How September 11, 2001 Transformed My Course on Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, and Education

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In the fall of 2001, I taught a seminar on religious and spiritual pluralism to a group of fifteen undergraduate and graduate students, all of whom were preparing to be educators, either in the public schools or in higher education. Because the course was an elective, all the students who enrolled in the seminar truly wanted to be there. The composition of the group ran the religio-spiritual gamut from Mainline Protestantism, to Evangelical Christianity, to liberation and feminist Catholicism, to Reform Judaism, to New Age spirituality, to atheism and agnosticism. The youngest student was 20 years of age, the oldest, 50. In 35 years of teaching at the university level, this was one of the most professionally rewarding courses I have ever taught.

What brought us together, at the outset in late August, was our common interest in studying a number of the world's major and minor religions in order to explore the current state of religion and spirituality in American culture, as well as its impact on our personal and professional lives. To this end I assigned a number of texts listed in the order that we read them: *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*; *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety*; *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief & Behavior During the University Years*; *God of the Oppressed*; *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*; *Buddhism Without Beliefs*; *Why Christianity Must Change Or Die*; and *Faith, Hype, and Clarity: Teaching About Religion in American Schools and Colleges*.[1] I intended for these readings to represent what I believe are the four dominant religio-spiritual narratives extant in the United States today: Orthodoxy, Social Justice, Alternative Spiritualities, and Post-Theism.[2]

As the semester evolved, however, a purpose far more urgent than merely reading interesting texts and writing rigorous research papers emerged. And it ended up bringing all of us together in an unprecedented, common cause: Each of us, in our own ways, despite our differing religious,

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spiritual, and political loyalties, and professional objectives, found ourselves desperately trying to make meaning of the calamitous events of September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon on that fateful, sunny day in the early fall, occurring only two weeks into my course, not only changed the geo-political-religious landscape forever, as many pundits noted almost daily in the media. On a more microcosmic level, they dramatically changed the educational focus, objectives, and trajectory of my little seminar in ways that I could never have imagined.

As a reaction to that day when three airplanes became deadly missiles, and caused unprecedented acts of devastation, suffering, and loss of life in Washington D.C. and New York City, the course material that I was planning to teach for 15 weeks took on a very personal hue, resulting in a spiritual intensity and urgency that, at times, left us breathless. No longer could any of us be content merely to intellectualize religious and spiritual differences in a detached manner. No longer was it enough for us to do a whirlwind, historical-philosophical tour through the major religions of the world. Now the subject matter of the seminar would hit each of us where we lived, in a way that surfaced all of our nagging doubts and challenged all of our comforting certainties in regard to each person's search for spiritual and religious meaning. Now the search became uniquely our own, to be experienced up close rather than studied from a distance.

No longer a space requiring a stance of strict impartiality and objectivity on the part of an intellectually dispassionate instructor and mildly curious students, now my seminar gave way to honest soul-searching, much personal anguish, doubt, and questioning, and, in a few cases, to a corrosive cynicism and despair. My seminar grew to be a welcome, sometimes unsettling, haven for genuine, heart-felt dialogue, excruciating self-examination, and poignant cries of the heart pleading for the existence of some kind of enduring meaning amidst the catastrophic loss of life and terrible human suffering on 9/11. I know for sure that the lessons learned during this fall semester experience have changed my own heart and mind forever. Moreover, I have a strong hunch that most of my students left the seminar in early December, at semester's end, psychologically and intellectually drained but nevertheless transformed, some dramatically so, and some more subtly.

For one, they and I learned how to talk respectfully and compassionately with one another about a topic that, throughout history, has caused as much suffering and division as comfort and reconciliation: religion and spirituality. We understood well the wisdom offered by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*: "Good Christians are dedicated to saving their neighbors' propositions rather than to condemning them."[3] Expressed in a more secular manner, Ignatius reminded us that good teachers and learners are

primarily interested in saving one another's propositions rather than finding ways to critique and ridicule them. We learned to construct and follow what we called the "Golden Rule" of seminar conversation: Respond to others in the class the way that you would like them to respond to you.

As one student said in an end-of-course, letter of self-evaluation:

> I learned that under the stresses of extraordinary events outside our safe, little seminar space we were somehow able to converse with each other in such a way as to make the other person look good. We actually made ourselves look good by making our classmates look good. We made ourselves look bad (selfish, hyper-critical, and dogmatic) whenever we made others in our cohort look bad (defensive, self-righteous, and angry).
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> I learned the unexpected lesson that critical examination of controversial course content can take hold only if it is undertaken in a mutually cooperative, generous, and compassionate educational environment. For the first time in my academic career, I no longer felt the need to defend myself against personal attack. Instead, I settled back, read carefully, listened empathically, imputed the best motive to others at all times, and, you know what, I made a great start in putting my personal, spiritual life back in order.
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> The 9/11 events early on in the term threw my world, and my reasons for initially taking this course, into turmoil. I am still torn up, don't misunderstand me, but at least now religion and spirituality mean something tangible and real for me. I learned most of all that in spite of our religious and political differences, in the wake of 9/11 we are all in the same human experience together. We have similar needs and even similar values. We all hurt, and we all cry. We live in the same dark cave of confusion and futility. We all need to locate the meaning that we hope beyond hope actually exists in the midst of the meaninglessness all around us. Isn't this insight a significant learning? Isn't this truly what the study of religious diversity is all about, something that can enable all of us to identify both our similarities and differences as each of us struggles to make spiritual sense of good and evil?

