

From Fear to Hope: Individual and Collective Contributions to a Post-  
September 11 World

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Five years ago in New England, early on the morning of  
September 11, the sky was so blue, the air so crisp, the sun so  
warm, my thoughts turned to how I could spend some part of that  
glorious day outside. Two hours later, by 9 AM, I was inside, glued  
to a TV screen, watching in horror a scene that I, like all but a few  
people in the FBI, the CIA and our government, we have all  
subsequently learned, never thought possible: that airplanes could  
be used like missiles and aimed at buildings to destroy the lives of  
the people inside and to terrify all who witnessed those monstrous  
acts. I imagine that most of us in the room tonight, like hundreds of  
millions of people all over the planet, were inadvertent witnesses to  
these acts of violence.

In an op-ed piece that I wrote a few days later, I comment that the task now for citizens and leaders is to take action for the purpose of making our world a safer not a scarier place. Many of us, did just that. With prayer, candlelight vigils, ad hoc memorials, support groups and relief work **[slide, slide]** we expressed our compassion and committed ourselves to bear witness to those who died, survived, and lost loved ones, and to those working – suffering -- in the wreckage. Those acts of compassionate witnessing unhooked us from a paralysis of helplessness, turned fear into action and restored the belief that together we could make a difference in our shared well-being.

In the same essay, I cautioned leaders to take the time to collaboratively find 21<sup>st</sup> century solutions to our common peril and posed questions that I believed needed to be addressed: How can we make the world safe not just for a few but for everyone? What are the root causes of terrorism and how are these eradicated? What legacies will attach to each contemplated action for the generations to come? And finally, what kind of action can every citizen in the world endorse, allowing us to restore our global integrity and collective sense of well-being? Sadly, answers to these questions

have never been forthcoming. The task of contemplating these still-relevant questions falls to us.

I am a clinical psychologist and family therapist by training and a peace psychologist by later-life experience. My work for the last several decades has been to look closely at the experience of the witness to violence and violation and to distinguish the experience of the witness from that of the victim or perpetrator. We live in a culture that has taken up the terms victim and perpetrator with considerable ease and most people use these terms accurately, if narrowly. However, outside of the context of the courtroom, the term witness, in relation to the experience of violence, is still relatively new **[slide]** and people rarely apply it to themselves to account for experiences they have daily. And yet, far and away the majority of our experiences of violence and violation arise when we are in the position of a witness, not a victim and not a perpetrator.

A witness **[slide]** is someone who sees, hears or learns after the fact about personal or structural acts of violence. Personal violence **[slide]** is the kind of violence that most of us think of when we hear the word violence; it is when one person harms or injures another and the act itself and its consequences are usually visible. Structural violence **[slide]**, on the other hand, is often invisible to

those who are harmed and those who are benefited by it. With regard to structural violence, institutions, groups, the government, the social system itself cause harm to classes of individuals, in the process creating social injustice. When corporations dispose of chemicals in waterways, when the government situates urban highways through minority neighborhoods, when it takes days **[slide, slide]** to rescue New Orleanians from the 98% black Lower Ninth Ward, that is structural violence.

There are biological, psychological, familial and societal effects of witnessing violence, which, we in the United States now know full well. I would not be at all surprised if some of you in the room tonight are having what psychologists call anniversary reactions to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, perhaps primed by the arrests of the British men and women in August, who are alleged to have been planning to blow up American airliners en route from Heathrow to a number of American cities.

Even as I speak some of you may be having sensations in your body...you may be noticing a tightness in your chest or throat, a restlessness in your legs, a wavering of attention ...oddly, since you have just sat down and you were looking forward to my talk...(I forgive you; I understand)...and some of you may be aware of

feelings, for instance, of irritation or sadness. These sensations and feelings may well be biological and psychological effects of what I call common shock **[slide]**, a response to our awareness of violence. Common shock – a nearly inevitable response to unintentional witnessing of violence -- affects our mind, body and spirit; the way we manage our common shock strongly impacts the life of our families, our communities, and our nation.

