

Dick Bernard

From: Dick Bernard [dick@chez-nous.net]
Sent: Monday, September 17, 2001 6:36 AM
To: dick bernard
Subject: an awful week

Dear Family members:

I am no different than anyone: I cannot imagine a person without feelings in the aftermath of Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

You know some of my opinions already. These opinions are not necessarily always reflected in things I forward - I forward some information I receive, but not all of it - there was just too much - and some of the information I forward I don't even agree with.

1. I did not forward an extremely powerful power point photo essay of Tuesday, entitled "Attack on America" solely because the last photo, the effective "period on the sentence", was of the Palestinians cheering the bombing. In my view, still today, this is an example of trying to make two wrongs make a right: an enemy identified. How can we condemn hatred of Americans as Americans - what led to the terrorist attacks in the first place - when far too many, in effect, condone hatred of Palestinians as Palestinians, etc., or dismiss the rights of others to have and express opinions, even if (in our view) they are wrong. And our own "American" urban terrorists - and that is exactly what they are - are doing their deed to make sure that those who look, talk, dress like "Arabs" are harassed, threatened and in some cases beaten or worse. We have only seen the beginning of these atrocities, mostly emotional, but some physical. (For some perspective: yesterday's paper www.startribune.com had a guest column by Paul August Jasmer, monk at St. John's University, entitled "If life in our Upper Midwest was more like the Middle East". It is worth a read. Enter the monk's name to search. The article should be on line.)

Today I return to the Habitat for Humanity House we are building for a nine member Somali family. We met the husband (a security guard) last Monday as our Basilica crew had a time of prayer before beginning our two weeks on his families new home. The site supervisor remarked last Monday that members of the family came to the site every day, had worked far more than the minimum hours required, and were the best and nicest family she had ever worked with. Monday was the only day last week that anyone from the family came, and if they don't come today, the site supervisor said she will check in with them. Interpret as you wish. This two story house has been under construction for two or three months already - it is nearing completion.

2. I worry a great deal about what the ubiquitous and frequent use of the "War" word now, and what that means, or what meaning it is intended by "spinners" to project to the public. It is being used a lot, by people with lots of power. We spent 13 years at "War" in Vietnam, getting mired further and further in the quagmire of having to win that war. That war ended ignominiously (for us) in June, 1973, before some of you were born. It spanned over 58,000 deaths, and three presidents. I was in the Army at the beginning of that war - one of the very luck Vietnam-era veterans. My brothers saw heavy action there during the worst parts.

(An ironic twist: I have received in the last few days many copies of Canadian Gordon Sinclair's commentary, "A Tribute to America". It is excellent and moving and glorifies what is good about America. I doubt that any of the sender's knew that Sinclair gave the commentary on June 5, 1973, in response to, and at the time of, the ending of our great national humiliation - our Nation losing Vietnam. This is a time in our history from which we have not yet recovered. If you haven't seen this piece, let me know and I will send it on to you.)

Today, we are at the very beginning of what could be a much, much worse and longer term scenario that will be played out on our shores for the first time since the Civil War. My opinion: We will never completely destroy terrorism; but the nature of our response will make it more or less likely terrorists will receive regional or world support (a la the cheering Palestinians last Tuesday). We as individuals need to work on our own attitudes and to not sit passively by and let the future happen because we don't think we have power, because, because..... If you have an opinion it needs to be spoken particularly to political leaders - your legislators, congresspeople, governor and president.... Have the courage to stop hate in its tracks in your families and neighborhoods and workplaces as well. We all play a part.

We can work for war, or we can work for peace. Whatever the choice, we are in for a long, long campaign.

I am picking peace.

Dick Bernard

From: Dick Bernard [dick@chez-nous.net]
Sent: Monday, September 24, 2001 9:53 PM
To: dick bernard
Subject: FW: two weeks

I will be honest: the internal debate in me is whether to say something, or to say nothing on this issue which we all feel so intensely...and in different ways. Following is the pertinent part of a letter I sent to my family members today. I urge all of us to discuss, learn and take a stand on these most critical issues facing our country and our world. I am a single imperfect opinion. Now more than ever before, B'shalom; Peace.

-----Original Message-----

From: Dick Bernard [mailto:dick@chez-nous.net]
Sent: Monday, September 24, 2001 12:05 PM
To: dick bernard
Subject: two weeks

Friday I saw the first ducks on the pond on my walking route. Somehow the pond looks and feels differently than it did before September 11. I suspect that is true for most of us, about gentle places of our own daily lives.

