

Reflections on September 11

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I speak from my perspective as a Catholic priest and a university president.

On September 11, 2001 the University of San Francisco community – students, faculty, staff, neighbors – packed St. Ignatius Church for a noon service. We were no different from the rest of the country. Our instinctive, almost knee-jerk reaction to the shock and tragedy of those horrendous criminal acts was universally replicated across the country as people gathered together in churches, synagogues, mosques and plazas to light candles, sing songs, mourn their loss, share their sorrow and comfort one another as best they could.

Psychology tells us that human beings affiliate under stress. My own Christian theological tradition teaches that we are originally and inextricably linked with each other. We are one family of God, sisters and brothers all. We are primarily one and only secondarily many. Rabbi Irwin Kula in the PBS show, *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*, told his TV audience, “The real Torah, the real wisdom, the real religious tradition, the real experience behind religion, is about love and is about connection. It is no more complicated than that.”

Our fundamental human connectedness was manifest in farewell messages on cell phones and answering machines, in rescue workers rushing into flaming buildings with no other intention than helping those trapped within and, most poignantly, by people jumping hand in hand from the upper stories of the World Trade Center in a final desperate expression of human solidarity. Our connectedness was highlighted by the parents of Greg Rodriguez who died in the World Trade Center. They wrote: “Our son died a victim of inhuman ideology. Our actions should not serve the same purpose. Let us grieve. Let us reflect and pray. Let us think about a rational response that brings real peace and justice to our world. But let us not as a nation add to the inhumanity of our times.” Their sentiments were echoed by the mother of Deora Bodley, a Santa Clara University student who died in United flight 93. She said, “let this passing be the start of a new conversation that is all-inclusive, tolerant of all people’s beliefs, that includes everyone’s God, that includes everyone of color, that provides a future for all humanity to live in harmony and respect.” Subsequently, we have seen that connectedness touchingly displayed by those family members of the victims of September 11 who traveled to Afghanistan to comfort their counterparts who lost their loved ones during the US bombing campaign.

We do not gather in our places of worship for easy explanations of the mystery of evil, so evident in the tragedies of September 11 and in the fratricides of the Middle East, Central Africa and Northern Ireland or the ravages of the AIDS pandemic or the six million children who die each year from hunger in a world rich with food resources. We do not accept from anyone the poet’s hollow reassurances that “God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world.”

God is not in violence and destruction, but in precious acts of love and generosity and identification with suffering victims. Authentic religion binds the human family together for our common survival and for the pursuit of a more promising future. Authentic religion has no part with the blasphemous oxymoron — “holy war” — whether crusade, inquisition or jihad.

At this difficult time, the University of San Francisco and all universities must function within society as the voice of reason and compassion in assessing the issues and analyzing the options that confront us. Universities are the place where all ideas are tested and assessed critically in the light of evidence. This — an unpopular and easily misunderstood responsibility — is all the more necessary for its lack of widespread support.

It is incumbent upon universities to steer us away from the simplistic “either/or” dichotomies that war and crises evoke. One can empathize with civilian casualties in Afghanistan and be an upstanding citizen of the United States. One can demand that international criminals be brought to justice and work for reconciliation and forgiveness. One can support our men and women in uniform and seek peace. One can love one’s own country and all of God’s people. One can seek global justice and an end to terrorism.

To try to understand why people hate us is not to condone their actions or justify their animosity. To examine the underlying causes of global inequities is not to endorse violent actions undertaken to correct them. If an informed electorate is the bedrock of democracy, then universities have a compelling responsibility to see that all of our choices are well informed, and that all of our policy makers are held accountable for their proposals.

I am fortunate to be in a university context where faith and reason are understood to be equal partners in the search for truth and a more humane world. On this day, USF gathered as a university community in church to invoke the dual blessings of faith and reason manifest in the heroism and gratuitous acts of kindness and self-sacrifice so central to our memories of September 11.