

“Suffering and Safety”

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“Many of us worry about the situation of the world. We don’t know when the bombs will explode. We feel that we on the edge of time. As individuals, we feel helpless, despairing. The situation is so dangerous, injustice is so widespread, the danger is so close. In this kind of situations, if we panic, things will only become worse. We need to remain calm, to see clearly.”

“Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time.”

So wrote Buddhist writer, Thich Nhat Hanh, back in 1987, in his little book, Being Peace.

While it is certainly true that we live in trying times, perhaps dangerous times, and certainly times filled with uncertainty. We live in times of great personal suffering. People who thought they had made good, prudent decisions, have discovered that their retirement savings are completely gone. Even those with state funded pensions are finding that their states are not doing as well as they had thought. Economically and in many other ways, these are trying times. We say we live in a post-911 world, but is that really true? Do we really want to give ourselves over to all that? Do we really want to grant that event so much power over us?

Much of what we have gone through in the seven plus years since the events of 9/11 are the results of living in a culture which is totally unprepared for suffering, and which seems willing to do anything at all that such an event never happens again. In his farewell to the nation, our former president expressed this feeling with an amazing candor:

“As the years passed, most Americans were able to return to life much as it had been before 9/11. But I never did. Every morning, I received a briefing on the threats to our nation. And I vowed to do everything in my power to keep us safe.

There is legitimate debate about many of these decisions. But there can be little debate about the results. America has gone more than seven years without another terrorist attack on our soil. This is a tribute to those who toil day and night to keep us safe - law enforcement officers, intelligence analysts, homeland security and diplomatic personnel, and the men and women of the United States Armed Forces.” [George W. Bush - 1/15/09]

One difficulty with this analysis, as honest as it is, is that when any of us view the world through the lens of wishing to prevent one thing from happening, and all else fades into the background, then our perspective gets “warped” and the subtleties of different situations seem to elude us. As we know, it has been possible to keep us safe from another Al Qaida attack, or even a domestic terror attack, but not without costs, not without warrant-less searches of peoples’ telephone conversations, or the willingness to invade personal privacy to the point of looking at our library reading lists. And what may be the most grievous of mistakes in judgment, we have found ourselves willing to place people, citizens and non-citizens, in indeterminate custody, and subjecting them to what has been understood to be torture since the days of the Roman Inquisition. And now that we may be willing to try them in a court of law, we may have no admissible evidence against many of the most dangerous. As Maslow wrote in The Psychology of Science, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

Our cultural, if not personal, desire for safety at all costs, to avoid suffering in any event, just may bring us neither. We may actually be less safe than we would otherwise have been, and we aren’t really able to escape the suffering of this world, any more than we should miss this world’s wonders. I lost two friends from Law School who were working at Canter Fitzgerald on that September morning, and I can say with some certainty that they would be very uneasy about the trade-off that we were willing to make, trading civil liberties for an illusion of safety.

So, is there an alternative to this fear that we might be attacked? Is there an alternative to the path we have taken in the past, which are not really a break from the paths we have chosen long before?

I listen to “Speaking of Faith” on VPR on Sunday mornings, and most weeks find the conversations fascinating. Last week’s speaker gave some pause to think when he said, “The objects of our desire and our existential yearnings rarely point to what genuinely matters. The future we pin our hopes to, financial and otherwise, is illusory. These are the insights that made the teachings of Gautama Buddha so earth-shattering centuries ago. And they have, perhaps, never been more relevant, more poignant, or more painful than they are now.” That was Pankaj Mishra, Buddhist journalist speaking last week. We want safety from the terrors of the world, and we strive for that safety, and much of what we do does nothing more but create greater danger. It’s counter-productive. What we seek is not what we find, but just the opposite.

For one example, the healing miracle stories in the gospels of the Bible are not really about the miraculous, though I am sure that is what folks have focused on for centuries. They are more about bringing wholeness and connection in a situation which is filled separation and alienation. In the same way many who work in the area of medicine suggest two approaches to illness. There is the biomedical perspective that emphasizes the diseases and cures of individuals. [the miraculous doctor!] There is, on the other hand, the socio-cultural perspective which takes into account relationships with other people when dealing with illness and dis-ease. Which suggests that the spiritual and religious life might hold an answer to the current dilemma in which we find ourselves.

Abraham Joshua Heschel has written: “A religious [person] is a person who holds God and [humanity] in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.” [*New York Journal-American, April 5, 1963*]

The Apostle Paul, in most all of his letters, refers to suffering not as something to be avoided, *nor to be encouraged*, but rather as the impetus to bring us as disparate people together through compassion, through the difficult work of *feeling with* the other. When we are trying to remain safe, we are tempted into a kind of isolation, either by retreat or by striking out. But perhaps if we were less fearful of the next assault, perhaps if we were less intent on remaining safe and unhurt, we might find the capacity to reach out, to attempt conversation, compassion, seeing the world through the eyes of those whom we have made into “the other.” On the other hand, compassion, the open love of agape which is the centerpiece of all great religious faith, is the alternative to a passion for safety and security against any and all suffering.

Lincoln, facing a severely divided nation, reminded us in his first inaugural address of this great American and human thrust toward compassion: “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Can we do otherwise than by embracing compassion, and leaving the illusion of safety behind us and reach out to each other in these times, and to open ourselves to the possibilities of a world less dangerous and more human, touched by the better angels of our nature!