

Living in the Shadow of Terror

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(the Sunday following the Paris terrorist attack)

Such a stark contrast – these beautiful autumn days, the bright colors, the blue sky – and the beauty of this gathering, the beauty and the peace of it.

Yet still our hearts reverberating from the terror in Paris just two nights ago.

We all have our ways of dealing with such thing, of somehow going on with our days as if everything were just fine, even though our hearts are broken in response to such a tragedy, such loss, such terror, even though thousands of miles away.

Last night on the radio show “Prairie Home Companion,” host Garrison Keillor managed this balance first by beginning the program inviting everyone in the theater to stand as he spoke a tribute to the courage and sadness of the people of Paris and France. I was fine as I listened, driving at the time on Route 3A; until a woman’s voice repeated his message in French. Then my eyes filled with tears.

Then the band played the French national anthem, “La Marseilles.”

Then the program continued with its usual theme song and on from there.

All this reminded me of this poem by Irish poet Michael Coady:

Though there are torturers in the world,
There are also musicians.
Though, at this moment,
Men are screaming in prisons,
There are jazzmen raising storms
Of sensuous celebration
And orchestras releasing
Glories of the Spirit.
Though the image of God
Is everywhere defiled
A man in West Clare
Is playing the concertina,
The Sistine Choir is levitating
Under the dome of St. Peter’s
And a drunk man on the road
Is singing for no reason.

You see, the terrorists really cannot win.

They can certainly and terribly kill and maim. They can indeed make us afraid, uneasy in our daily lives.

But they cannot win.

Because always and everywhere they stiffen our resolve, deepen our values, strengthen our sense of solidarity and unity with one another.

I’m mostly not talking about whatever direct action is taken against those who foment terror. I’m talking about the ways that we simply move on, living lives of value and kindness and love as best we can.

Here is some of what I wrote to myself (and now to you) in my journal yesterday morning, the day after the Paris attacks:

Last night utter terror in Paris. How are we to make sense of this? How understand the state of mind that enables someone to open fire blindly in a crowded theater filled with young people just having a good night out? To have so little regard for other lives?

I can perhaps imagine that these men, whatever their stated grievances and justifications, maybe felt totally shut out from the possibility of such a life – a life of going to a club with friends for an evening of music, a life of eating a fine meal at an outdoor café

But still!

So – however we understand these terrorists, how are we to live in such a world, a world which includes such terror and which also includes the inequities and injustices that are the fertile ground for (though certainly not an excuse for) terror?

Personally, to being with we must continue to nurture our own spiritual lives, to connect in whatever way is ours to the divine spark within, to our True Self, to love; and we must in this spirit shed our too much concern with small self, with petty desires, so that this divine spark will shine.

Then – be kind. *Be* that divine spark, offer the helping hand, open our hearts to one another.

Kindness and compassion and love can, after all, begin only in the heart of each one of us. These are not abstractions or national policies. They are ways of life and of the heart.

Further, it then behooves us to use our minds as well, to use our minds to understand one another as best we can. In this small world Christians must try to understand Muslims, Muslims understand Jews... and on and on. Western non-Muslims in particular must learn more about Islam, and realize the stark differences between the genuine heart of Islam and so-called extremist or radical Islam, between Islam as the vast majority of Muslims practice it and the Islam soiled and desecrated by the likes of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Next, we must also extend the reach of our kind hearts and understanding minds through the contributions we make – whether to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Doctors Without Borders UNICEF and so on – and through letters to the editor, emails to leaders, or petitions we sign and candidates we support and vote for.

Taking all this together, it perhaps comes down to Gandhi's affirmation that we must be the change we wish to see in the world. And Mother Teresa's encouragement to do small things (which is all most of us can do most of the time) with great love (which we all have in our hearts).

The fact is that the world in its essential nature didn't change yesterday, anymore than it did after the Boston Marathon bombings or 9/11 or after the many recent bombings in Baghdad, Beirut, Ankara, Kabul and on and on. We are simply reminded of what the world is: Some of an unfathomable capacity for hate, violence, and evil; but many more have unbounded love. Yes, there are real inequalities and injustices in the world which must be addressed, even as we affirm that none of them justify terror.

To put it all simply: Life is short and sometimes very hard, occasionally unimaginably so. So: Be kind, and try to understand one another, held as we all are in the vast mystery.

But so much more that could be said.

The line now is “we are all Parisians.” But why not also “we are all citizens of Beirut” since dozens were killed in a bombing earlier in the week? Or “we are all from Baghdad... or Ankara... or Kabul.” Or “we are all Syrians.”

Do we really, in the year 2015, continue to draw our circles so narrowly?

Yes, having been fortunate enough to have more than once visited Paris, that most beautiful of cities, my heart is broken in a special way for the people of that splendid city.

But I’ve been to Kabul too, and can still see vividly in my mind’s eye the face of the young boy who invited me to tea one day and whose invitation I, in my teen-age shyness and awkwardness and maybe a little fear, declined. He would be perhaps fifty or so years old now – if he has managed to survive all the coups, wars, and violence swirling around his home city during these decades. I hope he did.

And I’ve been to Jerusalem – our daughter-in-law has family in Jerusalem, so I feel I do too. I worry for them as I read of the continuing violence in their home city; and my heart breaks too for all who share that city of three faiths, Israelis and Palestinians alike.

This said, can we not use our imaginations to feel unity with those wherever they are, whether we have any particular connection ourselves, when they are afflicted with terror or war or violence of any kind? Isn’t that one of the things our imaginations are for?

Our own Walt Whitman said something like, “I am large, I contain multitudes.”

He wasn’t boasting.

He was naming what it seems to me we must all strive for, this feeling of holding every being in our hearts and minds, for we *are* each other, or at the very least, our destinies are inextricably tied to one another, interwoven in one garment of destiny, as Martin Luther King, Jr., put it.

Ironically and perhaps quite beautifully and appropriately, in just two weeks leaders from the global community of nations will meet in Paris – yes, Paris – to consider together the fate of this earth we share in relation to the overarching threat and reality of climate change. My hope is that this conference of leaders from some two hundred nations will transcend the terror and fear, will spark a deeper unity of nations and people – for we are, in the end, one people, one humanity, one life.

Perhaps, perhaps, we are on the cusp of acting a bit more as if we knew it.

But whether or not this is true on the grand scale of nations, we can each choose to act and live as if we knew it.

Because deep in the recesses of each of our hearts, where the divine spark, our True Self, abides, we do indeed know it.

May it ever more be so. So that we may live more often in the spirit of these words from Albert Camus: “Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present.”

So may it be.