

“The Patient Architecture of Peace”: Spirituality in Light of 9/11 – A Fifth-Anniversary Reflection

By Kathleen Deignan, CND

It is an exercise in foolishness to try to say something meaningful about spirituality in light of the events of September 11, 2001, but I will make my foolish offering, which has caused me pause in its preparation, and may invite you to the same.¹

First comes the challenge of proposing a meaning for the word “spirituality.” This is the task that takes at least a semester in my courses, but I will offer a short-hand definition of how I will be using the term in this reflection. By spirituality I mean what Dr. Martin Luther King meant as he translated Mahatma Gandhi’s notion of “*satyagraha*” or *truth force*, into the evocative and potent language of *soul force* and with it launched a movement of liberation and transformation that has changed the world.

By *soul force* I mean those psychic energies that fund and source our deepest motives and intentions. *Soul force* is the power to generate and manifest the higher powers of human nature – wisdom, compassion, forgiveness, justice, non-violence. *Soul force* is the cultivated power of the human person to perceive what is good and to do it – a labor of conscience; to love what is beautiful and celebrate it – a labor of creativity; and to recognize what is true and affirm it – a labor of discernment. By *soul force* I mean the capacity to make hope, make love, make believe – and out of these *powers* of psyche – these *virtues* – to become truly human and humane, knowing and taking our rightful place in the community of life.

Spirituality then, is not just about getting a life, but getting an *inner life*, in whose depths we discover the fertile ground that Buddhists call our “store consciousness.” In this inner field are stored all the seeds of every thought, word and deed we will ever think or say or perform in this lifetime. Everyone has the same seeds stored in this deep, vast field of the inner self – seeds of bravery, despair, wisdom, anger, fear, compassion, violence. What distinguishes the humanist from the terrorist is the choice – or the conditions – concerning which seeds are watered: seeds of compassion or seeds of hatred, seeds of affirmation or seeds of negation. We become what we practice. If we practice peace we become peace; if we practice aggression we become aggression. Spirituality then is this life of reflective discernment that fosters right-seeing that makes for right-doing and bears the fruit of right-being – right relation to my self, to my neighbor, to the community of creation, and to the mystery underwriting all of life whose name



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we do not know.

A meditation on spirituality in light of the still imponderable horror of 9/11 then, is an invitation to wonder about how to cultivate soul force to fund the qualities of human being that will allow us not only to survive the world we have all had a hand in creating, but even more, how we might redeem it, save it, transform it – and ourselves in the process. How shall we awaken to understand that it is we ourselves who are the generators of this world – by the way we vote and eat and shop and play and want – regardless of our location or station or vocation? We each and all together in this totally interdependent global network, create and sustain worlds of terror or worlds of beauty by our thoughts and words and deeds. As each one of us has a hand in their creation, each can have a hand in their transformation.

We know that the terrorism plaguing our planet now was not born on 9/11. That fateful September day just brought it all home, piercing the bubble of our illusory security – suddenly, surprisingly, horrifically. But terror has a long and hideous pedigree as a feature of human insanity, and the last century, which was the cradle of the events of 9/11, was the most terrorized period of human history. It was a century of genocide beginning with Armenia, and the heinous purgation of European Jewry, and even now, past Rwanda, to the daily slaughters of Darfur. Its terror unfolded unbroken in the carnage of World Wars I and II, the protracted incineration played out in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, the sudden incinerations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the after-wars of Korea and Vietnam, the killing fields of Cambodia, the starvation fields of Africa. And these are just the big ones. The list goes on and on. In the end the calculus of terror inflicted by one human against another – for all sorts of insane ideological, tribal and religious reasons – reached 100 million by the year 2000. 100 million by the end of the century, one of the most violent in all human history.

Then came 9/11 – a well-orchestrated, long-planned multiverse of terror inspired by the soul force of hatred (that can be cultivated too) that woke America up to the violence in which much of our world is entrenched. Mad cycles of attack and retaliation characterize a fratricidal pathology – particularly of the males of our species – at this stage of our spiritual evolution. And now we are here wondering how we muster the soul force to face the myriad theaters of terror in which the peoples, animals, plants and elements of this planet play out their destinies.

