as they were before; of the serene empowerment they felt in being ordinary human beings, connected to all others. What they learned was simple: We use the energy of life to think, and what we think becomes our perceived reality. The outside world is not making our experience of it; we are making up our minds moment-to-moment, and experiencing what we have created with our own thinking. Our whole world looks different and fills with new possibilities as we see our thinking for what it is and see that we can change our minds.

All of us were stunned with the realization that if the people flying those airplanes had learned what those prisoners learned, this horrible tragedy might not have happened. Suicidal terrorists may invoke God, but they have lost touch with the wholeness all people enjoy when their minds are free, and when their inner beauty is not covered by a blanket of intense habitual thinking.

If now, we could harness love and understanding in the world ... If now, we could unleash that power fearlessly ... If now, we could trust our faith in the fundamental truth in all spiritual teachings, that life is a gift that is ours neither to give nor to take, but to use for the continual creation of the world we want to experience ... If now, we could see that the power of thought is magnificent in its possibility and simple in its ease of change ...

Then what?

We do not know. That is the test of faith. It calls for KNOWING without knowledge because we have not yet had the new thoughts that will set us free from the past.

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