

Remarks on the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11 2001.  
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There's a rhythm to remembrance.

Exactly ten years ago, the towers fell, the Pentagon shook, and a field outside Shanksville was scorched with the wreckage of metal and human lives. Most of the three thousand people who died in these places were Americans; others were from China, India, Malaysia, Jordan, Ghana, Peru, Moldova—more than 80 countries in all.<sup>1</sup> An assault on two of our global cities was bound to imperil the lives of people from all over the world, because, as the novelist Ishmael Reed once said about our country, “The world is here.”<sup>2</sup>

And so this attack on the United States wasn't *just* an attack on us. It threatened values held dear by people of every nation, people of every faith and none. Two days after the attack, you could read these words in the French newspaper *Le Monde*: “La folie, même au prétexte du désespoir, n'est jamais une force qui peut régénérer le monde. Voilà pourquoi, aujourd'hui, nous sommes américains.”<sup>3</sup> *Madness, even on the pretext of despair, is never going to be a force for regenerating the world. That is why, today, we are Americans.*

For a long moment, these were sentiments heard around the world, as the vast majority of humankind, united by shock, stood with us in our sense of grief and loss.

We have other things to remember with gratitude and with pride. Our political leaders, from the President on down, forcefully insisted that, despite the attackers' claims, we were at war with no religion, and certainly with no ethnicity. The American creed that this was a country of foreigners where no one was truly foreign: that creed was upheld, at least as ideal and aspiration.

Of course, here in the university, the task of commemoration is inseparable from the work of comprehension. The tragedy and the crime of 9/11 summoned the attention of a wide range of disciplines. Architects and mechanical engineers analyzed the collapse of the towers; biologists used DNA to identify the dead; scholars of religion untangled the many meanings of jihad; historians and political scientists explained the roots of Al Qaeda. And social scientists drew on a rich body of research to explore the processes sunder us from one another.

Several decades ago, the American social psychologist Muzafer Sharif, in a famous experiment, took two groups of ordinary middle-class boys to a vast wilderness preserve in Oklahoma, and watched as conflict and competition between them shaped their identities.<sup>4</sup> What had started as two sports teams turned into two tribes. Healthy competition descended into bloody opposition. One day, the kids were merely clashing on the playing field. A few days later, after an escalating series of incidents, kids from one group were mounting a midnight raid on the other group, armed with rocks, and hoping for blood.

Sharif, like his colleagues, was aghast as he watched, but he wasn't astonished. You see, he was a teenager in south-eastern Turkey in 1919, when Greek soldiers seized control and set about slaughtering his town's Turkish inhabitants. During one attack, he saw the man next to him bayoneted, and he barely escaped death himself. Two years later, Turkish forces retaliated, burning much of the Greek-occupied town. So he knew, from first hand experience, that identities with sharp edges were bound to draw blood.

Witness Dr. Aymen al-Zawahiri, the man who is widely considered the architect of 9/11—Osama bin Ladin's longtime deputy and now, apparently, his successor. He has devoted

himself to crafting a creed that would be diamond hard, and an identity that would be razor sharp. Hence a denunciation he issued a few years ago of a phenomenon he called “waviness.” When it came to the rich and complex code of conduct known as *sharia*, he declared,

no person is able to stand in a position of waviness or oscillation. . . It doesn’t accept jokes. Either you are a believer in Allah and then you have to abide by His laws, or you are a disbeliever in Him, and then there is no use in discussing with you the details of His law. The waviness which western secularism desires to spread, no proper mind which respects itself can accept.<sup>5</sup>

“Waviness”—which is also to say irony, the possibility of self-scrutiny—was, he rightly feared, destructive to his mission of fanaticism. Yet, I believe, it must be central to what we call a liberal education. We philosophers sometimes use the word “fallibilism” to name the recognition that any of our beliefs could be in error. Don’t confuse this with disengagement or indifference. We believe what we believe: but we’re not afraid to test our beliefs against reality—because we can entertain the possibility that we are wrong. John Maynard Keynes, the economist, when tweaked for changing his views on some matter, is said to have replied, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do *you* do, sir?”<sup>6</sup>

All this, of course, is anathema to the violent extremist, and to those who, opposing violent extremism, have become a mirror image of what they detest. You may have noticed that people who abhor “waviness” in the realm of ideas—denying the possibility that one could be in error—tend also to abhor waviness in the realm of identity, denying its mutable, multiple nature.