In April 1962 a prayer was read in the U.S. House of Representatives to begin its session. It was Christian Holy Week when Thomas Merton's prayer was offered aloud in the congressional assembly:

Almighty and merciful God, Father of all . . . Creator and Ruler of the Universe,

Lord of History, whose designs are inscrutable . . . whose compassion for the errors of men is inexhaustible, in your will is our peace! . . .

You have witnessed the impious fury of ten thousand fratricidal wars, in which great powers have torn whole continents to shreds in the name of peace and justice.

And now our nation itself stands in imminent danger of a war the like of which has never been seen! . . .

In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the patient architecture of peace

We may also take the last step across the rim of chaos.²

I will leave it to my colleagues in other disciplines to say how we have in fact taken deliberate strides *toward* that rim of chaos since 9/11, led by leaders on all sides of the great divides of this planet. Blind guides, these men and women echo each other's messianic hubris, claiming to speak for God, for righteousness, as they spin us all around the rim of chaos. These powerbrokers from D.C. to Tora Bora, from London to Jerusalem, from Gaza City to Baghdad, have brought us all into the bloodbaths of Afghanistan and Iraq; the neglect of New Orleans and Sudan; the destruction of Lebanon; the deliberate and unrestrained assault on the life systems of our planet which now are suffering collapse. These are the myriad terrorisms that also unfold in the wake of 9/11.

These men and women confiscate our sacred visions and myths to serve their own ideological agendas, perverting the deepest aspirations of our religious and political traditions to their own world-making ends. Our blind guides – whether Bush or Osama – would enlist us all in a *war on terror*. They tell us now is Armageddon, now is the great Jihad of our time. Whether they realize it or not they sing the same song in different languages: a battle hymn summoning us to take up the struggle with our mortal enemy – the Terrorist who is always Other, always someone else. For those who have ears to hear it is a song arising from the warped spasms of fear and distortion, and it can only result in bringing us closer to the chaos which we would dispel. For those who have eyes to see in the long reading of our blood-soaked history, violence is not transformed by violence, but by something else: what Merton called “the patient architecture of peace.”

What then is a spirituality for this post-9/11 world? I want to be provocative and agree with Rumsfeld and Osama. I want to say it is a spirituality of *jihad*, of *crusade*, of *struggle*, of *shambhala*. But the enemy is not some strange other, but my own – *our own* – false self fabricated from the inner confusions and soul-weakness which generates this world of terror that we all inhabit. In truth, I can only stop terrorism in my own heart and its vibrational circumference. Yet this is no mean task, because as Christopher Fry remind us in his play *A Sleep of Prisoners*:

The human heart can go the lengths of God.
 Dark and cold we may be, but this
 Is no winter now. The frozen misery
 Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;
 The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
 The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
 Thank God our time is now when wrong
 Comes up to face us everywhere,
 Never to leave us till we take
 The longest stride of soul [folk] ever took.
 Affairs are now soul size.
 The enterprise
 Is exploration into God. . . .
 What are you [waiting] for? It takes
 So many thousand years to wake,
 But will you wake for pity's sake?³

The continued life of the world now depends on our soul-power, at once a gift of grace from whatever is living us and the fruit of my own spiritual discipline. The “War on Terror” *is* in fact the struggle of our time and it will require “the longest stride of soul [folk] ever took,” because we know so little about the “patient architecture of peace.” We pray for its prophets, its poets, scientists and strategists; we pray for spiritual masters and guides who can help us cultivate the creative soul force required to comprehend and convert the poverty, powerlessness, nihilism, rage and despair that are the breeding grounds of much terrorism in the underdeveloped world. Likewise we pray for those with greater wisdom and vision to help us deal with our insatiable hungers that fuel the crazed consumerism of the developed world, at the expense of these others.