Letters of the Spirit

Like my student, I have come to realize over the last few years, but especially in my fall, 2001 course, that no other type of learning matters as much as what he described above. During that semester, I decided two weeks into the course to put aside my three-decades-plus expectation of four scholarly research papers passed into me at regular intervals as proof that students were grappling with the course content in an approved, academic way. I also decided that I myself wanted to be an active, sharing participant in what I would later come to call a "no-holds-barred dialogue of spiritual vulnerability" that was unfolding each and every week in my seminar. It became less important to my students and me to absorb the objective facts of a variety of religions and spiritualities and their implications for building curricula in secular schools and colleges; more important was how this material was being personally absorbed and translated into what one of my students called "personal instruments for psychic survival." Therefore, I asked my students to write a series of four freewheeling, reflective letters to me at specific intervals throughout the course.

In these letters, I wanted them to mull over the readings, discussions, and the terrorist bombings in a manner that was personally resonant. I wanted them for one semester to get beyond the usual scholarly paraphernalia of footnotes, APA referencing, and extensive library research, to express themselves in a way that touched both their heads and their hearts. I wanted them, whether theist, pantheist, polytheist, or atheist, to engage in a semester-long, open-ended journey of creating some type of sustainable meaning to get them through, over, under, and around at least some of the horrors of the 9/11 crisis.

My guiding question for them each week was this: "What is new in your continuing efforts to make religious, spiritual, and secular meaning of 9/11?" Some of my students came from the New York City area. A few knew firsthand of someone who had died in, or survived, the collapsing, burning Twin Towers. Many of the teachers and administrators were being asked by their own constituencies for help in putting into some perspective the ramifications of 9/11. Most of my students knew nothing about Islam except the usual religious stereotypes perpetuated by the media; thus, their curiosity to know more about this religion of 1.1 billion adherents worldwide was virtually insatiable. No group in recent memory had devoured my course material as hungrily as this fall 2001 course participants.

In order to position myself in the middle of this dialogue as a co-partner in the journey, I took the time, at strategic points during the semester, to write four lengthy, personal letters back to each and every one of my stu-

dents, as a way to respond honestly to their letters of the heart, journal entries, and classroom comments. I called this process a "mutual exchange of letters of the spirit." I found that when I took the time to write each of them a carefully crafted, candid, and thoughtful letter, I was able to say things to them that I just could not express in the rapid give-and-take of seminar discussion or in a series of quickly scribbled, handwritten responses on more conventional term papers. Because I tried to keep each letter personal, frank, and plainspoken, somewhat like a well-edited e-mail, I was able, for the first time in my teaching career; to engage students in a format and conversation that, in an existential sense, truly equalized the roles of student and teacher.

After all, I was the first one to admit that I had no all-purpose, infallible answers to the inscrutable questions that the September acts of terrorism raised about good and evil, belief and non-belief, religious fanaticism and religious moderation, revelation and reason, relative and absolute truth, and mortality and immortality. As my student remarked above, we were all in this crisis together, none of us wiser than the other in trying to fathom the deeper meaning of senseless acts of cruelty and inhumanity, acts often justified in the name of a particular religious creed, sacred book, or supreme being. More than one student raised this question during the semester: "Why is it that something good like religion has produced so much horror throughout history?"

No problem my students confronted in the course material during the term was ever too large or too small for me to discount or ignore in my letters. No response of theirs to me or to the readings was insignificant. No personal account regarding their peculiar religious struggles and doubts as a result of 9/11 was irrelevant. Everything was important because the subject matter was religion and spirituality, content that deals with the very meaning of life: matter that resides in the bone marrow of each student's lived existence. I took very seriously that semester the immovable, religious promontories on which each of my orthodox and mainline students stood, just as I did the fluid, spiritual journeys which my mystical and secular humanistic students traveled throughout the course. I also listened carefully to the impassioned critiques of organized religion, and the zealotry it often produces, which social justice activists, New Age spiritualists, and postmodern skeptics raised.

This, for me, was genuine religious pluralism in action: In Diana Eck's words, we were engaging in a true "culture of dialogue"

> a truth-seeking encounter. . . We do not enter into dialogue with the dreamy hope that we will all agree, for the truth is

> we probably will not. We do not enter into dialogue to produce an agreement, but to produce real relationship, even friendship, which is premised upon mutual understanding, not upon agreement…a culture of dialogue creates a context of ongoing relatedness and trust in which self-criticism and mutual criticism are acceptable and valuable parts of the interreligious exchange.[4]

This mutual exchange of letters, if I may say so, was nothing short of a resounding educational success. End-of-course evaluations mentioned them positively time and time again. As one student put it in an anonymous note to me:

> The letters that you wrote to us helped us to become part of your religious story just as you became part of ours. We, in turn, wrote letters to other students in the seminar. In this way, we became part of one another, students and teacher, students and students. Isn't this what religion ought to be about, binding us together, forging a connection with one another, pursuing the mystery of it all communally?

Although the letters I wrote consumed many hours of my time, the personal rewards were abundant. My letters to my students were really letters to myself. They were an ongoing account of what Gregory of Nyssa, the 4th century theologian, called *epektasis*, my own "straining toward meaning," toward a luminous darkness, toward an unsatiated desire for "god," both in and out of the classroom.[5] In fact, in a very real sense, my letters to my students were really letters to a god I do not yet know or cannot even begin to decipher. During that fall semester, therefore, I can now say that, notwithstanding their feedback value to students, I wrote my letters to me and for me, in order to find, or, for that matter, to lose, a god . . . once and for all. Needless to say, I am still involved in this process and probably will be until my life comes to an end. Not surprisingly, more than a few of my students wrote their letters for the same reasons.