I looked back at the family letter I sent two weeks ago, prepared September 10.... As the song lyric goes "What a difference a day makes. 24 little hours...." More on that at the end of this letter.

The rest of this letter reflects my opinion on the last 14 days...and our nation and its people in general. I hope you will read on. If you stop at this point, my main points remain the same: we will not stop violence with violence, nor will we stop terrorism by a war on terrorism. We need to take a long, hard look at why it is so easy to drum up hatred against us.

Today is day 14 after the horrible events of September 11. I am noticing more reflective talk in the newspaper, especially, and that is good. We all feel as we feel. Today's newspaper headlines at least suggest a more reasoned approach to retribution by those who "hold the trigger". I am a little encouraged.

I am a military veteran, who has never been an anti- or pro-war activist, but for as long as I can remember I have been an advocate for Peace, and Justice for all. I absolutely support bringing to Justice those perpetrators and accomplices who are still alive. I think we are, as a nation, making a huge mistake in pretending that a war on terrorism will root out terrorism: it will only make its intensification on our shores and against Americans generally more certain. We have to speak out to those who we elected to represent us at all levels. We have to be willing to engage in civil conversation, and to truly listen to points of view of those who disagree with us, and to dialogue. This is something we seem unable to do well in our society - rather we too often associate and talk with and listen to only those with whom we agree, and our conversation loses something. Or, even worse, we detach completely from any responsibility for what goes on in our society. Even our political leaders, in recent years especially, have taught through example that their opponents are not worthy of a point of view: until this crisis forced them together, they rarely talked to each other, and about each other, for public consumption, they talked in basically repulsive and contemptuous terms. Expressing anger, sarcasm and ridicule has become the language of contemporary politics. They have taught us many negative lessons..

About the conversation since September 11: I reviewed Friday night all of the e-mail received and sent since that fateful morning. I scanned and considered it all again. What an intense couple of weeks. Somebody who is a kindred spirit of mine on peace wrote that I was really "gung-ho". I guess I have been, and I will continue to be, though not using up your cyberspace as much. But the issue of Peace and Justice for ALL will never be off my screen. We are talking about not only our future, but of everyone who lives on this planet, including the poorest and most oppressed Afghani family who is sometimes looked on as simply potential "collateral damage" to get at Osama bin Laden.

If past is prelude, we will collectively, now, begin to either avoid the Topic entirely, or talk about it only with people who we think totally support our own position. I hope that doesn't turn out to be the case. This is a topic that represents a very major "fork" in our national "road". We have to keep reading and talking and listening and respecting all points of view. I would suggest a reflective visit to a single website before "moving on": <http://www.whoohoo.net/worldturns/>. And if you can access it, listen to the song "From a Distance", sung by Bet Midler in

her greatest hits album.

I would urge you to visit, and bookmark for future visits, <http://www.gandhiinstitute.org>. Gandhi's grandson, Arun Gandhi, has a short essay on Terrorism and Non-Violence that is worth reading, in my opinion.

Thursday night I was among about 60 people at a long scheduled Catholic Archdiocese Social Justice meeting. The pre-established agenda for the meeting was basically set aside, of course. The lady presiding began her remarks with a paraphrase of a quote from one of the books of Anthony DeMello, as follows:

"All human beings have three basic things in common:

1. We find it difficult to love those who hate us;
2. We find it difficult to include the excluded;
3. We find it very difficult to admit it when we are wrong."

The meeting went on with table discussion of how September 11 has impacted us; and an abbreviated look at our long term concerns of social justice: welfare and housing issues - issues that lay essentially unaddressed by all government entities last legislature and congress in their stampede to give tax rebates. The issues for the least among us will undoubtedly become even more critical concerns in the coming months, as the most economically fragile are laid off, and have to fend for themselves in this new War economy.

Perhaps the most powerful messages I have received since September 11 are copies of two different letters written by 33 5th graders in a long-time teacher friend's class in suburban Minneapolis. Her class and school is a true "rainbow" place - very diverse in all ways. The first letter was written on September 12, a "how I feel letter"; the other, a few days later to fellow students in New York City. Writing about feelings is a very common cathartic device used by teachers with students - an opportunity for even the shyest to talk about the untalkable. (It's a good device for we adults, too). It is the future that these and other kids will inherit. The letters say to me these kids are up to the challenge. I continue to say that churches and schools, especially the public schools since they have the huge majority of students, and shelter everyone regardless of financial or family circumstances, are collectively what will bring us through the current state of crisis.

