

Evil—10 Years Later

Looking back at the 9/11 attacks, one of the darkest days in recent memory, what emerges are reminders of the powerful connections that trump “evil.” This affords us the opportunity to look forward to the choices we may make now and in the future—for ourselves, our organizations, and society.

What did he remember of his father, Larry King asked John F. Kennedy, Jr., in 1995. After all, “John-John” was only two years old when he saluted his father’s casket. John Jr.’s response? He had been told so many things and seen so many photos and news clips that he couldn’t tell anymore. What were acquired images, and what were authentic memories?

As we mark the 10-year anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, images come rushing back, and I’m left with a similar feeling. It was pre-dawn in California, and I was getting ready for a business trip. My stepdaughter called: “I don’t think you’re going anywhere today; turn on the TV.” I’m no longer sure what I actually saw as events unfolded and what was etched behind my eyeballs later.

What I do clearly remember is sitting on the family room sofa,

watching TV, shoulder-to-shoulder with my husband, held in a space beyond words. I remember the crystal clear imperative: Gather the people dearest to us—our daughter, grandson, son-in-law, best friends—and cook dinner. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, apple pie—the foods that connected us to our roots.

It matters to me that this stands out among much more dramatic images because it says something about who I authentically am. At the time, I would have introduced myself to you with a business card, an executive title, a résumé of business achievements. I might have amused you with tales of my lack of domesticity. And yet, on that day, what bubbled up was the priority to connect and nurture. What does that say about what really matters to me?

Similar feelings and thoughts about connection and priorities occurred to the late Bob Gunn. A week after the attacks, he wrote a column for this space that he titled, simply, “Evil” (November 2001).

“It is a moment for me to reflect on my own actions,” Bob wrote. “Am I living in ways that reflect love, kindness, and compassion for others? Or am I pursuing my own selfish desires and plea-

sure that, no matter how pleasant they may feel at the moment, bring some measure of pain to those I touch?”

“It is the dead and the living—their families, friends, rescuers, and survivors—that are holding me accountable for answering these questions. For what has affected me deeply is the example they have given of the power of goodness in the face of evil.

“...What stunned me about the events in Lower Manhattan [were] the examples of ordinary people who, facing the most extreme peril in the aftermath of monstrous evil, acted with grace, compassion, love, and selflessness. Surely you saw their testimony to the central truths of life: that all of us are connected, that in some way we are all one, and that love for mankind is the sustaining energy that inspires people to do the most remarkable things with kindness and courage in the face of great personal danger and risk.

“One of these people was a mother who went into the day-care center in the WTC complex and helped lead toddlers to safety. She said, ‘Now I understand why people go into burning buildings to rescue total strangers. It seemed

completely obvious that this is what I had to do.’

“Another was a firefighter—so youthful and innocent—climbing the Tower stairs with a look of utter calm, competence, and confidence. What a hopeful and inspiring sight he must have been for those fleeing the smoke and flames above.

“And, of course, there were the passengers on the doomed flights who coolly called loved ones to let them know that they were about to die and to say goodbye. They were not thinking about themselves or feeling sorry about their fate. Quite the contrary, they sent messages filled with reassurance and hopeful wishes for wonderful futures.”

A year later, the PBS series *Frontline* echoed Bob’s perspective in a documentary called “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero.” Among the people interviewed was Helen Tworikov, editor of *Tricycle*, the American Buddhist magazine, who volunteered in the recovery work at Ground Zero. She noted how much thinking and effort it had taken to execute the attacks. “It took a lot of people getting together and planning and going to flight school and talking to each other and raising a lot of money and figuring out how all of this was going to happen,” she noted.

On that day, we had no time for calculation. People simply responded. Some refused to leave disabled coworkers. Firemen, policemen, and security personnel rushed into the buildings to help people get out. Shopkeepers handed out bottles of water and shoes to dazed survivors trudging

toward their homes.

“There was no planning. There was no thought [that] went into that,” Tworikov said. “I mean, everybody was stunned. And within that being stunned, this kindness came out.

“Where did it come from? It was just there.”

Bob Gunn reflected further:

“What is not surprising is the fact that people act with love and human connectedness in times of great peril and danger. But what is still overwhelming for me—because I saw so much goodness on such a grand scale—is how millions of people put their egos

“I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart.”

—Anne Frank

aside and simply did the best they could to serve others.

“All over New York City and America, we saw people acting for the common good and giving unselfishly. Our customary ‘game face’ of thinking about what is best for number one, putting our financial gain ahead of other people’s needs, ignoring the pain of strangers, or making fun of someone else’s plight suddenly seemed banal and stupid. What emerged were beauty, kindness, compassion, love, and service...

“For me, as a father, leader, husband, and friend, I now know that creating a paradise on Earth is possible—I saw it even in the most horrific circumstances. I also

know that it comes down to my choice. Am I going to act in ways that give me some momentary pleasure or satisfy some selfish whim? Or am I going to be good and guide my decisions with feelings of service, love, and connectedness?

“One path seems to lead nowhere except to sorrow and suffering. But now I know that, in spite of the suffering I may face, the other leads to joy and beauty.”

Ten years later, the question still resounds: As individuals, as a nation, who are we? So much has happened in this past decade. Day by day—rather, enabled by technology, minute by minute—we are shocked by horrible things. Some disasters—hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, drought—are beyond our control. But human beings have compounded natural troubles: two major wars (and additional military engagements), financial meltdown, more terrorist attacks abroad, polarized politics at home. Untold suffering is unleashed from fanaticism, from avarice—indeed, from all habits fomented by the delusion that I am an island unto myself, that what *I* think is all that counts.

Yes, we saw the ultimate result of self-centered thinking on 9/11. Yet we also saw something more essential, innate, authentic. It was just there.

And, in spite of everything that has happened since, it still is. **SF**

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