Maybe, in truth, what I was really looking for in my letters during the 9/11 semester was a god beyond the god of religions, a god of inexpressible depth, a god that is not "once-and-for-all" but "once-and-for-always-a-mystery." Like a number of postmodern theologians, maybe the most that we can ever know are concepts, constructs, and stories about god. Don Cupitt has observed that Jesus himself used stories to preach about the Kingdom to come; unfortunately, according to Cupitt, it was the Church that came. In

the place of a wise and prophetic humanism, we got a professional caste of priests, accompanied by canon laws, written scriptures, temples, churches, and dogmatic theologies.[6]

One important, personal insight I gained in my semester-long exchange of letters was that I could not truly call myself an absolute atheist unless I was willing to declare for all the world to hear that life is utterly without depth, mystery, or otherness, that acts of terrorism fully and finally invalidate a belief in any kind of transcendence. So many of my students arrived at the same place as I regarding the events of 9/11. Few of us were bold or stark enough to declare to anyone who was willing to listen that our lives, in the end, are shallow, without meaning, lived entirely on the surface, totally devoid of a single truth that we are able to take seriously and without reservation. Even though I remain a postmodern agnostic to the core, I found that I was simply unwilling to deny the infinite and inexhaustible depth that somehow gives shape and substance to my, and my students' lives.

In some as yet inscrutable way, both I and many of my students ended up standing with that troubled nineteenth-century genius, Friedrich Nietzsche, who said: "The world is deep, and deeper than the day could read. Deep is woe. Joy deeper still than grief can be. Woe says: Hence, go! But joys want all eternity, want deep, profound eternity."[7] Several of us, in spite of our postmodern bravado, needed the deep, profound eternity that makes all the world's grief and woe endurable. In contrast to many students in my seminar, however, I want this eternity on my own terms, in my own way, and I want it here and now. I fully accept that this may be a grievous contradiction in terms, but I am more than ready to live my life accordingly and to accept whatever outcomes befall me.

I find myself, at this time in my life, poised precariously somewhere between the paradox of both embracing and demystifying the unknowable. Can any of us really know for sure why a group of extremist Islamists, in the name of Almighty Allah and Holy Jihad, hijacked three jumbo jetliners and flew them into buildings, sacrificing their own lives while killing almost 3,000 others? Actually, it is this type of confounding mystery that ignites my passion for teaching about pluralistic conceptions of religion and spirituality. I am convinced that, without the challenge of such puzzling, often tormenting, problems as this one, there would have been no passion in our seminar during the fall semester of 2001.

Excerpts From an Exchange of Letters

What follows is a series of actual excerpts from several letters that I wrote to students in the fall of 2001. I present these abbreviated paragraphs

in order to convey the flavor of our exchanges. Alan Wolfe, a sociologist of religion and values in contemporary American life, has recently asked this question: "Are we better off when religion is as broad, but also as thin, as the kinds of faith one finds on American college campuses today?" He goes on to quote an author, whose book he is reviewing favorably, that many students on our nation's campuses are "dim, fourth-carbon copies of real religious people," because they have no sense of what Wolfe calls the "tragic."[8] I, for one, strongly disagree with Wolfe's depiction of college students' spirituality today. Because their faith is pluralistic, fluid, non-triumphalistic, and personal, it simply does not follow that they lack a sense of the tragic, as many of the excerpts below will demonstrate.

One last note: I offer selected excerpts only from my letters in order to protect the rights of my students to have their letters kept confidential. In all cases but one, I have changed the names of students in order to protect their identities. In some instances, even though I retain several actual phrases that my students used, which I place in quotation marks, I have modified distinguishing characteristics and events in my letters in order to shield a student's sacred zone of privacy. I have also taken the liberty to conflate the material in a number of letters in the interests of efficiency and narrative appeal. Finally, the footnotes in the letters have been added ex post facto.

Dear Jackie,

What a profoundly moving letter you have written. I appreciated the story you told me about your four-year old daughter when she overheard you say to your husband that you couldn't think of anything more horrible than the bombing of the Trade Towers. You wondered openly why an all-powerful and all-loving God would allow such an event to take place. Your daughter, not knowing anything about this catastrophe, calmly asked you: "Mommie, why do you suppose that God took away my puppy last year? Was it because he wanted Pepper to go to a home that would make him even happier than the one he had here?" You extrapolate the meaning of this little incident in such a way as to make the connection between "little" evils and "big" evils seem entirely appropriate, without once detracting from the macro-horror of the unspeakable events of 9/11.

I am glad that you took the time to examine the enormous problem of theodicy by putting into dramatic, personal perspective the story that you relate about your daughter. You give me what Anne Lamott calls a "one-inch picture frame" on an event that is really too huge for most of us to get our eyes and minds around.[9] You are telling me that, for you, a series of "little catastrophes" in your own life has helped to give you an "empathetic"

perspective on evil, a way to wrap your own heart and mind around an "evil of such staggering proportions" that it defies and "passes all understanding." This, as you know, is Scripture's definition of faith, a trust that some power, somewhere, will someday make the senseless sensible.

