

Valerie Elverton Dixon

September 14, 2011

Reflections on the 10th Anniversary of 9/11

A decade has passed, and the nation dedicates memorials for the dead, names carved in stone, a final resting place for many of those killed on September 11, 2001 in the most deadly terrorist attack upon the United States. We observe moments of silence to commemorate the instants of impact 10 years ago when America starts to understand itself in a different way.

America did not lose its innocence on 9/11. America was never innocent. The horror of the day did not affect all of us in the same way. Some of America's children have never felt safe from useless, unnecessary, out of the blue violence. Terrorism lives in our blood and bones. Yet, those of us who never took safety for granted understand the grief of our sister and brother citizens over the loss of their sense of security.

Ten years after that horrific day, we sing "Amazing Grace", "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and a children's choir sings of peace on earth and the truth that such peace begins in every individual heart, with every individual's determination to respond to violent provocation with the weapons of peace.

In New York City, President Obama reads Psalms 46. It says among other things: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani reads from Ecclesiastes. It says among other things: "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. . . . A time to love and a time to hate; A time of war, and a time of peace."

In the dedication ceremony for the Flight 93 Memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, on September 10, President Bill Clinton compares the passengers on that flight who thwarted the attempt by the terrorists to take the airplane and probably fly it into the U.S. Capitol Building to the 300 Greeks who lost their lives at the Battle of Thermopylae fighting against thousands of Persians. Their bravery inspired the Greeks to continue the fight and to eventually defeat the Persians. The Greek and Persians wars were fought over a 50 year period.

On September 11, at a Pentagon ceremony, Vice-President Joe Biden speaks of the 9/11 generation of military service members who volunteered for service in a time of war. He speaks of a basic al Qaeda miscalculation saying: "Whenever this nation is attacked, it emboldens us to stand up and strike back." Al Qaeda did not miscalculate.

The terrorists knew then and they know now that they cannot defeat the United States militarily, but they also knew then and know now the United States will respond to violence with violence, that this nation will respond militarily and thereby hemorrhage blood and treasure in endless war. The heroism of ordinary citizens and first responders on that day, and the heroism of rescue and recovery workers, warriors, diplomats and aid workers during the past 10 years is beyond question. Our national grief over the tragic loss of the passengers in the airplanes and the people working in the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon will be with us for the rest of our lives. However, now the question is what ought to be our response as we enter the second post 9/11 decade?

Against the background of amazing human virtue, of courage and a willingness to generously pour out oneself for the sake of strangers who are also sister and brother citizens of the nation and of the world, we have also witnessed the vicious aspects of humanity. The United States has engaged in the terror of war, torture, indefinite detention without due process of law, the expansion of surveillance and police powers under the Patriot Act, fear mongering and scapegoating of Muslim communities, Congressional hearings to investigate the so-called "radicalization" of Muslims in America, hysteria over an Islamic community center near the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, and the persistence of drone strikes on various countries around the world killing innocent people, noncombatants, and wounding and killing animals and the natural world.

Some people would argue that many of these things are necessary to keep another attack from happening in the United States. They would point to lack of any successful large-scale attack as proof that such tactics have worked. Logically, we can never know this for certain since history does not reveal its alternatives. What is certain is that the United States and the world must take another stance when it comes to responding to the crime of terrorism. We can no longer afford endless war. It costs too much money. The human price has always been intolerably high. The lives lost and maimed are beyond monetary calculation.

The September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows is an organization of those who lost loved ones on September 11. This organization works for peace and compassion across the globe so that what happened to them will not continue to happen. In a statement in advance of the 10th anniversary remembrances, the group writes:

On this 10th anniversary, let us honor those we lost by recognizing our kinship with people all over the world, and affirming the values and principles that will guarantee peaceful tomorrows for everyone.

(<http://www.peacefultomorrow.org/article.php?id=1039> accessed September 13, 2011)

Just peace theory holds that there can never be peace without the establishment of justice. This means justice in all its forms-- restorative, distributive, commutative, contributive and retributive. It means the establishment of social justice. It means that we look past the deception that the Other is not a vital part of ourselves, even the evil Other, the terrorist Other, the Other we do not understand, the Other that we fear. The truth is that fear is the ultimate enemy. When a terrorist criminal is able to

make an entire nation afraid, make an entire society turn on its sister and brother citizens out of fear, then they have won the battle.

It is our radical love that can deny our enemies this victory. This is the reason why the imperative to love one's enemies is the most powerful force the world has ever known. Politicians and national leaders rarely speak of radical love. Governments exist to manage coercive power and work their political will both at home and abroad through the threat or the actual use of violence. However, for ordinary people, the weapons of our warfare are not bombs and bullets and military hardware. The weapons of our warfare are compassion and generosity and kindness and forgiveness and radical love. When we function in this modality, there is no space for fear and terrorist criminals lose. This is where we find our security. And when we begin to live this logic, our politics must change because nothing else will make any sense.

To make this shift in the way we as a national and as a human community think is our work to do for the next decade and for decades to come.