I say that common shock is *nearly* inevitable to cover my bases. Teaching around the world as I do, I have yet to find someone who is unfamiliar with the reaction, although the way people express their response differs widely. Curiously, when I mime a sudden intake of breath and a tight, constricted sound, most people in my audiences nod their heads in recognition, as if this is a common idiom.

Take a moment and think about the most recent time you were a witness to violence. Did it happen in your living room while you were watching the evening news? In the morning, reading your newspaper? Driving in your car and you saw an episode of road rage? In a check-out lane, when one customer was rude to the clerk? Or, did you see a parent berate a child in a mall, dragging him away from the counter by his arm? Few of us are aware of the

incessant drip drip drip of exposure to violence and yet most of us feel fatigue from it. The way individuals manage their common shock – whether or not they are aware of it and deal effectively with it -- has a profound impact on the quality of life in their families, the tenor of their communities and the actions of nations.

Several years ago, before a trip to South Africa where I was going to be facilitating tri-racial conversations about community violence in the post-Apartheid era, I developed a diagram to help account for the range of positions from which one could be a witness to violence and violation. It is a simple two by two diagram that yields four witness positions, which I have color-coded for ease of remembering which is most desirable and which most dangerous **[slide]**.

I first presented this diagram at a conference in Capetown in 2000, explaining that one could change witness position **[slide]** and that each witness position had an impact on the self, one's family, one's community and one's nation **[slide]**. At the end of my talk, a tall, slender man, a few years older than I, whom I shall call Peter, came to the dais and asked to speak to me. He was wiping tears from his eyes. We walked over to the side and he confided in me that he had been one of Nelson Mandela's guards on Robben Island

**[slide]**. At first, he said, he was in the red square **[slide]**. He was unaware of the true nature of Apartheid, its effects on colored and Black citizens of South Africa, yet he was empowered by the system, both as a landowner in the Eastern Cape, where he had a small farm, and as a member of the SA defense forces, where he worked as a medic. He was the one who dispensed Mandela's medications... or withheld them, upon instructions from the government. Exposure to Mandela and the other political prisoners on Robben Island opened his eyes to the truth of the regime. Initially, he plummeted into a depression, aware now but seeing no alternative for himself, no way to extricate himself from his situation and predicament. He felt disempowered, unable to act on his knowledge... in the yellow square. Eventually, however, when Mandela left the island, which he did in 1988, after 25 years on the island (he still had more than a year of incarceration to go), he left the service and went back to school. He was now studying to be a counselor. He hoped to work in a township with Black youth and in some small measure pay back what he had been the unearned beneficiary of under Apartheid.

Peter changed his witness positions with complex consequences for himself, his family, his community and ultimately

the society of which he was a member. He did what I call flipping the witnessing coin **[slide]**; he moved from being an unintentional to an intentional witness, in his case of the violence and violation wreaked by the Apartheid system. The movement from unintentional to intentional witnessing starts with awareness and proceeds to action. It may be a spontaneous, unplanned witnessing or a deliberate, planned witnessing. When intentional witnessing evolves as a considered response, it usually entails a creative process that connects one's understanding of a situation with one's resources, commitments and values.

Intentional witnessing is always an opportunity for compassionate witnessing. And here, I think there is a felicitous alignment of EMU's vision, the words of which adorn these walls -- do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God -- its mission -- witness faithfully, serve compassionately and walk boldly in the way of nonviolence and peace -- with my notion of compassionate witness.

The movement from unintentional to intentional witness is not easy. First, the task of becoming and staying aware is arduous. All over the world, I have found that good-hearted people, and I suspect that each of us in the room tonight is just that, often find ourselves in Position #4, witnessing some terrible event with awareness --

whether it is watching citizens in Israel or Lebanon or Iraq or Afghanistan –but feeling disempowered in relation to it. The temptation for any of us is to try to return to unawareness **[slide]** – to turn off the TV, put down the newspaper – or to numb out – by taking a carton of ice cream out of the freezer or by subjecting ourselves to significantly more information and images than we can realistically metabolize.

