

Five intervening years

Five years ago, it was a crisp, beautiful, soft and sunny autumn morning when the genteel and innocence of humanity we all knew and took for granted, was struck. Today marks the 5th anniversary of the horrendous tragedy of 9/11 perpetrated in the name of Islam on the American soil. Five years later, the wound is still bleeding, the scar is still fresh and the anger is still seething. Five years ago we thought American people and institutions were the sole victims of that attack. Today we know Islam also was the target. That day, we surmised that planes were hijacked, buildings were rammed into and innocent people were killed. Today we know, a faith was molested and its followers became pariahs and ostracized for as long as it takes for the fog of ignorance and disbelief to lift.

A tragedy that ranks with the Mongol sacking of Damascus, the burning of Rome by Nero, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor occurred on the 11th September five years ago. You mourned, and I mourned with you, then. To this day, I still do. To most in the world the tragedy of 9/11 reads thus: 3000 innocent lives were taken and structures worth billions of dollars were destroyed. For me, the very fabric of the faith which taught me how the life came about in the first place and what constitutes its decorum, was torn and untethered. Life is holy in all religions; it takes a person of ignoble misunderstanding and instability to advocate or perform violence against it. The morality and integrity of a people as a whole are vital in dealing with all people. The precepts of my religion, my way of life uphold this.

The Qur'an tells Muslims: *"Come, I will rehearse what God has really prohibited you from: take not life, which God has made sacred, except by the way of justice and law; thus does He command you that you may learn wisdom"* (4:151). Thus, the precepts of religion forbid Muslims from taking life in a cowardly and unjust way, their own or those of others. The morality instilled by this single commandment, made Abu Bakr, the successor to Muhammad, order his military commanders of many things that helped make the Muslim Empire the largest in the world. He said: *"I advise you ten things: Do not kill women or children or an aged, infirm person. Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees. Do not destroy an inhabited place. Do not slaughter sheep or camels except for food. Do not demolish the places of worship of other faiths nor harm the people in prayer therein. Do not burn bees and do not scatter them. Do not steal from the booty, and do not be cowardly."* (Al Muwatta 21.3.10). So, go figure out, how the world was won by a bunch of Bedouins.

Now, don't get me wrong, but while the body count of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 has been accurate and estimates of property losses very realistic, the repercussion of the aftermath of this unfortunate event on the Muslim community has gone ungauged. The incessant and ever-intensifying scathing attacks on Islam and Muslims for the

last 5 years - especially by the self-conceited, self-qualified overnight graduates of Islam in the US media - has never let up. To some the events of 9/11 seem to have opened an opportunity of attacks as big as Pandora's Box: from the televangelists (with father-son Graham team topping the chart) to Bill O'Reilly at Fox News to the Islam hate-monger father of a proven anti-Semite Mel Gibson. The handfuls of those, who have stood up to defend our belief and stand on issues of humanity, liberty, justice, tolerance and, coexistence have been sidelined. But I guess, in the barrage of anti-Islam rhetoric and anti-Muslim slogans, it is hard NOT to get swayed away from the truth. All is not that bleak, though. Many of you have shown great interest in reading about us, talking about our belief and knowing what is important for us as Muslims and how are we contributing positively. Some of you have invited me and my family in your homes for discussions, and when I wrote a letter which was published in the wake of 9/11, many offered protection in their homes, lest I should be harmed in the frenzy of resentment! I never forgot that nor ever will.

On the eve of the 5th anniversary of 9/11, my emotions are running amuck as I am reminded of that fateful day's events and the following days and weeks, and how friends and strangers came together and formed a circle of hope around ourselves. Never mind how silly it sounds now, but the strangers I met on the internet that day have become my friends of a lifetime along with those whom I already knew, one way or the other.

You are one of them. I want you to know that you are still that guardian angel who offered me solace, hope and affection instead of anger, hatred and abuses, which you could have rightfully. In the intervening days between that fateful day and today, I might have or might not have talked or written to you much or at all. Please know that you are always in my thoughts and prayers. I urge my friends and fellow Americans to look at Islam in the light it should be and not the way media want you to. Know that while the administration is fighting the war on terror on terms it deems fit and correct, Muslims in the US will work extra hard to protect its borders, people and property from the threats of radicalism. Talk to us and help us in presenting to you the true picture of Islam so that you don't live in a fog of mistrust and hatred just because a family living next door or the guy sitting in the plane across the aisle is a Muslim.

Educating each other about our differences is the best way to bridge the gaps and facilitate the peace making process, because mistrust diminishes when people communicate with one other. No matter how ironic it sounds but 9/11 gave us that opportunity. Our work only began that day and will/ should never come to an end. I'm a Muslim. I'm an American. And to this day, the past 5 years have given me plenty of reasons to be proud of being both.

Abdul-Majeed Azad

aazad@eng.utoledo.edu; <http://www.angelfire.com/zine2/tribute911/>