

The world of evil hits home

published in *The Morning Call* newspaper (Allentown, PA) on 9/28/01

Every other year at DeSales University, I teach a senior-level course called “The World of Evil.” This course has grown to be quite popular for two reasons. First, it gives students about to enter the real world an opportunity to confront troubling issues. Second, discussion centers on how movies depict the various themes that are debated in class.

Despite the surreal look to the photographs, we know all too well that what happened in New York City and Washington, DC is not a movie but something painfully real. The losses suffered, the sorrow felt, the fear kindled, and the retaliation sought are all sensible experiences that bring home an awareness of something that transcends our individual lives.

Yet it is important that we name accurately what has happened. We begin and end my course with three questions that are pertinent to the clamorous discussions now taking place throughout our country: (1) What is evil? (2) Whence does it come? (3) What, if anything, can we do about it?

People differ in their speech about what happened. For most, it is a senseless tragedy, in which innocent lives were lost in a way that confounds any lucid explanation. But this is not entirely accurate. To those who perpetrated the acts of destruction, what took place made complete sense. Their acts were purposeful and deliberate and intentional. The catastrophic results make it hard to fathom, but at least to some minds there is a reason behind it.

Political strategists consider these attacks to be an act of war. The precision strikes were discharged on U.S. soil by organized forces inimical to the American way of life. But this war lacks a clearly identified combatant, a formal declaration, and an international dispute that usually occasions such a conflict.

More than tragedy, more than war, the wanton destruction of life and property that has desecrated our land is an act of evil.

To call this attack “evil” is not merely lip service to an inexplicable calamity. It is to name it what it really is. No longer is evil the “banal” reality to which Hannah Arendt referred when speaking of the horrors wrought by Adolf Eichmann. Last week’s evil is both novel, in terms of its extent, and immediate in terms of its impact.

This evil is ugly. But, as M. Scott Peck notes, “We cannot begin to hope to heal human evil until we are able to look at it directly.” Now we have seen it. Thanks to television coverage, its image is indelibly etched in our collective mind.

Whence comes this evil?

Some say it is the work of madmen. Whether individually or in cells, these suicidal crimes against humanity are terroristic plots so gruesome that those who carried them out must be crazy.

Others lay the blame on misguided religious and/or political aspirations. Taliban and Jihad are fast becoming part of a lexicon that describes the dangerously wrong turns that ideologies can instigate.

But the ultimate source of this evil is neither the mind of the attackers nor the socio-political persuasions to which they subscribe. This evil is deeper. It resides in the soul. There where our humanness is fashioned, where we vacillate between angel and beast, this evil rears its ugly head and brings the human spirit down to the level of animal aggression. In this abyss of hatred that can engulf the human spirit, the callous disregard for life becomes a comprehensive way of thought and feeling and action.

As Pope John Paul II described it, what transpired that fateful Tuesday was an “inhuman act.” It was a “dark day in the history of humanity,” for it disclosed to all of us the sad reality that “(t)he human heart has depths from which schemes of unheard-of ferocity sometimes emerge, capable of destroying in a moment the normal daily life of a people.”

It is necessary that we acknowledge these attacks as evil and locate its provenance within the human spirit. Only then will we be in the best position to respond.

What, if anything, can we do about this evil? Our immediate response is the humanitarian one. We should cry, as so many have done, over this indignant affront to human life. We should provide aid, as so many are doing, because we share a common human dignity.

Political decisions will provide a strategic response. Retribution can and will be pursued, not as a government asserted act of vengeance but as a measure of necessary justice. Freedom, as an inviolable right that distinguishes the human from the animal, should and will be defended.

But neither compassionate charity nor military might will eradicate human evil. Barbaric acts of terror are ultimately manifestations of a debased spirit. Only a supernatural power will be adequate to respond to this human depravity.

It is a telling sign that so many people, in so many ways, have turned to prayer during this crisis. Almost instinctively, our human spirit is guided by an inner sense of faith, aspiring as it were to rise above the frightful reality of spiritual decadence made evident by these dreadful deeds.

This transcendent response is necessary to restore the human spirit to its unique prominence. Belief in God, particularly in times when a divine absence seems apparent, is what gives us hope and what sustains our efforts to be and to live.