You acknowledge in your letter that, for you, a "lapsed denominational Christian," but still a believer, the "Lord's Prayer" offers you a precious, personal consolation in times of crisis. You continue to love the words, "deliver us from evil." To whom, I ask, do you direct these words? What is the particular narrative of transcendence in your mind and heart that defines the "something greater" that you mention? What particular "glimpse of the cosmos" have you experienced that enables you to persevere in the face of the cataclysm of 9/11? Some in our seminar cohort have found only chaos, not cosmos in the cataclysm. What exactly are the "fear and awe" that you felt? What is there, after all, to be awed about?

I don't really expect you to answer these questions, because there are no permanently satisfying resolutions to the mystery of evil, suffering, and death that will comfort all people. I have often asserted that the problem of theodicy has caused more people to lose their religious faiths than any other single problem. And yet, as you point out, all around us on this campus, and throughout the country, people appear to be reaching for, rather than repudiating, the comforts that their religiosity provides for them in time of great need, whether they are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus.

Yet I am still intrigued, and greatly impressed, even a little envious, that you find such consolation in the words "deliver us from evil." In my own case, the Lord's Prayer has always seemed unsatisfying. I wonder to this day why the "evil" from which people want deliverance isn't divinely preventable in the first place. What's the point? The nearly 3,000 human beings who lost their lives on 9/11 were not delivered from the evil, and, yet, thousands of others were. Why? Is divine deliverance so selective? On the basis of what and whose criteria? Protestants add this last line to the Lord's Prayer, as you know: "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and glory, forever and ever, amen." I wonder, also, "what kingdom, what power, and what glory?" 9/11, at least to me, is depressing evidence that there can never be any heavenly kingdom, power, or glory that is quite good enough to console all of those who lost loved ones, some, maybe, but not all.

I know full well that these are my personal issues on the problem of evil and not yours. I would never impose them upon you or upon anyone. Each of us needs to find meaning, consolation, and what you call "light," in our own best places and best ways. I respect your attempts to find an enduring meaning in those less than cosmic, micro-events that often make our "blood run cold," as my mother always says. The "smaller meaning" that your

daughter attributed to the death of her puppy is actually the narrative construction that many of us need in order to make sense of the inconceivable horrors of gulags, holocausts, and terrorism on such a grand scale.

One thing fascinates me, though, in your letter. You don't appear ever to have seriously doubted your faith as a consequence of the September 11th events. How did you ever get to a place where you could believe that the September 11th catastrophe was part of "God's plan"? Is it possible that reason could lead some people, even religious believers, to a very different understanding, perhaps coming to the conclusion that while there may be a God, this God is not all-powerful or all-knowing, but simply a divine blunderer who, though he means well, does great harm? Or, for that matter, might reason lead some, like the atheist, Wendy Kaminer, one of our course authors, to decide that the God hypothesis is no longer necessary, as science has filled most of the gaps in explaining many of life's mysteries?

Anyway, your very last sentence conveys in your trademark, cryptic writing style the nub of the truth in your spirituality, indeed in most of the world's spiritualities. "I know that this disclosure of my faith in a compassionate God who someday will reveal to all of us the reasons why terrible things happen to decent people holds no guarantees of a one-answer-fits-all to the questions we ask during times of extreme stress." I am deeply grateful for your putting a human face on Nietzsche's aphorism that "he who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."[10] Thank you for a wonderful personal reflection, particularly the disclosure of how your daughter's "little tragic thing" has helped you to come to grips with the "big tragic thing" that occurred a few weeks ago.

Dear Julie,

Your letter about the importance of "forgiveness" to believers and non-believers alike if we are ever to stop the cycle of religious and political violence that engulfs the world is compelling, beautifully written, and gives me much pause. The tone of your writing is prayerful, the words inspiring, and your personal resolution comforting, but still difficult for a non-believer and a non-pacifist like me to grasp fully. Nevertheless, throughout your letter, you convey powerfully the sense that forgiveness is not a quality that is easy for you or for anyone to come by.

You were understandably moved by your local Catholic Bishop's Christian equanimity in forgiving the terrorists who took the lives of his brother and sister-in-law at the Trade Towers. Your personal resolution to 9/11's horror—to allow your own "forgiveness" to be an "instrument of peace" — is, in my opinion, courageous and profoundly Christian. In the end, as you so aptly ask, who can really live a life with any enduring meaning by continu-

ally harboring a hatred which looks for a resolution only in more vengeful killing? You beautifully recount your gradual transition during this time from an initial period of "revenge and hatred," to a state of "disbelief, acknowledgement, and sorrow," and eventually to "forgiveness." I can only wonder, though, where your narrative of Christian forgiveness will end up. How will you be able to sustain a spirituality of peace and forgiveness, given the hyped-up cries for victory and vengeance that are bound to intensify throughout the country in the coming weeks and months?

Perhaps your belief in the "invincibility of the human spirit" has its origins in your Catholic narrative. The Christian story is one of redemption, deliverance from evil, resurrection, salvation, and spiritual renewal. The indomitability of the human spirit, from the point of view of Christianity, begins and ends in the understanding that life has an ultimate, cosmic purpose, greater even than worldly success. Forgiveness, as you suggest, is the key, both for you and for the Bishop, but in order to get to this place, you needed first to pass through the negative human feelings of fear and hatred.

