

What does one say a year after 9/11?

There's a danger, frankly, of saying too much.

Last October I was at a national conference of ethicists. A colleague said we MUST have a session on the previous month's events despite the fact that the conference program had been officially set months previously. I concurred. But as I sat in the circle with about forty other ethicists, I had the overwhelming sense that our talking was somehow offensive. Intellectualizing is the stock-in-trade of academics. In some ways we can't help doing it. We can't help thinking that analysis is called for, that there must be ways in which we can apply all of this in our teaching. Yet, as we talked, I was engulfed by the feeling that we just needed to be silent. Words felt inadequate or sacrilegious.

In his book *Moses*, Martin Buber wrote that "the great turning-points in religious history are based on the fact that again and ever again an individual and a group attached to him wonder and keep on wondering; at a natural phenomenon, at an historical event, or at both together; always at something which intervenes fatefully in the life of this individual and this group. They sense and experience it as a wonder. This, to be sure, is only the starting-point...but it cannot be explained away." Profound wonder and even horror—not words—flood over me when I revisit the airplane slicing that second tower, the towers collapsing, people jumping from windows or running to escape debris you know will overtake them.

So, I thought of asking the New Frontier editor simply to publish my name and leave the rest of this column space blank. But, one year out, perhaps it would be just as bad to say nothing, since that could imply that September 11th, 2001 actually meant nothing.

At times that's the way it feels, unfortunately. Like 9/11 meant nothing, or nothing long-lasting. True, people responded in record numbers—over \$85 million and more than 55,000 volunteers in the Army's operations in the USA alone. On the other hand, a year after 9/11 it's doubtful whether we have really learned to care more for our Afghan neighbors, despite the fact that we know names of some Afghan towns and political figures (good and bad). There has been no increase in the number of Salvationists offering themselves for missions in Afghanistan or elsewhere in the "developing" world. And donations of \$85 million to world missions through Self-Denial and other appeals is an unrealistic dream.

Has nothing changed?

I desperately want that not to be the case. I want September 11th, 2001 to be a unique day in our collective consciousness, a reference point for something important.

The thing I keep coming back to in my recollection of that day is the moral clarity we had. 9/11 was not just a "tragedy," it was wrong! President Bush was right to call the acts evil—and everyone knew it.

It was a day of moral awakening. Over time there had been an erosion of our collective sense of right and wrong. If we cared about moral values at all, we settled for a practical relativism or an unthinking tolerance. Money and power over others grabbed the headlines. One interpretation of the motivation of the bin Laden forces is that they attacked the targets they did precisely in order to skewer us at our cultural heart. What actually happened is that we saw that money and power are not the only things that matter. We saw devilishly clever murder for the unmistakable evil that it is; and we saw self-forgetful courage and caring for the unmistakable good that they are.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that “the common currency of the moral life is constituted of the ‘nicely calculated less and more’ of the relatively good and the relatively evil. Human happiness in ordinary intercourse is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and a little less freedom.” My daily experience in addressing ethical issues confirms that he’s right. However, as needful as this measured judgment is, it needs to be grounded in something less “gray.” And that, I think, could be the abiding significance of September 11th.

This does not mean that the attacks of September 11th were the only evil or the worst evil or even the worst evil on that particular day. Nor is it to say that all the evil is on the other side or that there has been no evil in the military response. But it is to put the relativized judgments of everyday social policy and ethics in a framework of values that are real and enduring. Just to recall that day one year ago

is to assure us in a way no argument can that there is an *objective* moral order against which we and all our actions will be measured.

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15 July 2002