Some people, unable to bear the helplessness of Position #4, perhaps by virtue of temperament or social status, move diagonally **[slide]**, taking action prematurely when they think they understand what they are witnessing but when do not. The parent who reacts angrily and punitively when he comes upon his two teenaged sons wrestling on the floor is making this diagonal move. Nations make the diagonal move also. When they do, as I believe we did in Iraq, the action is almost always impositional not collaborative.

The challenge for individuals and for nations is to move **up** into the green square of aware and empowered action **not over** into the abyss of numbed out blindness – the gray square – **nor diagonal** into the aggressive inadequately informed red square. But this is easier said than done. If it were easy to move up, we would all do it. But, sadly, it is not.

Fear is probably the emotion that makes it most difficult to direct our attention to the actions that can help us move **up**, both for ourselves and for children who look to us for guidance in these matters. This struck home for me in the spring of 2005, when I was asked to consult with a family about their six-year old son.

Many parents following September 11<sup>th</sup> believed that the best way to protect their children from fear was to shelter them from images and information about the attacks, about Osama Bin Laden **[slide]** and about all the frightening after shocks that occurred across the nation in those glorious fall days of 2001. Their strategy was to try to keep children in the gray square (unaware and, necessarily, disempowered), that is to move them **over**.

This was the approach taken by the parents who consulted me about their son, whom I shall call David, following an extensive psychological evaluation he had had by a psychologist on the Upper West side of Manhattan where he lived. He had been referred to her by his school because of poor attention, wigglyness, and sadness. The psychologist administered a wide array of tests and concluded that David was very bright, but troubled. She suggested medication for his attention difficulties and weekly therapy for his mood issues. Before embarking on such a program, his parents asked me for a

second opinion. They sent me all the test reports and I reviewed them carefully.

One aspect of the testing stood out for me: David's answers on the "projective" tests, where what is on people's minds often gets expressed in response to -- or "projected" onto -- oddly shaped ink blots and cards depicting scenes of people in various situations, were dominated by images of fires, and of firefighters and police in harm's way. **My** association to David's association was September 11<sup>th</sup> and I asked David's mother whether he had spoken about the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> to her or whether the family had had any connection to the events of that day?

His mother paused. "It's funny you should mention that. We don't talk about it. At all. We were advised not to say anything to David, who was three years-old at the time. His father worked in the World Trade Centers, but he was late to work that day. He saw each tower hit and saw the towers fall. He ran from the buildings up through lower Manhattan along with hundreds of other people. Many of his friends died that day. But I say it's funny that you mention it because last week, David's younger brother, who was 9 months old at the time, was playing with his father. They were running in the park and Mikey said to my husband, 'Daddy, run fast.' My husband

said, 'I am.' 'No, run faster,' Mikey said to him. 'But, I am,' my husband insisted. Really frustrated, Mikey said to him, 'No, Daddy. Run as fast as you did the day the buildings fell down!' Now we have never said one word to him. Not to either child."

David's mother was shocked that Mikey knew that her husband had run from the twin towers. Later discussion revealed that David had told Mikey that this had happened, leading his parents to consider that perhaps David **had** been affected by the events of September 11 as they had specifically impacted their family – his father had been out of work for 3 months, he had attended funerals for more than a month and he had been depressed for a long time. I suggested that I meet with David's parents first.