Your "reconnection with [your] religious beliefs" has enabled you to "forgive [your] trespassers." I suspect the reason why "tears come to [your] eyes" when you utter this sentence is that you have reclaimed an essential truth which your Catholicism is able to provide you during this particular "vale of tears." This is the truth that there is more to life than what happens in this particular time and place in the universe. There is a supernatural power that will, indeed, "deliver us from evil." Your Catholicism offers you consolation and a reason to persist in the presence of evil, just as it does your Bishop.

You capture well in your letter the tension that exists between wanting to seek justice in the face of these unspeakable acts of terrorism and wanting to forgive those who committed them so that you might become a "vehicle of peace." I listen to Quakers, Mennonites, and secular pacifists speak on television, and in my classes, about the utter self-destructive folly, and cruelty, of rushing to all-out, vindictive war against guilty and innocent Muslims in third-world countries like Afghanistan, and then I listen to their critics excoriate them for being un-American, cowards, and traitors. How brave these peacemakers are, but, on principle, are their pacifist convictions in the name of peace any more meritorious than the war hawks' who demand retaliation in the name of justice?

Whose "vehicle"—aggression against the transgressors or peace in behalf of the transgressed—is ultimately more defensible, more right? Your letter speaks from your heart. You give me another angle of spiritual vision with which to reflect on the events of 9/11. I am profoundly appreciative that you chose to go public in our seminar with your reflections on forgive-

ness. This took no small degree of courage. You have reaffirmed for me that the best way to deal respectfully with opposing religious and spiritual views in a seminar like mine is to encourage the outward expression of each and every contrasting narrative, no matter how unpopular or politically correct or incorrect.

You have also reinforced for many of us in this seminar the principle that when we feel safe enough to talk about what really matters to us, and when we treat each other with dignity and generosity, we often become stronger in our views rather than weaker. But we also undergo a change in the sense that now we are aware that others possess a goodness and righteousness about their cause that is as sincerely felt as our own. When we impute the best motive to them, we learn how to disagree with one another frankly and passionately without losing sight of our, and their, basic humanity. This, I contend, ought to be what a genuine respect for religious pluralism is all about in the real world of mutual give-and-take.

Dear Scott,

First, I want to thank you for volunteering last week to read sections aloud from your letter. I was greatly moved by your account of being on the JFK runway ready to fly up to Vermont when the Towers were being demolished by airplanes. I was even more moved by your verbal account in class of how you were feeling as you sat in a plane waiting to take off, how you tried to make calls on your cell phone to reassure your loved ones when you saw the smoke billowing from the Towers in the distance, and how you felt as your plane was forced to return to the terminal, and all the chaos that you saw when you got there. All of this left me with a sense that I was witnessing first-hand what had happened to folks who were actually present in New York City at the precise hour and day of the attacks. You set the stage, I believe, for your cohort in class to subsequently express their feelings very honestly last week, and for this I am appreciative.

You use the Trade Towers catastrophe in your letter to raise compelling questions about good and evil, and about why a God would ostensibly permit these things to take place. Once again I am grateful for your decision to be forthright in your personal responses to the questions you raise. “Do I believe that everything happens for a reason?” you ask, and then you admit that, as an atheist, you never actually believe it when you say that there is always a reason. You become a kind of sociological functionalist, in the middle of your letter, in the tradition of Emile Durkheim, in searching for possible explanations for this 9/11 evil. Perhaps the tragedy gave us a way to pull us together as a nation; an excuse to appeal to a higher being, particularly if this being is portrayed as a partisan American; finally an “inci-

dent to rally around" in order to get young people involved in some communal cause outside their own narrow self-interests.

Your personal doubts about the efficacy of an international show of force, mass destruction, and vengeance are effectively rendered in your essay. I especially appreciate your willingness to see both sides of every question that you raise. Finally, you admit that you just "don't know why this happened." You venture a speculation that Americans have become "numb, entitled, and hedonistic, while so much of the rest of the world is starving, uneducated, and desperate for a reason to continue living." But even this acknowledgment doesn't seem to assuage your doubts or your concerns. You sound like a patriot at times; other times you are a pacifist. You can be a hawk; you can be a dove. You are both a non-believer and a believer. You reflect in your own dithering how most of us feel about this event. The central strength in your letter is your open admission that, in effect, you are a bundle of contradictions on where you stand on the bombings and what should be done about them. You claim that no religion or spirituality that we have studied this semester is useful to you in "putting the pieces of the metaphysical puzzle together."

Few people I know are willing to admit publicly that they are "just still sorting through it all." Most people I know, particularly media types like Bill O'Reilly on Fox's "No Spin Zone," as well as the "Crossfire" pundits on CNN, know exactly where they stand, and, come hell or high water, they are sticking to their guns. I admire Colin Powell for the same reason that you do. I hope that he is able to withstand the enormous pressure he must be under to "bomb back to the stone age" some Islamic countries suspected of harboring terrorists. I also agree with you that, despite the tragic events of the past few weeks, "we will find a way to get through this."

I'm not as convinced as you, though, that we will somehow be better for having survived this terrible ordeal. I am dismayed by the Administration's talk of "justifiable collateral damage." Neither am I convinced that organized religion will emerge stronger as a result of this ostentatious, national display of devotion and piety that we have seen all around us—flags and church services, "The Star Spangled Banner" and "God Bless America." My strong hunch is that all of this jingoism and churchgoing, although perfectly understandable and even inspiring at times, will be shortlived. (Actually, a November, 2001 poll by George Barna found that two months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks attendance at synagogues, churches, and temples had returned to pre-9/11 attendance figures, and in some cases, had dipped even lower.)[11] But this is my hang-up, not yours. Thank you for a wonderfully frank letter.

