

TERRORISM

We are immersed in terror and rumor of terror and fear of terrorism. Many nations, many cultures, are engaged in “a war against terrorism” and struggling with the oxymoron contained therein: Isn’t war itself a form of terror?

We defend the deaths of others’ innocents resulting from the deaths of our innocents, and yet our souls are troubled, and it is hard to express why. It agitates the spirit to call dead mothers and fathers and children crumpled in bloody heaps “collateral damage” as deeply as it agitates the spirit to conceive of blameless people going about their morning’s work being “vaporized” in a jet fuel inferno set by a handful of men who hated a system of beliefs more than they cared for human life, even their own. In every group I’ve engaged with since mid-September, questions have been raised: What is terrorism, really? How could we stop it from recurring? What would it take for people never to think that way again? Some ideas have gelled in my mind.

Terrorism is the product of opinion disconnected from the soul.

Lest that statement be misunderstood, let me clarify the three essential terms. By opinion, I mean the Oxford English Dictionary definition: *what one thinks about something; judgment resting on grounds insufficient for complete demonstration*. By soul, I mean the Oxford English Dictionary definition: *the principle of life in man or animals; animate existence*. By terrorism I mean the Oxford English Dictionary definition: *a policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted; the employment of methods of intimidation*.

The seeds of terrorism are planted when an individual or group develops greater respect for personal ideas (opinions) than for common ground and connectedness with others and with life itself (soul). The essential act of terrorism is to dehumanize all who do not see the world according to the personal ideas of the terrorist(s). Those who are dehumanized are intended to be intimidated by that dehumanization.

By dehumanize I mean the Oxford English Dictionary definition: *to deprive of human character or attributes*. By intimidation I mean the Oxford English Dictionary definition: *inspire with fear; force or deter from some action by threats or violence*.

Terrorism takes many forms. Discrimination. Prejudice. Affront. Hatred. Exclusion. Accusation. Slavery. Murder. Slander. Abuse. Sabotage. Mockery. Torture. Humiliation. Repression. Inquisition. Superiority. Hostility. Insult. Crucifixion. Mortification. Vengeance. Sarcasm. Vendetta. The list could include hundreds of ways in which people exploit their imaginations to exert dominance over others.

The deepest human attribute is soul, the life force, the element of our common animate existence. Terrorists deny that universal human attribute. They assume the Orwellian notion that “some animals are better than others” and they assume that those who are able to engage in acts of terrorism have the preferential right to do so. Terrorists assume that the strength of their conviction about their opinions imbues them with the authority to express those opinions in ways deliberately intended to wreak havoc, with no concern for the effects of their terror on other human beings, no regard for others’ ideas or ideals and no respect for the sanctity of life. Terrorism is conceivable only in the minds of those who have lost touch with the ordinary human attributes we shared as children: reverence and enthusiasm for life and celebration of the diverse ways in which we all express that.

If terrorism is the product of opinion disconnected from the soul, what would happen if opinion were *reconnected* with the soul?

It seems self-evident that we all started our lives that way, with our personal thinking and our knowledge of the way we all live life connected comfortably with each other. Children enter their learning about life filled with questions, not answers. They enter their learning about life engaged in the fresh process of seeing with their own eyes, thinking with their own minds, making up their own worlds, and children intuitively seem to know that they’re all the same in that regard. Children tend to coexist peacefully, and play together creatively, regardless of differences of opinion, race, creed, or background. They are free of harshness and full of love and lively interest in all things new, including other children’s ideas. Little children have no need to kill other little children who disagree with them. They might avoid them, or choose to play with others or even build a personal fort in their own yards for a while, but it doesn’t register with little children to damage other little children in their own self-interest. We learn about that later.

Anything we have learned, we can question.

From the dawn of mankind, we have lived on a spherical planet, but we learned for a considerable time that it was flat. Then we questioned that and discovered that it wasn’t and we circumnavigated the globe. From the dawn of time, we have lived in a galaxy, one of millions, and our planet has rotated around its sun, but we learned for a considerable time that the sun revolved around the earth, the center of all things. Then we questioned that and discovered it wasn’t so and understood astronomy. From our earliest ability to observe, we learned that heavy objects fall faster than lighter objects. Then we questioned that and discovered gravity. In the early days of medicine, we learned that pus and putrefaction was a good sign, suggesting the process of healing. Then we questioned that and learned pus meant infection, not healing, and discovered sterilization. The history of the civilization of mankind is the history of learning and discovery – of shedding opinions and taking on new ideas, then shedding those as others evolve, of questioning and wondering and experimenting, and sharing and being willing to undertake unique

journeys of the imagination in order to explore the unknown and challenge the prevailing views.

Terrorism at its essence is insecurity in the face of the unknown, the unfamiliar or the unexplored. All of us, when we're insecure, cling to what we know, defend it to the death, and assault anyone who appears indifferent or threatening to it.

Many people mistakenly think that joining opinion to the soul, would mean homogeneity – a kind of bland niceness in which dialogue and discussion was impossible. But such is not the case. Connecting to the soul means knowing that there are as many billions of ideas in the world as there are people thinking them, and all of them are important to someone. Connecting to the soul awakens interest and respect for all ideas because it shifts our sense of what's true away from opinion towards a deeper trust that the infinite formation of opinion is the essential gift of human thought. Respect for the incredible diversity of what people think arises from reverence for the beautiful mystery of the fact that people can create brand-new ideas. It moves discussions from the argumentative stance of "We're right and they're wrong and one of us is going down," to the engaging stance of "I wonder what any of us will think of next and where our ideas might take us?"

Terrorism absolutely precludes dialogue, debate, tolerance, charity, trust, courage, humility, integrity ... Good will, the interest in listening to others regardless of differences and the strength to free one's own thinking to entertain new ideas cannot flourish in a closed mind, bent on eliminating dissimilarity or diversity.

We cannot kill terrorism by killing people who are afraid to share the planet or their own neighborhood with anyone who disagrees with them, or doesn't think like they do or look like they do or talk like they do. We can only kill terrorism by awakening our souls, reconnecting to appreciation that we are all alive in the same way, and as long as we are alive, the horizon of our thinking is changing as fast as we can think.

Terrorism looks like a global condition. In fact, it is an individual condition. All of us are capable of it. In mundane ways, we all have been terrorists. And in the smallness of our lives, we all also have glimpsed the vastness of our souls and known freedom from fear, from terror.

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