The plan that developed from our meeting – which had included an emotional blow by blow account by the father of what he had experienced that day – was for me to assist the parents in telling David what had happened to each of them – including David -- on September 11. What a remarkable session! Each family member willingly and lovingly offered compassionate witnessing to the other. David learned explicitly about his father's experience running from the buildings and about his mother's fear in those early hours, when he was with her, that his father had died. David's warmth and

attentiveness, despite his wigglyness, were immensely consoling to his parents. And, as is typical of resilient children, he had many ideas about what actions could be taken to render buildings safe from attack. He had ideas about airplane detector systems, fire resistant sheathes inside and outside of buildings, and stairwell guidance technology among other creative ideas.

David's parents had thought they were protecting him by keeping him unaware, telling him nothing despite the fact that he had been on the streets of Manhattan from 8 to 9:30 AM that morning, he had been holding his sobbing mother's hand and he had lived with a depressed, suddenly-at-home father for many months. In fact, David had pieced together a version of what had happened, which he eventually shared with Mikey. However, a gap opened up between him and his parents, maintained by their silence. What David most needed was what he eventually got: a conversation that was pitched at exactly his developmental level, that connected him emotionally to his parents, that supported his efforts at making sense of what had happened and that valued his ideas for taking action. In this conversation and subsequent ones, David's parents helped him move up not over.

Before I talk about fear itself, I want to point out that David would never be counted in any empirical investigation of who was affected by the events of September 11. First, he was three years old in 2001; studies of New York City children began with youth in the fourth grade. Second, he lived on the upper West Side of Manhattan, higher than 110<sup>th</sup> street, which was the dividing line set by many studies as demarcating areas of high from low impact. Third, David's symptoms appeared three and one-half years later, precipitated we suspect by a visit to a local firehouse still adorned with children's drawings of the events **[slide]**.

David clearly could be triggered into distress. In fact, when I asked him why he thought his parents had decided that he was old enough now to have this conversation about the twin towers falling he gave a remarkably insightful and revealing answer. He said, "**My parents didn't want me to worry that my Daddy had been killed or hurt even after I knew he was safe**, but now they know I wouldn't be scared of that."

David has managed to put into words what fear researchers now know. Fear is a remarkably tenacious emotion; it is hard-wired into the brain and we can feel fear even when we rationally know there is no current reason to be afraid. English provides many words

for fear; and we all have had experiences to which these words refer: fright, dread, horror, panic, alarm, consternation, and terror. I'll wager that many of us have felt one or more of these emotions in the last five years with regard to the state of the world and our own place in it. Any of these reactions will do what Edmund Burke – and David -- suggested fear could do **[slide]**: “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.” Fear hijacks reason precisely when reason is most needed.

Recently, a number of people have suggested that the current administration has been cynically manipulating fear **[slide]** and that the people of the United States are vulnerable to descending into a “climate of fear” --that is Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka's phrase. Soyinka is referring to both the politics of fear and to political fear.

Researching political fear, I have found Corey Robin's work very helpful. Robin's is a political scientist at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and he has conceptualized political fear with considerable precision. Political fear, he writes, refers to “a people's felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being – the fear of terrorism, panic over crime, anxiety about moral decay – or the intimidation wielded over men and women by governments or groups. What makes both types of fear political rather than personal

is that they emanate from society or have consequences for society.” [p.2] He believes that political fear is a “political tool, an instrument of elite rule ...created and sustained by political leaders or activists who stand to gain something from it, either because fear helps them pursue a specific political goal or because it reflects or lends support to their moral or political beliefs or both.” [p.16]

According to Robin, political fear can work in two ways: First, leaders or activists can select which danger it will focus their attention on from an array of, usually external, threats that are always present in any political landscape. The choice is guided by ideology, by assumptions about which threats are clear and present dangers and also by which present “opportunities” that may be helpful in advancing a particular agenda (p.16). Following September 11, 2001 terrorism was selected as the object of fear. Nor was it just any kind of terrorism, but foreign versus domestic, and Islamicist versus religious fundamentalist terrorism. Subsequently, Iraq was also selected to become an object of fear and Saddam Hussein **[slide, slide ]** singled out as the supreme object of fear. His ruthlessness was highlighted in relation to his alleged arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, the infamous WMDs, which the government further alleged presented the world with an imminent threat.

