

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP  
Hanska, September 11, 2005  
Karen A. Larson

## **AMERICAN CULTURE AND TERRORISM**

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

-Margaret Mead

The tension between self-reliant competitive enterprise and a sense of public solidarity...has been the most important unresolved problem in American history. Americans have sought in the ideal of community a shared trust to anchor and complete the desire for a free and fulfilled self.

-Robert Bellah

The community provides one with a normative foundation, a starting point, culture and tradition, fellowship, and place for moral dialogue, but is not the ultimate moral arbiter. The members are...The communitarian paradigm entails a profound commitment to moral order that is basically voluntary.

-Amitai Etzioni

The small group of thoughtful, committed citizens that I have in mind today, when viewed in a global perspective, is the 300 million citizens of the United States of America. They make a reasonably sized block party in one of the richest and most empowered neighborhoods that there is. The future that they need to shape together is one free of the scourge of terrorism, and one that is more internally united in the face of domestic problems and disasters. This is not just a matter of being protected from terrorism. It is also a matter of becoming its antithesis, a vital humanitarian cultural force that will negate terrorism, as well as combat it. The work that Americans have to do in making themselves into an anti-terrorism task force (or perhaps simply an anti-terror task

force, where the terror can come from terrorists or from other sources) can begin with their understanding and combating the forces of domestic terrorism. For a moment, take off the Middle Eastern face of terrorism, and put on instead the face of Timothy McVeigh, Eric Rudolph, or Ted Kaczynski.

The relationship between American culture and terrorism is complex, and began well before 9/11. Americans, however, with their insights firmly fixed on Al Qaeda and associates, progressively retreat from realizing that terrorism, its behavioral dynamics, and behavioral dynamics that keep people divided rather than united are also firmly embedded in their own culture.

The domestic roots of terrorism are often glossed over in a rush to patriotic self-esteem in America's fight against foreign terrorism, but authentic American cultural self-confidence can only be sustained by using hard work to address the roots of social disintegration within America. To create both a stronger future and a better protected one, American citizens need to accept their collective responsibility to work together. In order to accept that collective responsibility, they must first be able to re-envision it.

In order to come to grips with this situation of a deteriorating American social fabric, we in America must recapture the tension between self-reliant competition and public solidarity that Robert Bellah refers to. Now, there is unfortunately too little tension. America's social and conceptual pendulum has swung so strongly in the direction of competition and away from solidarity that Americans are losing the ideal of community, the ideal that is necessary to anchor a sustainable concept of a free self. They have to grab that ideal again and swing back.

Americans cannot presume that the government alone will serve the functions of community for them. They need a grounded sense of their relationship to the American community, which provides culture, conversation, social connection, and confidence in the American way of life. When the concept of community, like so much else in current American culture, seems remote, Americans can only fail to understand the importance of Amitai Etzioni's point that the moral order is voluntary. They will not see that our collective identity is only as strong as American individuals choose to make it, because they can no longer envision a meaningful collective identity.

America has major work to do internally to combat the dynamics of radical individualism. Many are aware that the 9/11 Commission cited a "failure of imagination" that helped to produce America's vulnerability to the 9/11 attacks, and, one might say, to some other things as well. That failure was substantially one of social vision, an inability to imagine social connections between adversaries and to conjoin the necessary "dots" to see them. Fewer know that the Commission also stated that "the biggest impediment to a greater likelihood of connecting the dots—is the human...resistance to sharing information." American culture has become so inured to extremes of individualism that even the people who are critiquing thinking based in social isolation themselves presume such isolation as a deep given. There is no categorical human resistance to sharing information (or even control), but there is a deep-seated resistance to doing so in many American subcultures, including, notably, that of the American federal government.

People in the government, now, four years after 9/11, have begun to make some progress in learning how to stand together to solve problems. The most effective initiatives for doing so are coming from the bottom up, from local and regional law

enforcement, although some people at the top are also wrestling with how to create more collaborative subcultures. Sincere and motivated people are working to figure out how to get their sticks together into bundles, but their cultural challenge is huge, as the ambiguity in the 9/11 Commission report itself would lead you to expect.