Dear Fred,

In your letter, you call yourself an existential humanist, both a "believing unbeliever" and an "unbelieving believer." These are very intriguing self-designations. The central question that you ask, the question that the evangelical author, Steven Garber, asks throughout the book that we recently read, "Why do I get up in the morning?" is actually the biggest "big picture" question of all for existentialists. But you suggest in your letter that the question doesn't need to imply a "big picture" answer, a final, metaphysical resolution to such occurrences as 9/1l. Most of us get up, you say, simply because we must, for any number of reasons. Unlike one student I know in another one of my courses who suffers from a grinding depression as a result of 9/11, and often chooses to stay in bed for two or three days at a time, most of us do make the choice to crawl out of bed and get on with our lives. For you, 9/11 just happened. While the incident was truly "horrendous," in your opinion, you think that perhaps its greatest consequence will be in getting each of us to come to terms with your inescapable "big picture" question. "Why should any of us want to get up tomorrow morning?"

By the way, I do not read you as saying that there is no worthwhile meaning for people to live by and for. As a self-defined existential humanist, you obviously value choice, freedom, intellectual curiosity, uncoerced dialogue and conversation, authenticity, perspective-sharing and understanding, accepting responsibility, gentle provocation, and, if not the "big questions," at least the "little questions" concerning the importance of the ordinary events in your everyday life. Your interest in "big questions," according to you, is mainly intellectual. And, to some extent, it is for me as well.

I also believe that I can understand your irritation with those religious believers who won't allow you the right to your humanistic beliefs, particularly during this last month when the name of God was invoked many times daily by politicians struggling to help Americans pull together in the face of 9/11's dreadful happenings. Like you, I have dealt with "over-zealous true believers" all my life, but, unlike you, I welcome their presence in my religiously-oriented seminars. One of the many reasons that I teach this particular course is to smooth the way for believers and non-believers to meet each other on a level playing field, to encounter one another in lively and respectful conversation about their differences. My goal is to get students like you to become part of a group that accepts you for who you are and what you believe, one that doesn't try to transform you, but strives only to inform you, and vice versa. I hope that you will continue to do everything that you can this term to help us create a genuinely pluralistic environment where we can all engage in unbounded dialogue about the personal meaning of such events as 9/11.

I do have a few questions, though, that your letter brought up for me. You say that you "forge [your] own path." You are "in control." You "fulfill [your] own needs." You "make [your] own life happen." "Out there" is not as important to you as what is "in here." You "make [your] own meaning." This, you claim, is your "autonomous spirituality." Are you saying that you don't need anyone? Are you saying that a catastrophe like 9/11 didn't once cause you to wonder just how much control you actually do exercise over your life? Is there any place for a communitarian spirituality in your worldview, one where you see yourself as both an independent and an interdependent member of a group?

The weakness in my own existential view of the world is that sometimes I am tempted to see myself as a "lone wolf," a "free agent," accountable to few people, making my own choices, going along my merry way, questioning everything, committing to nothing. I don't sense that you are a radical existentialist, but I would only suggest that you and I are able to be existential individualists only because the communitarians have agreed to tolerate us. They allow us to "hang around." Without them, we would cease to exist. All agnostic existentialists, and I include myself in this category, are really freeloaders, in the sense that we depend on believers to put up with our choices to go it alone, to stand apart and live our own lives.

As my automobile mechanic once said to me: "Without me, Robert, you, the independent academic, end up dying in a fiery car crash, with your articles, books, and all going up in smoke." One thing that 9/11 has taught me and most Americans is that there were no "lone wolves" in those airplane-missiles, or in those collapsing Twin Towers, or in the Pentagon. Each and every life was an inextricable part of many other lives. While some victims may have died alone, many were comforted and aided by others, and all victims were mourned both by intimates and by strangers. In some way, their fates were our fates.

As several of your peers pointed out in our seminar, what makes organized religions of all kinds worthwhile for millions of people is the comfort of being in the hands of a supportive, loving, caring community of others, particularly intimate friends and family. During times of extraordinary crisis, these people become "church." During these times that test most people's faith in a divine raison d'être, the answer for some to the question—"is there a God?"—is this: There is no need even to ask the question. When people have gone through what existential theists call a "limit situation" that pushes them to the precipice, many believers come to the conclusion that they are in the presence of an enveloping mystery so profound and so vast that they need to call it something. Why not "God"? When they have found reasssurance in the arms and hearts of others, complex, abstract, and un-

answerable metaphysical questions relating to the problem of theodicy seem totally beside the point.

I also appreciate your observation that the media stories, scenes, and images that are the byproducts of that horrible tragedy will stay with us for as long as we live. What will stand out most vividly as time passes, though, are what you call the "amazing stories of goodness." Some people call this dramatic evidence of God's existence. Some call it evidence of humanity's natural compassion, sans a God. Some call it humanity's basic instinct to cling together against the darkness in a universe that is ultimately senseless and bereft of any kind of design. You are saying that whatever we call it, each of us makes our own "leaps of faith" in order to invest life with some kind of ultimacy and meaning. All the survivors of the September 11th bombings will somehow find a way to endure. They will find their "light in the strangest of places," as you say, or at least most will. Thank you for writing such an honest, provocative letter. I truly enjoyed reading your existential *cri de coeur*.

