

## **The Challenge of Terror: A Traveling Essay**

### **By John Paul Lederach**

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So here I am, a week late arriving home, stuck between Colombia, Guatemala and Harrisonburg when our world changed. The images flash even in my sleep. The heart of America ripped. Though natural, the cry for revenge and the call for the unleashing of the first war of this century, prolonged or not, seems more connected to social and psychological processes of finding a way to release deep emotional anguish, a sense of powerlessness, and our collective loss than it does as a plan of action seeking to redress the injustice, promote change and prevent it from ever happening again.

I am stuck from airport to airport as I write this, the reality of a global system that has suspended even the most basic trust. My Duracell batteries and finger nail clippers were taken from me today and it gave me pause for thought. I had a lot of pauses in the last few days. Life has not been the same. I share these thoughts as an initial reaction recognizing that it is always easy to take pot-shots at our leaders from the sidelines, and to have the insights they are missing when we are not in the middle of very difficult decisions. On the other hand, having worked for nearly 20 years as a mediator and proponent of nonviolent change in situations around the globe where cycles of deep violence seem hell-bent on perpetuating themselves, and having interacted with people and movements who at the core of their identity find ways of justifying their part in the cycle, I feel responsible to try to bring ideas to the search for solutions. With this in mind I should like to pen several observations about what I have learned from my experiences and what they might suggest about the current situation. I believe this starts by naming several key challenges and then asking what is the nature of a creative response that takes these seriously in the pursuit of genuine, durable, and peaceful change.

## **Some Lessons about the Nature of our Challenge**

### **1. Always seek to understand the root of the anger -**

The first and most important question to pose ourselves is relatively simple though not easy to answer: How do people reach this level of anger, hatred and frustration? By my experience explanations that they are brainwashed by a perverted leader who holds some kind of magical power over them is an escapist simplification and will inevitably lead us to very wrong-headed responses. Anger of this sort, what we could call generational, identity-based anger, is constructed over time through a combination of historical events, a deep sense of threat to identity, and direct experiences of sustained exclusion. This is very important to understand, because, as I will say again and again, our response to the immediate events have everything to do with whether we reinforce and provide the soil, seeds, and nutrients for future cycles of revenge and violence. Or whether it changes. We should be careful to pursue one and only one thing as the strategic guidepost of our response: Avoid doing what they expect. What they expect from us is the lashing out of the giant against the weak, the many against the few. This will reinforce their capacity to perpetrate the myth they carefully seek to sustain: That they are under threat, fighting an irrational and mad system that has never taken them seriously and wishes to destroy them and their people. What we need to destroy is their myth not their people.

### **2. Always seek to understand the nature of the organization -**

Over the years of working to promote durable peace in situations of deep, sustained violence I have discovered one consistent purpose about the nature of movements and organizations who use violence: Sustain thyself. This is done through a number of approaches, but generally it is through decentralization of power and structure, secrecy, autonomy of action through units, and refusal to pursue the conflict on the terms of the strength and capacities of the enemy.

One of the most intriguing metaphors I have heard used in the last few days is that this enemy of the United States will be found in their holes, smoked out, and when they run and are visible, destroyed. This may well work for groundhogs, trench and maybe even guerilla warfare, but it is not a useful metaphor for this situation. And neither is the image that we will need to destroy the village to save it, by which the population that gives refuge to our enemies is guilty by association and therefore a legitimate target. In both instances the metaphor that guides our action misleads us because it is not connected to the reality. In more specific terms, this is not a struggle to be conceived of in geographic terms, in terms of physical spaces and places, that if located can be destroyed, thereby

ridding us of the problem. Quite frankly our biggest and most visible weapon systems are mostly useless.

We need a new metaphor, and though I generally do not like medical metaphors to describe conflict, the image of a virus comes to mind because of its ability to enter unperceived, flow with a system, and harm it from within. This is the genius of people like Osama Bin Laden. He understood the power of a free and open system, and has used it to his benefit. The enemy is not located in a territory. It has entered our system. And you do not fight this kind of enemy by shooting at it. You respond by strengthening the capacity of the system to prevent the virus and strengthen its immunity. It is an ironic fact that our greatest threat is not in Afghanistan, but in our own backyard. We surely are not going to bomb Travelocity, Hertz Rental Car, or an Airline training school in Florida. We must change metaphors and move beyond the reaction that we can duke it out with the bad guy, or we run the very serious risk of creating the environment that sustains and reproduces the virus we wish to prevent.