But what about those of us who are not in government or law enforcement? Where do the rest of us fit in? We'll do some thinking about domestic terrorism first, and then try to answer that question. America has its own varied and robust tradition of internal terror. With the exception of attention from law enforcement, that tradition is underacknowledged and largely uncombated within American culture and community. America has the Unabomber, the Oklahoma City bomber, the beltway snipers, abortion clinic bombers, the Earth Liberation Front, its animal counterparts, ricin attacks, and, if the FBI profile is accurate, the anthrax attacks. Nor is domestic terrorism native just to the nation. It is also native to this state. Minnesota is home to Luke Helder, the mailbox pipe bomber, as well as to a young man whose acts may have met the formal definition of terrorism. We'll never know, and the question itself is academic. Jeff Weise of the Red Lake Indian reservation took knowledge of his intent to his grave.

You may be asking, doesn't an act have to be perpetrated by groups of Islamic people to qualify as terrorism? The answer is no. The IRA does just as well, as do lone American terrorists. Formal definitions identify terrorism as an act which is 1) violent, 2) public, 3) intended to have a negative psychological impact on bystanders as well as direct victims, and 4) motivated by a social or political agenda. Since 9/11, though, in a misplaced move of self-defense, Americans have come to associate terrorism only with foreigners, groups, and high body counts. Doing so directs them away from internally

rebuilding cultural self-esteem, as they will have to do to remain psychologically resilient in the face of ongoing terror threats. One maintains self-esteem by reference to what one is, internally, rather than by what one does to one's enemies. Americans need to recognize internal problems and combat them honestly.

In an America where it isn't always easy to tell where the voyeuristically oriented crime leaves off and where terrorism begins, another thing has happened to the popular definition of terrorism since 9/11, besides having the term "terrorist" applied to everyone and everything from schoolteachers to CEOs to hurricanes (notably, however, I have not heard such references to Katrina). The impact that an act has on the victims has taken on more importance in defining terrorism.

When John Muhammad, the beltway sniper, was tried under an anti-terrorism law making it terrorism to commit a crime with the intent of intimidating the government or the public, prosecution testimony included witness accounts about how terrified people felt. That testimony was not about Muhammad's intent. It was about his impact in creating terror. As Americans begin to think about terror more in terms of what terrifies them, terrorism and crime become increasingly difficult to tell apart.

In committing a terrorist act, terrorists consider delivering their message more important than the human suffering created by delivering it. The suffering, in fact, highlights the message, in a perverted calculus of social connection. It is easy to vilify such tactics, but before we become complacent in our horror, let's take a hard look at similar dynamics in everyday American culture.

People don't die on reality TV as they might in a terrorist attack, but they do endure humiliation and pain inflicted by their fellow game-players. These victims are

willing, but the behavior dynamics are the same. The message is that degrading and humiliating other humans is OK in order to get ahead yourself. People are no more than stepping-stones. America has no room to congratulate itself on a culture of humaneness, when its citizens so readily watch and participate in these gladiatorial spectacles, while the entertainment industry cashes in. Ritualized displays of ultimate competitiveness do not direct Americans toward thinking in terms of constructive community, but away from it.

The discourtesy and even rage on American roads does not speak of a people who have community in mind. By and large, Americans don't meet one another in parks anymore. It wouldn't be safe. The greatest public interaction space is the road. It, like reality TV, is characterized by extremes of individualism and hostility. Even consciousness of other drivers is sometimes lacking. At least hostility admits of a relationship. Inattention is worse. Drivers increasingly opt for the personal comfort of their cell phone conversations over their ability to react to the driver in front of them. How can a people who tolerate this degree of remoteness on the road aspire to practice vigilance with the people next to them in line, in the hallways, or in the next airplane seat? Until Americans turn their social imaginations and their behaviors back in the direction of cultivating positive social connections within the American community, that adaptation will be difficult indeed.

Self-interest even trumps the truth in an America where the difference between a bona fide journalist and a paid political consultant cannot be trusted. When a consultant appears as a journalist, the cost is collective trust in the very concept of truth. That cost is too high a price to pay for any partisan political message. Communication where the cost

of the message is greater than the value of the message has something in common with terrorism.

Where is the antidote to a cultural atmosphere that supports the behavior dynamics all of us love to deplore when they emerge in their extreme forms, but practice, tolerate, or seek out daily in their lesser manifestations as normal parts of American culture? The antidote is in choosing to exercise the power of American individualism to recreate individual integrity and social cohesion in America. Americans are empowered, the great paradox of contemporary America being that many do not use that empowerment to create social strength, because they cannot imagine that it is possible. The presumption that people are naturally isolated and in opposition to one another takes over (as it appears to have recently between state and local officials in Louisiana and FEMA personnel).

