

What We Can't Remember
Sermon of May 29, 2011
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Americans, it seems, no longer argue about what the government should do, or not do. We argue, instead, about what we should feel about what happens. For example, did President Obama show too little triumphant joy when he announced the death of Osama Bin Ladin? Is it appropriate to dance in the streets and shout "USA, USA" on the news? Should we feel grateful about George Bush now? Or even President Obama?

Almost everyone on Facebook has posted their feelings on the subject of their feelings. What is the precise mix of joy, triumph, sadness, forgiveness, vengeance that is to be expressed? There are dueling Bible verses being bandied back and forth. I have seen Proverbs 24:17 often quoted: "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble." I also note that the proverb is about observing that your enemy has fallen, not about killing your enemy yourself.

A spurious Martin Luther King, Jr. quote is circulating. "I mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

Apparently, the first sentence was not King's, but the introductory comment of a contemporary person.

However, we all know from our personal lives that nothing is more futile than trying to convince another person to feel differently than they do. People "move on" from their emotions only after they have felt them enough to see their limits.

The death of Osama is another step in the long emotional journey started on 9/11/2001. One emotional path taken from that day to now has been to personalize the attack as the work of one person and to want vengeance. I remember watching a televised fundraiser in the immediate aftermath and seeing New York firefighters spitting on and shaking their fist at photos of Osama Bin Ladin. For them, it had become personal and individual. For many, it still is.

Now that emotional journey has come to its natural end. Vengeance has come. And the promise that George Bush made with his bullhorn that those to blame "would soon hear from us" has been fulfilled. And for those who needed Osama's death, there will be great joy. For some, it will be closure. For others, it will not really change a thing.

America did go crazy after 9/11. Right from the beginning, there were widely different emotional responses. Many people were irritated, angered and irked when other people responded differently.

I believe that the deeply emotional political polarization of the country was born in the emotions around 9/11. Those emotional differences became fused with politics. Liberals were sad, reflective and self-critical. Conservatives were angry, terrified and vengeful. The lines were drawn.

Someday, we will have to explain to our grandchildren why the Dixie Chicks fell so swiftly from grace. Our grandkids will think that we were nuts. (If none of this makes sense, call a random number in a Texas area code and ask whoever answers the phone to explain.)

The emotional pathways from 9/11 are coming to their natural ends. Osama is dead. There was no World War 3 or 4, no great war for the future of humanity. The great war against Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan turned into a battle between warlords and tribes in distant mountains. The war against tyranny in Iraq turned out to be an orgy of sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing in a weak and fragile state. Saddam Hussien died and it changed nothing. And now, even when Arab peoples rise in their streets for democracy, we realize that all our military power is relatively useless for advancing their and our aspirations.

They say that at the end of grief's journey is acceptance. We all will come to the journey's end in our own time and in our own way. Let us not judge each other.

So after 9/11, what? There are holes in the ground in lower Manhattan. The great mass of the dead, now joined by so many Iraqis and Afghans, have become individuals, not symbols. They are missed by their families who treasure their memories. Hopeful signs of growing interfaith tolerance and cooperation have sprung up; they will endure long after the anti-Muslim hysteria has faded. Time is working.

There is a gap in the New York skyline; we are beginning to see in it the sky, the blue blue sky.