In Dr. Peck’s analysis, “That hope is our answer: goodness can succeed. ... Evil can be conquered only by love.” And love, as the pope reminds us, “is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity, or the world are involved. Believing in this love means believing in mercy.”

Many people ask whether we will be able to return to a normal way of life. The answer is “yes,” but it comes with a qualification, namely, that we acknowledge evil as part of the reality of this way of life, while maintaining that goodness is superior to it.

When faith and hope and love and mercy rule the day, then our culture will stand forever strong.

Firefighters hear another “voice”

published in *The Morning Call* newspaper (Allentown, PA) on 9/10/06

“We’re going for bodies.”

That grim announcement, spoken somberly by one New York City firefighter to his fellows, takes us back to the fateful September day five years ago when 2,749 innocent and unsuspecting persons in and around the World Trade Center perished. The task of recovering bodies has long since ended, but the work of remembering goes on.

“I’m coming for you, brother.”

This voice, too, was heard that day, as one firefighter communicated the promise of an entire department to a chief who was trapped with his crew in the crumbling tower. Astonishingly, they managed to survive in the hollowed space between the ash heap of the foundation below and the pancaked floors of steel above them.

Rescue and recovery – two tasks define the poignantly human dimension to what firefighters do, routinely and heroically. But it’s even harder to comprehend why they do it.

The images created in various media to immortalize the events of 9/11 express the drama of the everyday for those brave men and women of the FDNY (and countless other first responders). As scores of workers shuffled down unstable stairwells, those in heavy gear were proceeding upward. They had to know where that path was leading. They had to realize up wasn’t out. They had to feel it in the pit of their stomachs and the depths of their soul. Their destiny was directly in front of them, as above and below them life itself was collapsing.

That day 343 of New York’s firefighters died. Without in any way diminishing the deaths of the thousands of others, what happened to members of the FDNY was different. They knew it. They chose it. They acted in the face of it. And their fate challenges the rest of us not only to remember but also to think anew about human existence.

Why would anyone knowingly risk life and limb, especially for complete strangers?

Yes, it’s their job, but who seeks that kind of employment? It’s not for fortune or fame that one fights fires. No salary supplants the longing to live. The prestige that comes with public acclaim does no good for the hero who dies in the process. And whereas adrenaline may lead the young and the brave to do battle with an inferno, no one rushes in where he knows he’s likely not to emerge.

There must be something else, some other reason to explain why firefighters answer the call not knowing what awaits them, and why more than 250 persons each year, on average, have joined the FDNY’s storied ranks since that tragic day.

Perhaps it is faith. Perhaps more than many, they believe – in each other (the radio voice speaks of “brothers”), in the value of human life (which they seek always to save), or in the presence of God and the promise of another life.

Years ago, Karl Rahner, a German priest and theologian, pondered the power of faith in terms not typically religious. In acts of sacrifice, he wrote, particularly those made without a view toward receiving some acknowledgement or feeling the glow of satisfaction, the one who acts selflessly has an “experience of the Eternal, the experience that the Spirit is something more than and different from a part of this world, the experience that happiness in this world is not the whole point of existence, the experience of trust as we sink into darkness, the experience of a faith for which this world provides no reason.”

I suspect firefighters have had such experiences of the Spirit of sacrifice. Some witnessed it firsthand in the acts of their fathers and grandfathers who preceded them in the firehouses. Others grew up with it in the immigrant neighborhoods in which their families struggled to raise them well. And many of them grasped it through religion, in the preached messages and iconic images of churches that everywhere dot the cityscape.

Without the benefit of statistical research, which would make an interesting study, and based solely on assumptions from ethnicity and geography, I imagine the vast majority of the FDNY are people of faith whose belief system includes a fundamental teaching about heaven. For only with the prospect of fulfillment in another life where happiness is eternal can the limits of logic and the confines of mortality be overcome by the decision to risk one’s own death on behalf of another.

That choice is their honor. That faith is their foundation. Their memory is ours now to keep, as a reminder that the ultimate meaningful of life may be found in listening to a higher voice.



(image: baron-financial.com)