Extreme social isolation and unrelenting competition are not natural but cultural conditions. As such, they are amenable to change. Americans can create a positive moral order, but only if they can imagine how to do so. If they can't, the American moral order will continue to decay into increasingly radicalized individualism. Faith that Americans can exemplify positive, strong, collective, social connection will become harder and harder to find.

9/11 was an epiphany for me. It drove me to pick up and complete a book I had been writing about terrorism and America. While my book *Culture and Terror* is the manifest result of that drive, the changes that 9/11 wrought in my consciousness and spirit are much more deeply embedded than ink on paper. I feel faith in American humanity. That faith was deeply confirmed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It was

also confirmed by the general outpouring of humanitarian response to Katrina. I also feel, though, that I have to tell people that America can't just be tough on terrorism. It also has to continue to be introspective, and tough on itself. You don't beat an opponent just by focusing on what the opponent does. You also beat an opponent by strengthening yourself.

The trauma of 9/11 can be transformed into a resource. It's call post-traumatic growth, but it does not come without work. I feel a passion, a patriotic duty if you will, to keep asking people to embody the antithesis of terrorism every day. Just worrying about whether terrorism will strike or not is not good enough. That is counterproductive in fact, and feeds into the pathology of terrorism. Maladapting to the situation with emotional denial certainly isn't good enough. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. The nastier the challenge, the more powerful you become after authentically overcoming it, and the sweeter the lemonade. Terrorism presents Americans and their culture with a tremendous opportunity to make some of the world's best lemonade.

Along those lines, it is important to remember that culture isn't created just by the media and the government. While people in those areas have significant voices, everyone creates culture. In creating a future together, Americans no longer have the luxury of just going with a cultural flow that is going in the wrong direction. They have to act, to take a stand in creating a culture that negates terrorism, as well as fighting it. This will involve mustering the imagination, passion, and action to create a social order in which there may never be another school shooting, another bombing of an American medical facility, or another chemical attack on an American government office.



When you are busy fighting for your community and your culture, fear has a much harder time overtaking you. If you mentor a teen, you may not prevent that teen from becoming the next domestic terrorist, but you will help to equip that teen to be part of healing the culture when the next one does hit. The driver you don't cut off in traffic might go home and not hit her kids. Social activism is like brushing your teeth. It's social hygiene. It's what you need to do to stay healthy, every day, and in taking care of yourself, you will also rebuild American community.

One of the things that terrorizes most about terrorism is that the attack can come anywhere at anytime. There is a strategic lesson in that. To be effective against such an elusive problem, the response must be as broad as the threat. Maintaining the health of the collective psyche of the nation will take a comprehensive retreat from the individualized competitive end of the pendulum. The assignment now is not as narrow as growing victory gardens or giving up nylon stockings. The assignment is to recommit to community as the foundation of personal freedom in American life, and to cultivate it, while saying NO to dehumanization in its many forms, including one of its extreme forms, terrorism. That assignment will make Americans into a group of thoughtful, committed global citizens who can lead the world by cultural example.

The attack in London on "7/7" turned out to be "domestic," coming at the hands of British citizens. That highlights the fact, the rhetoric of my talk notwithstanding, that in a post-9/11 world, the distinction between "domestic" and "foreign" terrorism has less and less meaning. Borders are open. Populations are diverse. Ethnic identity can supersede national identity, and citizens may choose to attack their own homeland. Terrorism is a threat to the nation-state in general, because it is a form of guerilla warfare.

The entire world is now like Viet Nam writ large, with nation-states in the role of the United States and terrorists and the insurgencies that they often represent in the role of the Viet Cong. The terror in London comes in part because the terror was from within, and perhaps even in larger part because there may no longer be any truly meaningful “within” for a large nation-state where terrorism is concerned.

Finally, there is Katrina, which evolved from a natural into a cultural disaster. She provided another resounding wake-up about the disjointedness (or, in the vernacular “disconnects”) of contemporary American culture. The massive outpouring of relief efforts can become a kind of lemonade in terms of Americans’ general sense of social connectedness and commitment to one another, but the relationship of trust between Americans and their government seems to have, to use vernacular again “gone South” (I’ve always hated that term. It’s based on such a negative regional stereotype.). As we deal, first and foremost with the extensive direct human tragedy she inflicted, we will also, by and by, have to come to find a way to develop hope that the current state of affairs can be turned back to an atmosphere of accountability and trust between Americans and their various levels of government. If we can’t hope it, we can’t possibly achieve it. We have our work cut out for us.

Thank you.