### **3. Always remember that realities are constructed -**

Conflict is, among other things, the process of building and sustaining very different perceptions and interpretations of reality. This means that we have at the same time multiple realities defined as such by those in conflict. In the aftermath of such horrific and unmerited violence that we have just experienced this may sound esoteric. But we must remember that this fundamental process is how we end up referring to people as fanatics, madmen, and irrational. In the process of name-calling we lose the critical capacity to understand that from within the ways they construct their views, it is not mad lunacy or fanaticism. All things fall together and make sense. When this is connected to a long string of actual experiences wherein their views of the facts are reinforced (for example, years of superpower struggle that used or excluded them, encroaching Western values of what is considered immoral by their religious interpretation, or the construction of an enemy-image who is overwhelmingly powerful and uses that power in bombing campaigns and always appears to win) then it is not a difficult process to construct a rational world view of heroic struggle against evil. Just as we do it, so do they. Listen to the words we use to justify our actions and responses. And then listen to words they use. The way to break such a process is not through a frame of reference of who will win or who is stronger. In fact the inverse is true. Whoever loses, whether tactical battles or the "war" itself, finds intrinsic in the loss the seeds that give birth to the justification for renewed battle. The way to break such a cycle of justified violence is to step outside of it. This starts with understanding that TV sound bites about madmen and evil are not good sources of policy. The most significant impact that we could make on their ability to sustain their view of us as evil is to change their perception of who we are by choosing to

strategically respond in unexpected ways. This will take enormous courage and courageous leadership capable of envisioning a horizon of change.

#### **4. Always understand the capacity for recruitment -**

The greatest power that terror has is the ability to regenerate itself. What we most need to understand about the nature of this conflict and the change process toward a more peaceful world is how recruitment into these activities happens. In all my experiences in deep-rooted conflict what stands out most are the ways in which political leaders wishing to end the violence believed they could achieve it by overpowering and getting rid of the perpetrator of the violence. That may have been the lesson of multiple centuries that preceded us. But it is not the lesson learned from the past 30 years. The lesson is simple. When people feel a deep sense of threat, exclusion and generational experiences of direct violence, their greatest effort is placed on survival. Time and again in these movements, there has been an extraordinary capacity for the regeneration of chosen myths and renewed struggle.

One aspect of current U.S. leadership that coherently matches with the lessons of the past 30 years of protracted conflict settings is the statement that this will be a long struggle. What is missed is that the emphasis should be placed on removing the channels, justifications, and sources that attract and sustain recruitment into the activities. What I find extraordinary about the recent events is that none of the perpetrators was much older than 40 and many were half that age.

This is the reality we face: Recruitment happens on a sustained basis. It will not stop with the use of military force, in fact, open warfare will create the soils in which it is fed and grows. Military action to destroy terror, particularly as it affects significant and already vulnerable civilian populations will be like hitting a fully mature dandelion with a golf club. We will participate in making sure the myth of why we are evil is sustained and we will assure yet another generation of recruits.

#### **5. Recognize complexity, but always understand the power of simplicity -**

Finally, we must understand the principle of simplicity. I talk a lot with my students about the need to look carefully at complexity, which is equally true (and which in the earlier points I start to explore). However, the key in our current situation that we have failed to fully comprehend is simplicity. From the standpoint of the perpetrators, the effectiveness of their actions was in finding simple ways to use the system to undo it. I believe our greatest task is to find equally creative and simple tools on the other side.

## Suggestions

In keeping with the last point, let me try to be simple. I believe three things are possible to do and will have a much greater impact on these challenges than seeking accountability through revenge.

### **1. Energetically pursue a sustainable peace process to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.**

Do it now. The United States has much it can do to support and make this process work. It can bring the weight of persuasion, the weight of nudging people on all sides to move toward mutual recognition and stopping the recent and devastating pattern of violent escalation, and the weight of including and balancing the process to address historic fears and basic needs of those involved. If we would bring the same energy to building an international coalition for peace in this conflict that we have pursued in building international coalitions for war, particularly in the Middle East, if we lent significant financial, moral, and balanced support to all sides that we gave to the Irish conflict in earlier years, I believe the moment is right and the stage is set to take a new and qualitative step forward.

Sound like an odd diversion to our current situation of terror? I believe the opposite is true. This type of action is precisely the kind of thing needed to create whole new views of who we are and what we stand for as a nation. Rather than fighting terror with force, we enter their system and take away one of their most coveted elements: The soils of generational conflict perceived as injustice used to perpetrate hatred and recruitment. I believe that monumental times like these create conditions for monumental change. This approach would solidify our relationships with a broad array of Middle Easterners and Central Asians, allies and enemies alike, and would be a blow to the rank and file of terror. The biggest blow we can serve terror is to make it irrelevant. The worst thing we could do is to feed it unintentionally by making it and its leaders the center stage of what we do. Let's choose democracy and reconciliation over revenge and destruction. Let's do exactly what they do not expect, and show them it can work.