The second way that political fear works has less to do with external dangers and more to do with managing already existing internal dangers related to lines of cleavage in society. The United States operates with vertical hierarchies; we are a society of haves and have nots. The powerful fear the powerless and the powerless fear the powerful. The powerful use a wide array of tactics to retain power over the powerless, chief among them threats and intimidation that instill fear. This form of fear has been particularly salient during certain historical eras in the US, including our present one. The Civil Rights Era, The McCarthy Era and our own time with the Patriot Act, warrantless domestic spying, the Homeland Security alarm system **[slide]** are examples of this form of wielding political fear. Recent rumors that the government actually broke the levees in New Orleans **[slide]** to rid itself of a “crime mongering Black population” in certain low-lying city wards expresses a belief in the operation of this form of political fear.

Clearly, living in a climate of fear – a steady diet of fear-- is not healthy. Not for individuals, families, communities or nations. Neurobiological research can now tell us why fear decreases rational thought and, I would say, makes hopefulness harder.

Many psychologists work on the topic of fear. I am drawing on the neurobiological research currently being done by Joseph LeDoux and his colleagues at the Center for Neural Science at New York University. In a state of fear, a person moves from processing information using cortical systems **[slide]** to using sub-cortical systems **[slide]** ( if we pull away the temporal lobe and you see the colored portions as underneath the cortex ), what has been referred to as a move from top-down to bottom-up processing, or moving from the high to the low road. Top-down processing is responsive to and organized by thoughts, while bottom-up processing is not. It is focused on the immediate present and responsive to sensation and perception.

Don Catherall of Northwestern University Medical School uses a vivid analogy to explain the difference between top-down and bottom up processing. Imagine, he writes, a child upset about monsters in his bedroom at night. If the child is anxious before he goes to bed at night, a parent will comfort him, sooth him, help him calm down so he can go to sleep. On the other hand, if a child wakes in terror in the middle of the night, the parent won't attempt a rational conversation with the child about the existence of monsters but will instead allay the child's **perception** of monsters by turning on

the lights and demonstrating that there are no monsters in the bedroom, not under the bed, nor in the closet. The child who is anxious before he goes to sleep is using top-down processing. Should he awake in terror, that is bottom-up processing.

When people are continuously frightened, it becomes harder and harder to access top-down processing. They also have a harder and harder time distinguishing potential danger from actual danger. In this state, they often feel overwhelmed and paralyzed. Sound familiar? For a person you know? For a nation you know?

However, it is also the case that even in this state of fear, given an opportunity to take action, people can learn to do so. And, when we do so, we strengthen different pathways in the brain and generate what LeDoux calls “an active coping reaction” that diminishes fear [slide].

**Both as individuals, communities and nations we must learn ways of converting from bottom-up to top-down processing when we have been triggered into a fear response and we must learn how to shift onto the pathways that generate the active coping response.**

Let me make some suggestions about how to do both. I go back to the witnessing position diagram **[slide]**. Turning passive witnessing into effective action is key **[slide]**. But it also begs the question: how do we figure out what constitutes an effective action? I want to share some thoughts about this. First, what will feel effective for me may not feel effective for you. There is no absolute standard. Second, effective action may stretch us to take action far from what we initially think of as our area of strength. I think of the poet Walt Whitman **[slide]** who, learning that his brother had been injured at the Battle of Frederickburg, just 100 miles from here, left Brooklyn to visit him. He found George, who had only a superficial facial wound, and he also discovered that he had, in his words, an “instinct and faculty” for easing suffering. Compelled to respond to what he saw all around him –

“Outdoors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I noticed a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, etc. -- about a load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each covered with its brown woolen blanket.”

