

## **The Cries that Bind**

*This opinion/editorial by Dr. John Thatamanil first appeared in the Los Angeles Times on 9/30/02.*

The events of the past year have enabled many Americans to comprehend both the disfiguring pain and the redemptive power of vulnerability. Unfortunately, it seems now that some remember only the pain.

Our collective national energies are being marshaled on our behalf, if not at our behest, in a quixotic pursuit of absolute invulnerability and total security. Perhaps we are a people incapable of sustaining an appreciation for the inevitable fragility of human life. We refuse to learn the one irrevocable lesson of 9/11: our nation, regardless of its might, is not and never can be exempt from the round of atrocious evil and suffering that regularly visits so many who live outside our borders. As our nation readies for war with Iraq, we may soon discover that our inability to learn this lesson will carry a toll beyond our reckoning.

Last year, Americans experienced a deep sense of solidarity and kinship in the midst of our grieving and our loss. The enormity of the wound we suffered gave us no other option. New Yorkers in particular gave up the routine, even pleasurable, anonymity of being part of a frenetic, thriving urban populace, and began to look each other in the eye. David Letterman and Dan Rather wept on TV. Even our politicians engaged one another with exceptional and genuine civility.

All this transpired because we realized that we are all—to a person—citizens of the republic of the wounded and the vulnerable. For a moment, we understood that the borders of that republic cannot be patrolled, and no missile shield can cover it. It is wholly blind to race, creed, ethnicity, gender, and nationality. The demarcations we deploy to create and perpetuate our parochial distinctions are invalid there. The boundary lines present in our cartography are absent from the geography.

Such wounds as we suffered are not sought out. We do not and must not welcome them into our lives or the lives of others, but when they come—and come they inevitably do—they have the power to bring about powerful, healing, and even redemptive transformations because wounds such as these make it difficult to ignore our shared fragility.

The tremendous international outpouring of sympathy that we witnessed was driven in part by recognition that Americans had become members of this single republic. That compassion came also with a fragile faith that Americans might understand better the needs and sufferings of the global community and so become a real partner in world's common quest for a humane and peaceful future.

Tragically, those hopes seem to have been misplaced. On the domestic front, we pursue invulnerability at the expense of the freedoms we cherish. We seem willing to deprive ourselves, and all those who strike us as threatening, of fundamental rights, including the right to due process. On the international front, we arrogate to ourselves alone the right to unilateral and preemptive military action. We refuse to be constrained by the power of international bodies such as the United Nations, we ignore the wishes and needs of our allies, and we stubbornly refuse to enter into treaties that might constrain us from exercising economic or military power in the pursuit of national self-interest.

In sum, we pursue our goals in ways that patently demonstrate that we have gained no new appreciation for the common bonds we share with other nations. Not surprisingly, in the past year, we have alienated ourselves from nearly all our allies, and our nation is more alone than perhaps ever before in history. Our reaction to our injuries has led us not into communion but isolation.

Acknowledging our own vulnerability does not mean that we should be cavalier about our national security and abandon vigorous efforts to protect ourselves and our loved ones. That would be foolish and even suicidal. Pain may generate a capacity to embrace our connectedness, but it can also destroy.

Nevertheless, we cannot afford to let our fear drive us into a practically impossible and morally problematic quest to go it alone; nor can we act in ways which suggest that invulnerability as such is a legitimate and realistic goal. We must not repress the ugly truth that only a box cutter may stand between us and the horror.

The naïve and hubristic pursuit of invulnerability demands too high a price from our friends and allies, from the world's poor, and from we ourselves. Though our loss leaves us injured, terrified, indignant, and angered, we must not refuse the sole and delicate good that pain has bequeathed to our nation: our kinship with the whole of the human community.