**2. Invest financially in development, education, and a broad social agenda in the countries surrounding Afghanistan** rather than attempting to destroy the Taliban in a search for Bin Laden. The single greatest pressure that could ever be put on Bin Laden is to remove the source of his justifications and alliances. Countries like Pakistan, Tajikistan, and yes, Iran and Syria should be put on the radar of the West and the United States with a question of strategic importance: How can we help you meet the fundamental needs of your people? The strategic approach to changing the nature of how terror of the kind we have witnessed this week reproduces itself lies in the quality of

relationships we develop with whole regions, peoples, and world views. If we strengthen the web of those relationships, we weaken and eventually eliminate the soil where terror is born. A vigorous investment, taking advantage of the current opening given the horror of this week shared by even those who we traditionally claimed as state enemies, is immediately available, possible and pregnant with historic possibilities. Let's do the unexpected. Let's create a new set of strategic alliances never before thought possible.

### **3. Pursue a quiet diplomatic but dynamic and vital support of the Arab League**

to begin an internal exploration of how to address the root causes of discontent in numerous regions. This should be coupled with energetic ecumenical engagement, not just of key symbolic leaders, but of a practical and direct exploration of how to create a web of ethics for a new millennium that builds from the heart and soul of all traditions but that creates a capacity for each to engage the roots of violence that are found within their own traditions. Our challenge, as I see it, is not that of convincing others that our way of life, our religion, or our structure of governance is better or closer to Truth and human dignity. It is to be honest about the sources of violence in our own house and invite others to do the same. Our global challenge is how to generate and sustain genuine engagement that encourages people from within their traditions to seek that which assures the preciousness and respect for life that every religion sees as an inherent right and gift from the Divine, and how to build organized political and social life that is responsive to fundamental human needs. Such a web cannot be created except through genuine and sustained dialogue and the building of authentic relationships, at religious and political spheres of interaction, and at all levels of society. Why not do the unexpected and show that life-giving ethics are rooted in the core of all peoples by engaging a strategy of genuine dialogue and relationship? Such a web of ethics, political and religious, will have an impact on the roots of terror far greater in the generation of our children's children than any amount of military action can possibly muster. The current situation poses an unprecedented opportunity for this to happen, more so than we have seen at any time before in our global community.

### **A Call for the Unexpected**

Let me conclude with simple ideas. To face the reality of well organized, decentralized, self-perpetuating sources of terror, we need to think differently about the challenges. If indeed this is a new war it will not be won with a traditional military plan. The key does not lie in finding and destroying territories, camps, and certainly not the civilian populations that supposedly house them. Paradoxically that will only feed the phenomenon and assure that it lives into a new generation. The key is to think about how a small virus in a system affects the whole and how to improve the immunity of the system. We should take extreme care not to provide the movements we deplore with

gratuitous fuel for self-regeneration. Let us not fulfill their prophecy by providing them with martyrs and justifications. The power of their action is the simplicity with which they pursue the fight with global power. They have understood the power of the powerless. They have understood that melding and meshing with the enemy creates a base from within. They have not faced down the enemy with a bigger stick. They did the more powerful thing: They changed the game. They entered our lives, our homes and turned our own tools into our demise.

We will not win this struggle for justice, peace and human dignity with the traditional weapons of war. We need to change the game again.

Let us give birth to the unexpected.

Let us take up the practical challenges of this reality perhaps best described in *The Cure of Troy* an epic poem by Seamus Heaney no foreigner to grip of the cycles of terror who wrote:

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a farther shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.

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### **Biography**

Dr. John Paul Lederach is Professor of International Peacebuilding at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame University, and a Distinguished Scholar at Eastern Mennonite University's Conflict Transformation Program. He spends a portion of his year in the classroom but dedicates much of his time to supporting peace initiatives as a practitioner of conciliation, mediation and international peacebuilding. He has worked extensively as a conciliator in situations of violent conflict around our globe including Northern Ireland (with numerous visits inside the Maze prison), Somalia, Colombia, the Basque Country, Tajikistan, and Mindanao in the Philippines to mention a few. In many of these places he works with groups espousing violence to further their goals attempting to find ways to move the conflict toward peaceful resolution. He has published more than a dozen books.

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