<http://www.nps.gov/frsp/whitman.htm>

he stayed at Chatham House for one month nursing the wounded. He then headed North to Washington DC where he stayed

for three years nursing both Union and Confederate soldiers, in acts of mercy he experienced as symbolically binding the wounds of the nation as he literally bound the wounds of these men. His remarkable poems about that time have earned him the title of the first American anti-war poet.

Sometimes we are able to use gifts we have always recognized to take effective action. Clay Ward is an artist at MIT who was horrified, as I was, as so many of us were, to learn last March that a homeless man had been set alight in a public park. Ward, along with associates at MIT, designed a poster **[slide]** and within three days had created an art installation on the very spot where this man was immolated **[slide]**. (He did survive.)

Recently, I was giving a workshop on “International Work at Home: Creating Global Communities.” About half of the participants described themselves as “ambivalent” about projects that they had considered doing, each in his or her own way fearing that in the end whatever they did do would be insignificant.

I have encountered this sentiment many times before. Yet I have come to believe that the absence of action born of deep caring – wanting so much to make a meaningful contribution, waiting until one is absolutely sure that activity will matter -- shows up in the world

no differently from inaction due to indifference. Older, diverted from larger projects to ones I can do with less energy, I have had to embrace the belief that small actions matter and ripple out in ways that we can never predict. I believe that the small is rarely trivial.

And I have been fortunate in having back up for this conviction theoretically and pragmatically. Have you heard of mirror neurons? These are neurons that fire in our own brains when we observe intentional actions of others. Their existence suggests that the good deeds we intentionally do can actually neurobiologically influence others.

I have identified four steps that can assist people in choosing intentionally to witness **[slide]**. There are steps an individual can take **[slide]**. Let me take you through with illustrating them with an anecdote that happened in my life. **[slide, anika]** [Tell story of Anika three slides of orphanage outside of Capetown in Gugleto]

And there are also steps or paths societies can take **[slide]**, which, if chosen, may help to intercept cycles of violence. In my work, I have been impressed with the power of these paths to actually defuse and transform messages that promote revenge from one generation to another. These paths have the power to turn

revenge cycles into cycles of reconciliation and peace. [speak]

**slides 45-59**

This last path could be illustrated in a myriad of ways. I am currently working on a project with the Boston Armenian community, and think that there are lessons to be learned from events 100 years ago involving the American response to the Armenian tragedy. Too often today we focus on actions we want the government to take or stop taking –ending up frustrated and disappointed -- and we lose sight of the great potential we have as citizens to make a difference. In the 1890's through the 1930's, popular support of the Armenians had remarkable effects, if not, as most of you in the audience can anticipate, the prevention of the Armenian genocide in 1915. I think that part of humility is taking action in regard to the events of our day that matter most to us – prevention of genocide in Darfur; end of conflict in Iraq, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Chechnya... I could go on – with full awareness and with full appreciation that the desired outcomes may not happen...but others will.

Let me tell you about American involvement with Armenia this period.

American support for the Armenians, who were besieged by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire, was intense and co-ordinated, perhaps because Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its official religion, which it did in A.D. 301, and because Protestant missionaries, having started work in Armenia in the 1830s had, by the 1890s 150 missionaries there, 12 stations, 270 outstations, 114 organized churches and had made over 13, 000 converts to Protestantism from the Armenian Apostolic Church.

American concern for the fate of the Armenians was aroused first by the massacres of Armenians in Sasun (Pronounced Sassoon) in 1894, an event that was described at the time by a British member of the international Sasun investigative committee as “the first instance of organized mass murder of Armenians in modern Ottoman history...in which the [the object was] extermination, pure and simple.” P.56 Burning Tigris.

Committees formed to assist the Armenians. Local and then national committees for the relief of Armenia successfully prevailed upon the (nearly) retired Clara Barton, who had been the first president of the American Red Cross, to take a mission to Armenia. Funds for Armenian relief were raised by cross-denominational

coalitions and, in major cities, even spurred competition among municipalities **[slide, slide]**.

