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1500 words

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A Spiritual Response to Terrorism

Although we have a born again Christian President, and 95% of Americans claim to believe in God, you never hear about how we might create a "spiritual" response to terrorism. Just the mere word "terrorism" is enough to make the most loving person think about the necessity of war. But, does it need to be like this? If you look at how religious leaders such as Jesus or the Buddha dealt with their enemies, you can see the hallmarks of a very different approach to creating security. Unfortunately, when our feeling of safety is threatened, the reptilian part of our brain immediately takes over. We tend to ignore the spiritual teachings we've learned, and instead put our trust in the brute power of force. I'm not a pacifist, but it seems to me that if spiritual teachings are worth their salt, they should be tried in times of crisis---rather than just muttered on Sunday mornings. It seems pretty clear that the United States is not going to simply surrender to those who try to hurt us. Force is sometimes necessary. Yet, having a spiritual response to terrorism *along with* the power to protect ourselves seems a more likely road to success than just the use of military might.

So what would a spiritual response to terrorism look like? First, we would need to have a working definition of what "spiritual" means. Although people in different traditions have different practices, there is widespread agreement as to what the *goal* of spirituality is. In a book I edited called "The Experience of God", I asked 40 well known spiritual seekers, ranging from the Dalai Lama to the late Mother Teresa, about the ultimate goal of spiritual development. The answers I received were surprisingly similar. Most spiritual leaders said that the aim of spiritual work should be a more compassionate, more loving, and more aware person who is better able to serve humankind. So it seems that if we were to create a spiritual response to terrorism, it would involve applying the principles of compassion, understanding (awareness) and love to those who we have labeled as our enemies.

In doing research for this article, I tried to get a sense of how people such as Jesus, the Buddha or even Mahatma Gandhi dealt with the threat of violence. Jesus, of course was known to say "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." The Buddha said, "it is better to conquer your self than to win a thousand battles." Finally, Gandhi once said, "I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary. The evil it does is permanent."

Obviously, our national dialogue is a far cry from the "radical" ideas of these three men. Not only have we managed to label terrorists as evil monsters, but we've even managed to label fellow Americans who voted differently than us as evil or stupid. Are all these spiritual leaders and people who voted differently than us really insane or morons? Or perhaps they really know something that we don't, and we fail to use their advice at our own risk. Our experience of self-righteousness can block us from seeing beyond our own noses. Underlying the statements of Jesus, Gandhi, and the Buddha are the notions that kindness, compassion, and focusing on your own shortcomings are an alternate way of disarming your enemy. Fortunately, that doesn't mean we have to become defenseless. We can be understanding and kind, and still have a strong military. Yet, if we really believe in such spiritual teachings, it seems it should lead us to taking baby steps to try out some of their ideas.

In the spiritual "arsenal," there are many tools to try. Besides the "weapons" of kindness and vulnerability, there are also the spiritual tools of recognizing our sameness, rather than our differences. Of course, it's easy to say the cliché that "we're all one" until you hear about one of those beheadings in Iraq. Then, it's easier to think "how could those monsters do that?" Well, that's actually a good question. If we really are all part of a united human family under God, then what pain must those terrorists be going through to act so horrifically? Only if we understand such "monsters" are we likely to know how to instigate a healing. Recently, I read that almost 50% of Palestinians in the Gaza strip and West Bank live below the poverty line –which is defined as a paltry wage of \$410 a month for a family of 6. Furthermore, most of them have a family member that has recently lost their house, job, or life. With little hope for things getting better in the future, some of them turn to desperate acts of violence. Knowing this, it can help us see that true healing is likely to happen only if we can offer them some kind of hope.

Furthermore, a spiritual response to terrorism isn't just something for our national leaders to try. The teachings of great spiritual traditions clearly work well on a personal level. Back when 9/11 occurred, people had wildly different reactions to the tragedy of that day. Some people were literally angry for months, and/or were constantly filled with fear and anxiety. Yet other people, after a brief negative reaction, were filled with compassion and even managed to use that event as a wake up call to make positive changes in their own lives. What was the difference between these two groups of people? I believe that people who had, through their spiritual efforts, been practicing compassion, understanding and forgiveness fared significantly better than those who had no such practice. It's tempting to think that terrorism is something that can only be remedied by politics, but according to most spiritual traditions, that's simply not true. Since we're all connected, ultimately we *all* have a part to play in whether or not terrorism spreads into our society.

What are the actions that, on a personal level, might move the world away from its focus on hate and violence? Although there is no simple answer to that question, the exploration of that question can be very interesting. I believe that any sincere effort a person makes to expand their perspective or try to do something good is in some small way helpful to the entire world. If we each played a small part in countering any forms of hate and injustice, perhaps it would greatly tip the scales towards a more peaceful and less violent world. If that's the case, and plenty of research seems to support such assertions, then it becomes each person's responsibility to take actions that are likely to be helpful. Since we each have different affinities, the specific actions we take would likely be quite different. For one person, it might involve daily meditation, for another person it might involve volunteering at a food bank or not reacting to their mate's anger. Ultimately, perhaps all these "spiritual" deeds would help to elevate the entire world above the darkness of terrorist acts.

I believe we are at a crossroads in our culture. We can go down the path of fear and try to destroy our enemies, or we can offer our enemies hope while making sure we still protect ourselves. The reason for taking a more "spiritual" response to the terrorist threat is not because we're nice or naive, but because it's more likely to work. If our enemies see that we are willing to understand their plight, and work with them to offer them a better future, we will become safer as a nation. In addition, by focusing on understanding, charity, and kindness, our own minds will be transformed from thoughts of fear and hate to thoughts of compassion. In my book, "Terror Proof Your Mind and Money," I talk about how the most effective way to take the "terror" out of terrorism is to take specific actions that will help you be prepared. When the next terror strike happens, those people that have taken time to prepare themselves spiritually, physically, and psychologically are going to do better than those who are not prepared.

The threat of terrorism can be a great opportunity for the world to realize the benefits of understanding over ignorance and kindness over brute force. The model we've used to protect ourselves from our "enemies" clearly hasn't worked very well. Even when we create physical safety for ourselves, there is a price we pay whenever our minds and hearts are "at war" with other people. So the question we must ask ourselves in this age of terror is, "are we ready to move beyond reptilian thinking and into a way of being that relies on understanding, compassion, and kindness?" The fate of our future may depend on the answer to that question.