Dear Kristin,

You caught my attention in your letter when you said that "non-believers will never be able to understand the 9/11 tragedy. They have no implacable inner strength or foundation to deal with this event. They have no religious community to sustain them. Therefore, most will fall victim to despair and nihilism. They will be unable to discern the outpouring of love that only organized religion can promote during the dark days of unimaginable human evil." It is clear that what you call "love" is what the postmodern philosopher, Richard Rorty, calls the "unwobbling pivot" in your Judaism, the one virtue that got you through 9/11.[12] I would humbly suggest to you that if your "love embodies respect, faith, trust and a willingness to forgive," as you say, then religion doesn't always have to be the independent variable in the equation. I am a "lover" in the sense that you mention, and yet I am a non-believer. While I am stunned by the cruelty and suffering of the 9/11 debacle, I have not yet turned to despair or nihilism.

I have known many non-religious folks and non-theists who incorporate the loving virtues that you cherish. For starters, Stephen Batchelor, one of our course authors, is a non-theist who belongs to a kind of secular Buddhist community in the United Kingdom. So, too, I know dozens of Unitarian Universalists who are self-declared atheists or agnostics who are also strong advocates of social justice, pluralism, and who strive to "bring out the best in people . . . and to see [them] in the most positive light." I would also point out that many parents express the type of love you find desirable, and it has little or nothing to do with religiosity or spirituality. This kind of parental love

could very well be genetically prior to religion, because, like religion, it is most likely an evolutionary adaptation that confers special survival benefits upon the human animal.[13]

It is true, of course, that many "people who have truly lived a life of love" have been genuinely religious people. I myself have known many such believers. I have also known many religious people, however, who lived lives of hate and duplicity. There is just no guarantee. Bin Laden is a devout Muslim. Popes Gregory IX, Innocent IV, and Paul III were devout lovers who oversaw the cruel Catholic Inquisitions featuring imprisonment, torture, and execution of people they labeled apostates and heretics. I repeat: One need not be religious or spiritual in order to be loving.

I wonder, too, why you believe that it is almost impossible to "lead a life filled with love" without the benefit of religious belief or membership in one or another religious community. I can fully understand your own personal need for what Richard Rorty calls "metaphysical backup," given your particular upbringing, longing, and training, and I respect it greatly, as I do you. But to generalize from your own specific experience that therefore we *all* need this backup is to deny the voices of those who have loved, sought social justice and liberty, tried to make a better world, and sacrified, on thoroughly humanistic grounds—people like the aforementioned Richard Rorty, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, our own Wendy Kaminer, the atheist priest, Don Cupitt, and others, not just in modern times but throughout history.

Please know that I too celebrate the "principles of religion" that have motivated people to do great good in the world. I too celebrate the virtues of religion that have provided succor to those who have experienced desperation, desolation, and desecration during the course of their lives. You might be interested to learn that I myself would never want to live in a "community of atheists or agnostics." By temperament, I am just not a communal being. In fact, I shun ideologically-driven communities of all types because I find them, for me, frequently to be exclusivist, unloving, defensive, self-righteous, and, yes, even unjust. But this is not to gainsay for a moment the right (and the wisdom) of people like you to seek the shelter of such communities for whatever reasons they and you might wish.

In spite of the somewhat defensive tone of these previous paragraphs, however, I do respect, and admire, your efforts to try to live your life whole, to try to hold your Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, your community of belonging, and your moral commitment to social justice and liberty in a single vision of love. I agree wholeheartedly with you that in your own religious story these pieces are "intricately intertwined." Your eloquent words in class a few weeks ago were proof that your profound religious faith has,

indeed, helped you in coming to terms with 9/11. I think that they also helped one of your classmates who was experiencing terrible grief over the loss of a friend who was working in the Trade Towers when the planes struck the buildings.

Dear Heather:

Thank you so much for your Zen Buddhist reflections on an incident like 9/11 in your last letter to me. Like Buddhists in recent years who have taken this course, you have such a wonderful ability to find the extraordinary in the ordinary and the ordinary in the extraordinary, the sacred in the profane, the stillness in the "upheaval." You know how important it is to be attentive to the illuminating elements of the quotidian in our lives, to dishabituate our day-to-day existences by breaking the usual habits and routines, and to be mindful of our mortality. You said it so well yourself: "Is there anything in this life that we can truly control or hold onto? We can't even hold onto our own beings—we all die eventually. So why not let go, let live, and let be, right now, at this moment."

Bon mot sentences from your letters this semester that will remain with me for a long time are these: "Listening and being still may be our best initial responses to irrational acts of terror." "The key is to find the stillness in the center of all the mini bits of madness and small whirlwinds of chaos that constitute our lives." "Life is marinated in upheaval. It is where the real business of life is lived, and, in a very real sense, everything else is commentary." "The only thing that we can ever be sure about, and what is absolutely not preventable, is the stark fact of our own deaths. Thus, the challenge is not to deny or fear our ultimate termination but to find a compelling reason to live and to die for. I wonder how many passengers on those jumbo jets that flew into the Twin Towers thought they had found a satisfying reason to live and to die while they were alive. I wonder, too, if this thought occurred to them at the very instant they knew that their lives were about to end."

