

Connecting

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I understand that violence happens every day all over the world. I understand that death will eventually come to each of us. But my heart still has not managed to understand the horrific events of September 11, 2001. The number of lives lost so unexpectedly in such a brief period of time is more than I can take in. I felt the same overwhelming horror and disbelief during a high school history class when I watched old news footage of the devastation in Hiroshima. For the first time in my young life I had felt hysteria rise within me. My question then and today remains: "How could this happen?"

I am exhausted from my efforts to answer this question, to grasp the complex realities of evil and good, power and oppression, wealth and poverty, love and hate.... I am exhausted from trying to determine what I must do differently in my life in the face of this crime against humanity. The only thing clear in the wreckage of my heart is that I must build community in every place that I am, in every role that I have, in every way that I can. I must ask myself anew: To what group do I belong? With which people do I share a common fate? With whom am I similar in my joys and sorrows? In one era the answer for many would have been: my kin, my tribe, my nation. Today the answer resounds loudly in my heart: I am connected to the world. We are all family. Harm to one is harm to all.

I have lived biculturally and bilingually for over sixteen years. My life is richer because of this. It is also more complicated. I have learned, for example, that "common sense" is by no means universal. And I know that I cannot assume that what I say in my second language will be taken the way that I meant it had I said it in my first. I have to put on and take off "cultural shoes" repeatedly and intentionally throughout my ordinary day. In my first community, those who hold US citizenship, I am a member of the dominant group. I do most of my work, get medical care, buy groceries, share mothering support and have most of my closest friendships in this community. I experience the daily overprivilege of this membership—though I was reared not to see it. In my second community, Iranian, I am a minority. I have family, friends and acquaintances. We come together for dinner, yard work, concerts and holidays. I have been warmly welcomed. But I still often feel awkward, wrong and on the outside looking in.

In reality, I live on the edge of two cultures—a full member of neither. I am so different from my monolingual, monocultural European-American family and friends as to feel out of place among them, too. Through my personal experiences and my work as a cross-cultural researcher, I have become an observer of culture: I see what is not meant to be seen. My awareness of culture prevents my blind participation in it. And my sense of identity has been changed forever.

My experience of the terrorist attacks on the US is necessarily complex. I am grieving the loss of so many lives and anticipating additional losses in the upcoming military response. What will the final tally be? How many innocents will die? I am grieving the loss of a sense of security I once took for granted—another overprivilege of my membership in a dominant culture, this time at a global scale. I am afraid that terrorists could strike again. But now I also fear my fellow white, privileged US citizens.

Since the attacks, I have already heard about acts of hatred and prejudice against innocent people whose only crime is that they appear to be of Middle Eastern origin. I expect that more such acts will come. Will they come to my family? To my friends? To my community? I know of US citizens of Iranian descent who are afraid to leave their homes, to gather in public spaces, to wear clothing that identifies them as Muslim, to pick up their family at the airport, to reveal their cultural heritage for fear of losing the job they finally found after months of unemployment. I know of children who have been harassed in school based solely on the fact that they are of Iranian descent. In the search for safety, families have curtailed their own freedom, choosing to grieve with trusted neighbors instead of at larger public memorial services where

they sorely wished to be. Parents have discussed the need to speak Farsi, their and their children's first language, in public settings with intent—not spontaneity—lest it endanger their family. They struggle to cope with their grief and with their children's grief, as well as to protect themselves and their children from crimes of hate and prejudice.

The evening news warns us that terrorists could be living in our own neighborhoods: we must all be vigilant. Of people who are different, that is. Of the minority, of the dark skinned, of those with an accent.... I understand this reaction. I understand this fear. But it is not difference, dark skin, and accents that should be feared. It is terrorism. Terrorism. Can we not understand this distinction?

So many of our European-American family and friends have called or emailed us to express their concern for our safety. To tell us they understand that this situation must have additional levels of concern for us. To express their regret that we have anything in particular to fear. I am grateful that there are those who make the distinction. How did they know to make it? How can others learn to make it?

Connection is the answer. For all of us. Talk to your neighbors, even if they are different from you—especially if they are different from you. Call in to the radio talk shows. Tell your story. Express your support. Invite your co-workers over for dinner. Attend a community meeting—held by a group to which you once felt you did not belong. Pursue a friendship. Arrange for your children to play with children of different heritages. Get involved in your community—all of your community. Co-create potlucks, concerts or religious services that are intercultural, multigenerational, inter-faith. Bring your children. Show them how to connect by doing it yourself. Read the literature and learn the history of cultures different from your own. Read about bias, prejudice, privilege, and oppression. Share what you learn with your children. Read together. Choose to step outside your comfort zone. Extra effort is needed. Be brave. The survival of the world depends on it.

The mainstream US ideal of independence leads to a vulnerable alienation in the absence of connection. Freedom without responsibility is anarchy. In reality, we are all interdependent: we all need each other. We must build community in every place that we are, in every role that we have, in every way that we can. We must ask ourselves anew: To what group do we belong? With which people do we share a common fate? With whom are we similar in our joys and sorrows? Let the answer resound loudly in all of our hearts. Let it show in all of our actions: We are connected to the world. We are all family. Harm to one is harm to all.

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