Media coverage was extensive and explicit. Each week eyewitness and survivor accounts were published in major newspapers and magazines detailing mass murder; torture; rape, pillaging and looting. The *New York Times* first used the word *holocaust* in reference to the massacre of Armenians in a headline on September 10, 1895. [P.67 BT] Harper's magazine was actually banned in Turkey due to its penetrating reportage and photographic coverage of the massacres. [ p.127].

Americans became compassionate witnesses to the plight of the Armenians. They took in and understood that the mass slaughter of Armenian men was meant to undermine the ability of Armenians to maintain a civil society, that it was intended to disrupt family, political and organizational structures. Late Victorian American women grappled personally with a "magnitude of sexual violence committed against Armenian women – rape and torture, abduction, slavery, and imprisonment in harems – that appeared unprecedented in modern history." P. 65.

Popular support achieved congressional action in 1896 in the form of a joint resolution condemning Turkish atrocities, which,

although it did not go far enough, was, nonetheless the first time Congress had made a statement concerning an international human rights tragedy. This resolution set a precedent for future Congressional legislation regarding human rights issues abroad.

P.73 Responding to popular concern, media maintained a high level of coverage of events as they unfolded. Finally, local relief initiatives worked seamlessly with national ones.

After the genocide in 1915, Mennonites were among the religious groups who were approached by the Near East Relief Fund **[slide 62]**, the largest of the relief organizations, and overall Mennonites contributed \$339,000. Additionally, on Jan. 25, 1919 nine Mennonites sailed on the *Pensacola*, bound for Beirut, along with 33 other relief workers and 5,000 tons of relief supplies.

I go into this much detail because we all know the fate of the Armenians from 1915-1922, in a genocide that that has been estimated by scholars to have resulted in the death of between 1.2 and 1.3 million men, women and children. Their tragedy has been complicated by the failure of the entire world community, including Turkey and the United States officially to recognize that the Turkish people committed genocide as opposed to fought a civil war.....I say complicated because we know very clearly from both political and

psychological perspectives the further damage that is done when perpetrators fail to acknowledge their actions and other groups take political stands that serve their interests over and above the truth.

From a distance of 100 years, we can recognize that remarkable achievements were made as well as acknowledge – with rage and sorrow— failures and gaps. Today, I consider the challenge for all of us to be one that calls for both/and thinking and feeling and I link the willingness to embrace this to the practice of walking humbly, in the words of Micah.

For most of the planet's problems, to any we set ourselves the task of ameliorating, most of us will make only a modest contribution. The challenge is to know that and to keep on keeping on. This is a stance in which one bears the tension of continuing to do justice and to love mercy, even when one knows the desired goal – whether it is to stop the genocide in Darfur, to stop the war in Iraq, to assist in the recovery of New Orleans **[slide]**, to end racist procedures in hiring – may not be accomplished in toto or in part, by any of your actions or by all actions taken, for that matter. Yet one persists with the work one is called to do.

I chose the word call deliberately. I am very interested in what calls us and why we are called. What allows people who have never

met someone from Armenia or Darfur to reach out, to sign petitions, to send money? I am sure there are many answers to this, of which several are on banners around us. One is empathy.

On September 11, two thousand nine hundred and seventy three people died in the attacks themselves. Estimates are that about 20% of Americans knew someone who was hurt or killed in the attacks. Add to that figure the numbers of people who knew someone who knew someone and you include most Americans. This may help account for the ubiquitous spontaneous outpouring of empathy we all observed throughout the country that materialized in all kinds of ways, from drawings sent to New York City firefighters; to a huge mountain of donated socks that ended up on a Manhattan pier; to candlelight vigils, memorials and church services held even before the death tally was known. Rural, urban, it made no difference. The release of empathy was spectacular.

