

Reflections on Tragedy

Remarks by William Martin at a gathering of the Rice University Community on Sept. 15, 2001.

Disbelief, shock, confusion, horror, grief, fear, anger, courage, love—we have felt and continue to feel all of these over the past three days, and we will for some time. It is pointless to tell you what you ought to be feeling, but let me suggest a few things you might take into consideration.

On Tuesday, remembering the mistakes that were made early on in laying blame for the bombing in Oklahoma City, we urged each other not to assume that Arabs or Muslims had committed this heinous atrocity. Now it appears that the people who did commit it were indeed Arab and Muslim. And we know that it was an occasion of rejoicing for some Arabs and some Muslims. That the perpetrators of these acts apparently lived as normal neighbors makes it easier to widen the scope of suspicion and to perpetrate acts of anger and revenge, as has already happened and will likely continue. But it would be an egregious, tragic mistake to imagine that all or most Arabs or Muslims, certainly in this country but also in Muslim lands, however critical they may be of American policy or American culture, feel anything but the same kind of revulsion and sadness that has engulfed America. The work of twenty, or fifty, or a hundred, or perhaps even a thousand or ten thousand, should not lead us to make statements or assumptions about approximately one billion other people. Americans made a mistake of that nature in blaming and imprisoning thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II, to our everlasting shame. And the atrocities committed on Tuesday were directed at people innocent of any known offense other than being Americans.

Islamic extremism exists, but it is important to remember that many Arabs and Muslims—and many Arabs are not Muslims—are in this country because they have fled or been driven out of their home countries by the kind of extremism that produced these attacks, and that Osama Bin Laden, a prime suspect, is in exile from his own home country, Saudi Arabia.

It is true that classical Islam has difficulty with the concept of pluralism, with a state that is separate from and not subordinate to religious forces. But the imperative to bring the government under control of the Word and Will of God as they understand it is not peculiar to Islam. Jews and Christians, among others, have a similar heritage, and many still cling to that vision with hope and determination.

In America, a secular state has not only failed to produce a secular people, but has fostered a variety and vitality of religion unmatched anywhere else in the world. Six million American Muslims, many of them relative newcomers, are demonstrating that they understand and cherish this freedom, for others as well as for themselves.

I am prepared to believe that the perpetrators of these evil acts did so from religious motives, however repugnant and ungodly the results. Again, it is important to remember that Muslims hold no monopoly on such behavior.

In Ancient Israel, Samuel the High Priest told King Saul that the Lord of Hosts had given the order to smite the Amalekites and “utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.” And today, in modern Israel, founded with the aid of a fair amount of terrorism, some Jews—not most, but some—deny that Palestinians have any right to that troubled land, because God promised it to them.

In Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics, both in the name of Christianity, have perpetrated terrorist acts for decades. The nation that produced the Protestant Reformation also produced, with considerable support from Christians, the Holocaust.

And more recently, when Timothy McVeigh committed what was, until Tuesday, the worst act of terrorism this country had seen, he was cheered by an extremist minority that calls itself the Christian Identity movement and refers to African-Americans as “mud people.”

Religion is a powerful force for good, but people of all faiths have reason for humility.

All of us have seen the pictures of Palestinians laughing and cheering and dancing and firing guns to show their elation at the destruction of the key symbols of American capitalism and military might. It makes us angry. It makes us ask, “What kind of people would cheer this kind of behavior?” It happened. It was not staged. It was the reaction of a people under siege and in desperate circumstances, who have doubtless been given a grossly distorted picture of this country, but it was disgusting nonetheless. There is reason to believe that it was also quite atypical. If you paid any attention at all, you soon noticed that it was the same women, the same children, the same men. The same piece of film shown over and over and over.

Last night, I received an e-mail sent by a Methodist church worker in Jerusalem. In it, she acknowledged that such expressions had occurred, but insisted they were rare and lamented that “few cameras have caught the spontaneous sorrow, despair, tears, and heartache of the vast majority of the Palestinian people.” That, she said, was “the story unheard and unseen.”

She told of how her phone “rang and rang as Palestinians from around the West Bank called to express their horror and their condolences.” She had spoken to the US Consul General, who told her that his office had received a stack of faxes of condolences, at least a foot high, from Palestinians and Palestinian Organizations. And when she drove by the American Consulate in East Jerusalem, she saw a gathering of about thirty Palestinian Muslim schoolgirls with their teachers, all of them looking grief-stricken as they held bouquets of dark flowers and stood behind a row of candles. “Silently,” she wrote, “they kept vigil outside our Consulate. But no cameras captured their quiet sorrow.”