Reports from every corner of our planet suggest that our world is hovering near the rim of chaos and we may not be able to bring it back. It terrifies me to conjecture that our biosphere may collapse as stunningly as the Twin Towers, burdened by the weight of our demands, the violence of our extractions and pollutions. Even if we changed our ways, it may be too late.

Therefore I ponder the urgency of a spirituality of counter-terrorism. I walk about holding the difficult *koan*: how might I meet the terror of my time with another kind of soul force? How might I serve the patient architecture of peace? It is a useful exercise. It keeps me alert, aware in each thought, word, deed: how am I now in this moment a terrorist or a creationist, supporting life’s flourishing rather than its extinction? The meditation spawns a litany of facets of radical counter-terrorism for our time – a partial list but indicative of how comprehensive this urgent soul-work really is. It is an endless list, but mine begins this way: the real work of counter-terrorism post-9/11 will be fostered by:

A spirituality of the spiritual warrior who knows how to take the transformative struggle into the deep zone where the enemy of life lives in sleeper cells of my own fear and fatalism, aggression and illusion;

A spirituality of non-violence pure and simple emboldened by skillful strategies to defend the innocent – the women and children, animals and elements of this earth;

A spirituality of inclusivity that moves me beyond my ethnic or religious or political tribalism, to the expansive tribalism of the whole living cohort;

A spirituality of planetary citizenship marked by a new variety of civic virtues that fosters social conscience and social witness, and sets me in solidarity and service to the whole;

A spirituality of dialogue and diplomacy, of interfaith understanding and intercultural visitation;

A spirituality of compunction, confessing my part as a guilty bystander in the face of the hydra of terrorisms unfolding on our earth from the genocide in Darfur to my daily assaults on our eco-system.

The list goes on and on, encompassing each thought, word and deed. Even in the practice of wondering how I might be a counter-terrorist, I feel my soul deepen, grow wiser, stronger. I remember that somewhere in Israel there is a rabbi trying to make peace with Hamas; somewhere in Palestine a Muslim leader goes out to meet him. I think of another such big soul – Reverend Mitri Rahab – whom I encountered in the West Bank this past July and wondered what he was made of. What was the source of the serenity, the wisdom, the seemingly inexhaustible energy to

begin over and over again at each impasse – be it the Israeli Wall, or the Palestinian *Intifada* – the patient architecture of peace?

That is creative soul force for our time. Not so much the luminous witness of saints whose nature seems to be effortless love, but of patient negotiators who know the challenging art of dialogue, who live and work in realms of moral ambiguity and conscience-ful compromise. These are the spiritual evolvers of our moment. Theirs is this-worldly spirituality, this-worldly soul force. Their eyes are not so much on heaven as on earth; their spiritual practice has less to do with their personal salvation and more to do with earth's liberation from human destructiveness.

Thomas Merton was one such spiritual revolutionary, whose words penned for the U.S. Congress nearly a half-century ago still resound with prophetic urgency for our time. It is a prayer that begs to be heard in all the tents of meeting where the fate of the world is deliberated:

Save us then from our obsessions! Open our eyes, dissipate our confusions, teach us to understand ourselves and our adversary! . . .

Save us from the compulsion to follow our adversaries in all that we most hate, confirming them in their hatred and suspicion of us.

Resolve our inner contradictions, which now grow beyond belief and beyond bearing. . . .

Teach us to be long-suffering in anguish and insecurity.

Teach us to wait and trust.

Grant light, grant strength and patience to all who work for peace,

To this Congress, our President, our military forces, and our adversaries.

Grant us prudence in proportion to our power,

Wisdom in proportion to our science,

Humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might.

And bless our earnest will to help all races and peoples to travel, in friendship with us,

Along the road of justice, liberty and everlasting peace:

Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found!

In your will, O God, is our peace!

Amen (*NVA* 269-70).

1. This reflection was presented at a symposium on September 11, 2006 at Iona College, New Rochelle, NY.
2. Thomas Merton, "Prayer for Peace," in Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 268-69; subsequent references will be cited as "*NVA*" parenthetically in the text. .
3. Christopher Fry, *Three Plays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) 209.