Empathy is harder to summon when we are far removed from the disaster, either geographically or culturally. Yet we can use our own experience to pivot us into the experience of others. If 3000 people died on September 11 and we know how devastating that was for us and for our nation, we can use that awareness to help us make sense of other catastrophic situations: It would take the equivalent of

22 years of daily attacks of the magnitude of September 11 to reach the number of deaths projected by the UN of children who will be orphaned by the AIDS pandemic by 2010: 25 million children by 2010. September 11 every day for 22 years. Or, in 2004, 10.5 million children died of mostly preventable causes before they reached their fifth birthday. It would take 10 years of daily attacks of the scale we experienced to reach 10.5 million deaths. [ 2006 Millenium Goal reports  
<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2006/MDGReport2006.pdf>].

We can take this in because humans are hard wired to feel empathy. What is empathy? I like Jodi Halpern's definition: It is the ability to resonate emotionally with, yet stay aware of, what is distinct about the other's experience. It requires imagination. Here are two images taken from MRIs of people's brains. These images come from a study conducted in London. These two images demonstrate that similar portions of the brain light up, are active, when people feel a painful sensation themselves or when someone they **care** about receives a painful sensation.

There is a critically significant embedded word in that last sentence: care. Some of you may recall the story in Claude

Lanzman's film and book, *Shoah*, oft repeated, of a conversation Lanzman has with a villager who lived near the death camp Treblinka. This man is "explaining" to Lanzman how it was that the villagers, who, he says were "appalled" when they understood that the Jews were being murdered, could continue working the fields in sight of the camps, hearing the screams of the Jews. He tells Lanzman they were afraid for their lives.

Lanzman asks, "Were they afraid for the Jews too?"

Well, he says, it's this way. If I cut my finger, it doesn't hurt him."

Precisely wrong. It does. We are wired so that it can. It can and it is our job to see that it does. To care. For that is the hope of the planet.

## Conclusion

Our planet is a precious orb. Charlie Chaplin brilliantly showed us the effects of trivializing and trifling with it. This clip is from *The Great Dictator* [slide, slide], his film satirizing Hitler and Nazism, begun before the US and Germany went to war.

[play 15 seconds of ballet]

Carl Sagan, the astronomer and writer, had a very different view of our planet, honoring it. **[slide]** This is an image of our planet taken from The Voyager I in 1990, that has become known by his phrase, “the pale blue dot.” These are Sagan’s accompanying words, heavily edited by me due to time constraints.

*We succeeded in taking that picture [from deep space], and, if you look at it, you see a dot. That's here. That's home. ...Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and in triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of the dot on scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner of the dot. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.*

*Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity -- in all this vastness -- there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. **It is up to us. ... to preserve and cherish [this] pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.***

The only home. Our home.

We live in an era in which the profundity of the planet's problems deprive them of a certain reality, a palpable face. The numbers who die, for instance, in wars, accidents, bombings, floods – 10 here, 500 there, 10,000, a million over there – paradoxically reduce not heighten their tragic impact.

None of us would be in this room, however, unless we had made a commitment to paying attention to the **people** who make up these un-encompassable numbers. In Camus' *The Plague*, Rambert, a visiting journalist, at first tries to leave the town where there has been an outbreak of a deadly disease. He says, "I'm not from here." But he chooses to become a witness to the plague and in so doing he crosses a border, he shifts his sense of belonging, until he is able to say, "Now that I have seen what I have seen, I know that I am from here."

Rambert is in an on-going conversation with the narrator of the story, a doctor, and at one point he accuses the doctor of living in a world of abstractions, like those large numbers I mentioned. The doctor contemplates whether or not this is so and admits that an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, is a part of his experience.

“Still,” he observes, “ when abstraction sets to killing you, you get busy with it.”

Such is our time and such is our challenge. Either we are or we are not “from here.” And, yes, there are no end of abstractions. We just must, for the sake of us all, for the sake of the pale blue dot, get busy with them.