Perhaps most moving to me were these last few Zen sentences of yours: "When I first saw those grisly images of death and destruction on television replayed over and over, I felt as if gravity had been removed from my life. It was at that point when I remembered the advice of my guru: 'During moments of extreme duress, don't just do or say something, sit there, and let the words and feelings come when they are ready. Sit there because in that space, that space of the unfamiliar, something new is on its way to being born. This requires not only patience, but a listening ear and the stillness of the heart.'"

Thank you for sharing your wisdom and your calm with me during these trying times. I am profoundly grateful for the reminder that perhaps

the most honest spiritual understanding of life is that we are all "hostages to a kind of fate," in the sense that so much of life is beyond our control, notwithstanding our "airbags, antibiotics, and amulets." In the end, all that we have to weather life's cruel misfortunes are our "affections, affirmations, and commitments."

Dear Melissa,

The letter that you read to our class on the day of our last meeting is a song that sings! It sings of your love and "awe" of the simple things in life. It sings of your profound spirituality forged outside the walls of a church, and beyond the strictures of a specific doctrine and a sacred book. Your choking up with such strong feeling as you read your sentences to us was just the right exclamation point to mark the end of our course. You echoed what so many of your classmates and I felt after being together with each other for fifteen weeks, a semester interrupted by the shocking devastation in New York City and Washington, D. C.

From my perspective, your type of spirituality is incredibly moving. It is non-doctrinal and deeply personal, even a little pantheistic, and it requires no radical conversions from others to confirm its validity. But neither does it condemn those whose religiosity is far different from yours. It is not True Belief; rather, it is true faith because it is your own handiwork, and because, for you, it is palpable and real. Your words on that final day of the course were compelling: "As an adult, I know that the grace of God can be found everywhere, both in organized religions and in the private spaces of an individual's heart, in the churches and temples in large cities, and in the forests, lakes, and mountains of wilderness areas." I believe that all of the authors whom we read this semester would agree with you: From very different perspectives, John Shelby Spong, Huston Smith, and Steven Garber would embrace your words. Even Wendy Kaminer, always the skeptical atheist, would find meaning in the obvious, heartfelt authenticity of your spiritual sentiments.

Yes, I too will miss our "safe, weekly venue." And, yes, in one sense "we've only just gotten started." But, as one of your classmates said, "aren't religion and spirituality really all about getting started, exploring, making commitments, questioning and doubting, and then restarting all over again . . . a process that never gets done?" In one sense, as you point out, "our classroom was our church, our mutually respectful conversational process was our sacrament, and our clinging together this semester against the darkness of 9/11, across our religious, political, and ethnic differences, was our salvation."

You helped each one of us to "love the mystery of life, a mystery that encompasses both good and evil, a life that can be filled with so much

beauty and yet so much ugliness." All of us in this class envy you your grace-filled spirituality. In my own case, I need to think very seriously about the cogent truth in your words. Perhaps it is my doleful Irish heritage, perhaps it is nothing more than my stubborn, skeptical temperament, but whenever I allow myself to bask in the mystery of life's beauty, I soon find myself dwelling on the horror of life's ugliness and pain. This is the main reason why many, many years ago I rejected what I thought were the factitious consolations of the Catholicism of my youth.

You also have pushed me to reconsider the reasons why I should be the one who, in your words, is "blessed to the point of embarrassment," and why someone else should be cursed to the point of wretchedness. Why am I here, now, basking in the splendid spirituality of this group, and in the tangible sacredness of this learning space that we have created together, while others in this country are mourning the deaths of loved ones lost to a religious and political fanaticism driven by hatred, vengeance, and retribution? In your letter you asked all of us to be grateful and humble about our cherished places in the universe. I, for one, just feel incredibly lucky to be alive and to be with you and all the others who are my students and loved ones. We have relearned together this semester the terrible truth that nothing can ever be taken for granted. You remind each of us how fragile and ephemeral life's crap shoot can be. This is perhaps the major common ground that all the world's religions share.

Most important, however, is how each of you has enriched my understanding of the indispensability of religious and spiritual stories, even for non-believers like myself. Each of the religions that we examined this term was actually a story, and, in my opinion, the real truth of any theology, religion, or spirituality can be found in the power of the story that each tells. To what extent do we find ourselves in these stories? Do they help us get to the bottom of our own anger, damage, and grief? Are they sufficiently complex, credible, and capacious enough for us to organize our lives around them? Do they give us a reason to persist in our vale of tears? Do they help us to shape the story that we would like to live? Do they give us the courage to go on? Do they give us the language to describe our quest for something worth living, loving, and dying for? Finally, do they help us to understand our history, shape our destiny, develop a moral imagination, and construct a tragic vision of the world that allows for the larger meaning to emerge from such disasters as 9/11?

I relearned the value of Meister Eckhart's truth that there is actually something called a "higher ignorance."[14] When it comes to trying to discover a grander meaning in the human tendency throughout history to humiliate and butcher others in the name of a particular God or creed, all that

I, and anyone, can say is "I do not really know why." Being able to say this is a necessary first step in actually knowing anything at all. Eckhart, the Christian-Eastern mystic whom I most admire, gives us permission to admit our learned ignorance. Knowing that we do not know the meaning of acts of apparent meaninglessness is to realize that all our certainties are actually uncertainties. The religious and spiritual stories that speak most cogently to me are those that are inescapably and unavoidably full of reversals, surprises, paradoxes, mysteries, and, most of all, doubts. This entire semester with all of you has provided me with a plethora of such stories, and, for this, I will always be grateful.

Notes

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