Yet that mutability and multiplicity can be identity’s saving grace. Muzafer Sherif’s study in the Oklahoma wilderness showed how easily murderous enmities were conjured into being. But he also showed how, as a social force, fusion could overpower fission. It happened when feuding parties face challenges that require them to work together. One day, during his experiment, Sherif staged a breakdown of a heavy bus; all the kids had to band together in order to push it uphill. This time he watched as mortal enemies became blood brothers. Sharif called such unifying challenges “superordinate goals.”

There are seven billion human beings now on a small rock hurtling through space, sharing a fragile ecosystem with an uncounted yet dwindling number of trees, thousands upon thousands of coal-burning power plants, and something like six hundred million gasoline-powered cars. Each year now, upwards of twenty thousand species go extinct. Each year, the polar caps melt, and the seas encroach further upon the land. Would you say there’s any shortage of superordinate goals for our own species?

When the global economy functions well, it can lift hundreds of millions out of extreme poverty; when it falters, it can plunge hundreds of millions *into* extreme poverty. The 1918 flu pandemic infected more than a quarter of the earth’s population; what will the next pandemic do?

There is a rhythm of remembrance. But there’s a rhythm to forgetfulness, too.

Plagues. Depressions. The mass carnage of industrialized warfare. These experiences too easily fade from consciousness. So we need our humanists as well as our scientists and engineers. Someone told me this story: a colleague once made the commonplace observation, in conversation with Albert Einstein, that from the perspective of an

astronomer, we human beings were nothing but the tiniest of dots. Why, yes, Einstein replied. And some of those dots are astronomers.<sup>7</sup>

Einstein's response—as so often—was the humanist's response. Particular lives, compounded of particular experiences, perspectives, values, and strivings: each one matters. On the tenth anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, we rightly think back on the toll extracted by the forces of fanaticism and division. But we must also think ahead to how we might conjure the forces of amity and union: shared perils met by shared struggle. As the planet grows smaller, the human spirit must grow larger. To rescue this fragile world of ours, it is not enough to remember who we have been; we must also decide who we want to be. We cannot simply retreat into the fortress of the familiar. Instead, let us keep our ears open for the rhythms of new identities and new ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.interpol.int/public/ICPO/speeches/20020911List77Countries.asp> This list does not account for the Saudis and Emiratis who were among the murderers (Lebanon had both a terrorist and a victim) as well as people like Ignatius Adanga, who was born in Nigeria, but was an American citizen. <http://www.legacy.com/news-record/sept11/Story.aspx?PersonID=107474&location=2> And it doesn't count Bermuda because it is a British Overseas Territory. They also don't include Moldova, which is mentioned in other lists, perhaps because the State Department regarded Americans of dual nationality as simply Americans. Add those five places to their 77 and you get 82. Wikipedia claims 90 nations among the victims, based on an article at America.gov on the fifth anniversary, which refers to a State Department fact sheet that is no longer available. <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2006/September/20060911141954bccklaw0.9791071.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/modlang/carasi/via/ViaVol5\\_1Guest.htm](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/modlang/carasi/via/ViaVol5_1Guest.htm)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2007/05/23/nous-sommes-tous-americains\\_913706\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2007/05/23/nous-sommes-tous-americains_913706_3232.html)

<sup>4</sup> Robert F. Trotter, "Muzafer Sherif: A Life of Conflict and Goals," *Psychology Today*, Vol. 19, No. 9 (Sept. 1985), pp. 54-9.

<sup>5</sup> The translation comes from a Bangladeshi website called Jihad Unspun. <http://www.mail-archive.com/osint@yahoogroups.com/msg06735.html>

<sup>6</sup> Though this remark is often ascribed to Keynes, I can't find an original source.

<sup>7</sup> I haven't been able to confirm this story either.