I am thankful, really, that a national conversation is now beginning to urge us to really look at - and deal with - why others can hate us - to the extent that they cheer our tragedy.

In this regard, I think of one of our societies many "blind spots" - something we don't know we don't know about ourselves - which I have not really seen addressed in any forum since September 11: Five years ago, an angry anti-government young white guy, with some white guy accomplices, bombed the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. Cathy and I have been there. It's a monument now to several hundred innocents killed. But I mostly reflect on it today because, if you remember, there was near hysteria in this country over who did the deed...until an ordinary anti-government American white guy, Timothy McVeigh, was arrested on probable cause. After his arrest, life for most of us went back to normal. We didn't look with suspicion on angry white guys generally; Congress didn't allocate billions for a war on the tens of thousands of angry white guys who spew their venom freely in this country, and probably privately cheered the destruction of a symbol of the government they hate. All of you who are reading this were around when the Murrah Building was bombed. Think about it in context with today's interational War on terror. What if that same building had been bombed by "some Arab"? How would we have reacted then?

Last week I mentioned to some of you the fact that, like the Palestinians cheering our tragedy, many Americans had in effect cheered the death of 71,000 Japanese civilians by the first use of the Atomic Bomb, over Hiroshima, August 6, 1945 (tens of thousands more died later of bomb-related illness and injury in the five years after). And this doesn't count Nagasaki, later. (I know people whose parents were interned (imprisoned) in America for the crime of being Japanese nationality in WWII). Some readers protested to me: "but that was different". I challenge anyone to prove to me that it makes any difference who cheers which brutality. For an apparently very substantial element of the Arab World, we are now viewed by them, as we viewed the Japanese so many years ago, with disrespect and revulsion. To this day, we have the opinion that we, the only ones ever to have used the Bomb, should be the only ones with rights to it. In my opinion, we need to back off from our national arrogance and take a very hard look at ourselves as part of the world community, and how we are viewed by that community.

We have a lot to learn, 225 years into our Democracy, especially about how we relate with, and depend on, the rest of the world. Early Thursday I had a "coffee and conversation" with a friend I've known for many years, but who I've too seldom seen. We are both retired. We talked a lot, of course, about the present...and the past...and the future. September 11 - and a chance meeting a couple of days earlier - is what brought us together for a great and long overdue visit. At the end of our conversation he pulled up his sleeve and pointed to a wrist band with the initials WWJD on it ("What Would Jesus Do?") I had always perceived Joe to be a spiritual, though not especially religious person, in the conventional sense His gesture was very powerful. What would Jesus do? Or Muhammad for that matter, or any of the

great Prophets of the Hebrew tradition...when faced with this, is a very relevant question we should all ask ourselves.

The Sunday after September 11 our Priest was faced with the universal dilemma of his colleagues of every denomination, everywhere: what should I talk about? In the end, he briefly and very powerfully focused on the Gospel reading for the day, (Luke 15: 11-32) on the Prodigal Son, his father, and his responsible...and very angry brother.... He chose to focus on the angry brother, and on the absolute need to replace anger with forgiveness. (If you are a reader not from the Christian tradition, and need a little more information about that passage, **see the end of this letter for a summary.**) At the aforementioned Social Justice meeting, one lady commented on the aftermaths of a conciliation message preached by her pastor: three families quit the parish. And so it goes...goes...and goes.... But we forget too quickly. We cannot forget.

Thank you for reading this. I am grateful to the many who commented in any way about the messages I sent on in these first two weeks of our future.. Thank you.

Pray and work very hard for Peace, and have a great two weeks.

The essence of the story of the Prodigal Son: A rich man had two sons. At some point, one of the sons asked for his inheritance, and left for a distant land, squandering everything he had. The other son remained with his father and was the essence of a responsible person. The Prodigal son returned to his father, asking forgiveness, and expecting nothing in return. The father rejoiced in the return of his errant son, and had a big party to celebrate his return. The responsible son was very angry at this, for he had done everything right, and his brother had done everything wrong. The father said to the responsible son "Son, thou art always with me, and all that is mine is thine; but we were bound to make merry and rejoice, for this thy brother, was dead, and has come to life; he was lost, and is found."