At her home, Palestinian Christian and Muslim friends came together, visiting her to express their sorrow and to ask what they could do. Again, the phone rang incessantly with Palestinians asking if everyone she knew was okay, telling stories of their loved ones in the States, relatives they feared might have been injured or killed, relatives they knew had been subject to harassment in the last couple of days. She wrote, “Despite the world, and particularly the American world, not

seeing them or seeing them only as 'terrorists', Palestinians continued to express their common humanity with people everywhere as they shared in the heartache and dismay."

When next you see that familiar clip on CNN, close your eyes and think of these scenes. Think also of the e-mails sent out by various Muslim groups in America, reporting on incidents of harassment, vandalism, threats of violence; warning against appearing in public in Muslim apparel; and, despite that, encouraging Muslim physicians and rescue workers to go to the scenes of these crimes and offer their help, urging Muslims to give blood, donate money, and do whatever else they could to relieve suffering—as Islam calls upon them to do.

You have heard it said, and perhaps you have thought, that America will never be the same after the events of September 11. In a sense, that is true. You will always remember where you were and how you first learned and even how you felt when you saw those terrifying pictures that could not be real, but were. And as our country prepares for some kind of war, as yet visible only in blurry outline, we may witness further destruction of property and loss of life, conceivably far more extensive than this.

Even so, there is reason to hope. Other countries have been devastated by war, have rebuilt, and resumed normal lives. That is what humans do. We see it all about us—in the display of our national symbol, in the drawing together of our divided Congress, in the thousands of prayer vigils and gatherings all over this nation, and in the gradual return to everyday life.

The Robert Frost poem, "Out, out..." tells of a boy on farm in Vermont, preparing firewood with a buzz saw. Suddenly, his hand is severed by the saw and, in a few short minutes, he bleeds to death. Immediately upon revealing that he has died, the poem ends with the words, "And they, since they were not the one dead, turned to their affairs." When I first read that forty years ago, I thought it was shockingly cold. Since then, I have witnessed death numerous times and I have come to realize that, because we have little alternative, that is what humans do. We carry on.

In the aftermath of these events, I have thought a great deal about what humans do. One of my granddaughters asked her parents Tuesday afternoon, "Is it wrong for me to have been glad that I was able to stay home from school today?" It is quite human to think, at least briefly, probably guiltily, of how this tragedy affects us personally, even if we lost no one. Will it alter my weekend plans? Should I take a job on Wall Street? Will it distract the Astros from the pennant race? Will it affect my retirement funds? Is this worse for the Republicans or the Democrats?

That you probably had some of these thoughts, or thoughts in similar categories, does not mean that you are a bad or terribly shallow person. It means you are a human, with some self-regarding tendencies—an almost ineradicable human characteristic. That it may have bothered you to have had such thoughts is also human.

But take comfort in the fact that many people also acted altruistically, even heroically, and that you would have as well, had you been there.

You would have pulled someone from debris if you had been able.

You would have given a ride to a person suffering from burns.

You would have stood in front of your store and handed out sneakers to women trying to walk or run in high heels.

You would have taken people into your home.

You would have laid flowers or contributed to memorials to aid fireman, whose daily bravery often goes unnoticed.

Dozens, maybe hundreds of you gave blood, and others would have if so many others had not already filled the need.

Had you been trained for it, and perhaps even if you hadn't, you would have gone into dangerous places to rescue trapped people, even at the threat—and perhaps the cost—of your own life. I know that you would have done that. That's another part of being human.

Take comfort in the fact that humans can be incredibly kind and loving and resilient. We saw that as people described their loved ones who were missing and almost certainly dead. "He was a wonderful father." "She wasn't just my mother; she was a mother to everyone she knew." "Our son would have been the last to leave. He would have helped everyone else before he tried to get out himself." "She wanted to be a teacher, and she would have been a great one." "He was generous, he was kind; you could even call him noble."

We heard of people who knew they were going to die, who shared their cell phones so that others could call their families, who reached out to hold the hands of their co-workers, to spend their last moments alive touching another human.

How many of you talked to your parents on Tuesday? My "children" are 41, 40, and 35, but we were all in touch. It is a primitive impulse: Are my children safe? If you don't understand that now, chances are excellent that one day you will.

Over and over and over, we heard people tell of the last words they spoke to each other: "Take care of yourself." "Take care of our baby." And more than any other, "I love you." There is probably no message any of us would prefer to hear or send if we knew we were about to die. But you do not have to wait to send that message. It is really hard to overdo it.

Be sure that those whom you truly love know it.

And do your best to display a loving attitude, a sense of fairness, a measure of mercy to all whose lives you touch.

Grace and peace be unto you.

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