

Losing Oneself

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The attacks of September 11 were an amazing testament to the human capacity to lose oneself in something greater than oneself. Emergency responders rushed into the World Trade Center towers, trying to save the lives of others without regard for their own welfare. And some victims, facing a fiery demise on the upper floors, joined hands as they leapt to their deaths.

As that day unfolded, and in the immediate aftermath, we witnessed the symbolic grasping of hands across the globe. “We are all Americans,” said the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

How can we explain these acts of heroism and human solidarity? German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that it is a gut feeling of connection with the one who suffers that is the basis for all moral action.ⁱ As soon as this feeling arises, the well-being and the suffering of another become as close to your heart as your own. Then, in a mysterious but very real sense, your perception of the difference between you and the other person actually dissolves. We cannot give any rational explanation for this feeling, he says, but it is the very basis for every willing act of justice or loving-kindness we commit. Morality in many religious traditions is based ultimately on this kind of experience.

On the other hand, however, is the intense religious and ideological zealotry of those who perpetrated the violence of that day. They proclaimed that God is great as they intentionally killed themselves and thousands of others. They too were losing themselves in something other than themselves, but in a fundamentally different way. I believe the criterion by which we judge this powerful human experience good or evil lies largely in whether it involves some measure of compassion in response to suffering, or whether it contributes to human suffering.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 we were touched by the displays of heroism. The sense of solidarity with those who suffered filled our hearts. United we stood.

But it didn't last. Compassion gave way to the fear of those who committed despicable acts, and soon we took our revenge. We lost ourselves once again, but this time not in compassion for those who suffer, but in a collective will-to-power that was exploited by politicians and fed by our fears. We launched a war of revenge in Afghanistan, and a misguided war of choice in Iraq. And as the wars unfolded, American unity was lost, and global solidarity and feelings of compassion for *our* losses evaporated.

One should not equate the destruction of 9/11 with the events that followed. Each event stands alone, and in many ways, that day was of singular importance, with the violence unambiguous in its evil.

But ten years later, we can now see what happens when our response to suffering gives way to collective self-assertion, and loss of self in the guise of excessive patriotism. In the last ten years, 6,204 American military personnel have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan; 2,300 American contractors have died; 1,192 foreign coalition forces have died; 18,678 Iraqi and Afghan security forces have died; and minimally, 102, 339 Iraqi civilians have been killed. And the cost to the United States for these wars, including all related costs and economic impact, according to the *New York Times*, is \$3.3 trillion dollars.ⁱⁱ

Why could we not have allowed the sacrifices of the 9/11 heroes to open our eyes to a vision in which our political and ideological differences could be set aside to relieve the suffering others? Why do we fight so hard to avoid sacrificing our own interests so that all of our fellow Americans might have health care, good education, and a clean environment? Why must we read the headline on September 13, 2011 that a record number of Americans are now in poverty?ⁱⁱⁱ Why do we lack the imagination to seek responses to tragedy other than wars that perpetuate the cycle of revenge? What if, as philosopher Simon Critchley suggests, after 9/11 we had turned the other cheek, and then done nothing at all?^{iv} What if we had only lost ourselves in the cause of reaching out to suffering Muslims wherever we found them?

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Mansfield Program in Ethics and Public Affairs at the University of Montana.

ⁱ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*.

ⁱⁱ Shan Carter and Amanda Fox, "One 9/11 Tally: \$3.3 Trillion," *New York Times*, September 13, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/09/08/us/sept-11-reckoning/cost-graphic.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Rising Poverty Rate Shows Holes in Safety Net," *MSNBC.com* September 13, 2011, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44507675/ns/business-eye_on_the_economy/#.TnA0teyjf08.

^{iv} Simon Critchley, "The Cycle of Revenge," <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/the-cycle-of-revenge/?ref=sept112001>, September 8, 2011.