

## ***TO SPEAK OF THE UNSPEAKABLE***

**By Michael Ventura**

**Psychotherapy Networker Nov-Dec. 2001**

In the aftermath of September 11, people faced with the monstrously unspeakable require of us coherence and meaning. Yet, we are like them, like everybody in this wounded culture. We, too, in our psyches, are those dazed people in the streets that day, covered with dust and ash that contained the remains of human beings, of people who died for us in that they were a target that represented us. We, too, don't know what infection awaits us in the mail.

This horrible fact at least gives us a starting point, a ground of solidarity: for this is not a situation where people approach you as a therapist (or me as a writer) as experts or authorities. A particular client may be especially vulnerable and shattered by September 11 and its aftermath, but we, too, have been hit; we, too, are shocked and wounded and in danger. They are presenting to us a pain that we, too, bear. So they come not only as clients but as brothers and sisters, sharing the same confusion, the same longing for hope, the same sharp shards of broken expectations. We are all at Ground Zero. And what we offer had better be worthy because it is likely we are speaking in the space between explosions.

When engaged in therapy with an individual or a family, one important objective is to reveal the structure of their suffering--how their suffering came upon them, how it is acted out. Facing the collective pain of September 11 takes us beyond the limits of psychological theory. We have to step back and look at a far larger canvas than we are used to.

Most psychotherapists would agree that fanaticism is an extreme form of panic--acted-out panic. It is difficult to conceive of, much less accept, the fact that everything Americans do and say contributes to a panic that results in the fanaticism of millions. A tiny few of them in the case of September 11--19 hijackers and perhaps 200 or 400 direct supporters--feel justified in committing atrocity against us. But if we simply call it "evil," we miss the point. September 11 was an act of focused panic. In psychological terms, an act of transference in the most literal sense: they transferred their panic onto us. They were seeking not only to destroy us but to make us feel what they feel. They succeeded.

It is not my fault, and not yours, that we Americans live economically at the top of the world. Five hundred years of exploration, migration, colonization, invention, commerce and war have combined to make Americans the 4 percent of the world's population that uses (depending on what figures you believe) roughly 50 percent of the world's resources. You and I didn't create that, you and I didn't decide to exploit it; nevertheless, you and I profit from it. That massive imbalance is the ground of our security, our ambitions, even our dreams.

And even if we remember that imbalance every day; even if we are conscious of its injustice; even if we try to do our part, contributing some fragment of our individual holdings to the excluded; still, most of us make more money in a year than whole villages, whole provinces, elsewhere. For this, we are resented and hated. If we lived in one of those poor villages, we, too, might resent and hate those who, by perhaps only an accident of birth, live so much better. People whose beliefs we call "medieval" or "ancient" or "backward"-- they are both threatened and terrified by an American sense of

liberty that looks upon their convictions as mistaken and dispensable. It was only a matter of time before those who resent and hate us would also target us.

You and I didn't commit the sins of genocide and slavery that helped make America strong. *It is not fair* that we are held responsible for the sins of our cultural (if not biological) ancestors. Yet, we are their inheritors. We make free use of what they won for us. So, while we are not responsible, it is natural (though not fair) for others to hold us responsible.

All of which is to say:

The very prosperity that is the ground of our lives is the horror of theirs. If we were living on less than \$2 a day, as two-thirds of the world lives, we, too, might rejoice in the streets when the privileged suffered. *That in no way justifies the atrocity committed against us, nor mitigates the need for a military response.* To explain is not to justify. And to cite a reason does not mean that the reason is just or rational. But it is important to see that there *are* reasons why many people in the world see no way out of their situation but to destroy ours, destroy us.

How can you and I get used to that?

We can't. It goes against everything we believe about a merit society--a society in which individual merit is rewarded individually.

Nevertheless, this is the world we live in, and in the wake of September 11, it is a world we must admit that we live in. There is no more room for the avoidance mechanisms of affluence.

Most Americans live in comparative affluence and have perceived their very real troubles as purely personal. Relationships don't work. Childhood memories haunt and debilitate. Now and then, a race riot or something like the Columbine High School massacre shatters their sense of order. But such things are lived through and commented upon as glitches, interruptions, a time when normal expectations are suspended temporarily. But September 11 was another order of experience and it has opened the gate into another mode of perception, of expectation. We have seen perfectly normal people left with no choice but to jump from skyscrapers.

James Hillman, a Jewish American therapist, has often said that in America there is no way to escape being a Christian, because the American Dream is based essentially upon the Christian "myth of resurrection." A facile way to put this is that Americans believe in happy endings no matter what. This is the source of the brash American naiveté that other cultures at once admire and resent. American culture inculcates the belief that, no matter the trouble, something good can and must and will come of it, something better will rise from the ashes. The "resolution," the "closure," the "healing" will leave us stronger.

As one therapist put it to me, September 11 "cut through so much that is counterfeit in the American culture." I have heard this echoed by thinking people of the right as well as the left. This is certainly a form of the hope of resurrection: that the tragedy will turn America from the trivial and bring us back to our core values; that good will somehow come of this; that, through coming together, or through a return to our best values or through victory over terrorism, we will somehow fashion a happy ending

There are no happy endings in a war. Even the Second World War, "the good war," left us dealing with the moral nightmares of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and the half-century struggle we called "the Cold War"--a struggle that included the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and America's cultivation, training and support of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. The Second World War also bequeathed the present situation in

the Middle East and an arms race that created the very weapons we now most fear in the hands of terrorists: biochemical agents and nuclear bombs. This new war (which I do not dispute must be fought) will be no different. It will reconstitute the world and leave us with new, undreamed-of problems. There will be no happy ending. No ending at all, really.

What Hillman calls the "myth of resurrection" will be a prime motive in what people are seeking from us in this crisis and the crises that are almost sure to follow. People are wrapping themselves in the flag not only out of patriotism but out of a lust for affirmation. (I use the word "lust" deliberately, to mean an intense and barely controlled desire and need.) The temptation to lapse into a naive and illusory comfort will be considerable for client and therapist alike. But it is a central fact of therapy that illusions don't make anyone stronger. In fact, illusion makes people more vulnerable to the next shock.

Therapists would do well to operate under the assumption that there will almost certainly be another shock--perhaps several, and conceivably many (that's how it is in war)--and that September 11 and the anthrax attacks may not be the worst one. The concepts of "comfort" and "affirmation" should be addressed not only in reference to the immediate past but the possible future. For it is unreasonable, even delusional, to imagine that a war will not touch you in the most direct way possible.

Nothing I say to you can decrease the danger. No ideas of mine, no conceivable vision, will make us any safer. This, alone, can be the starting point for our place of contact. I greet you in this danger as a brother, as a sister. All I can offer is my hand. And I need the clasp of your hand as much as you need mine. Not for false comfort, but for the fundamental requirement of contact: I will try to be brave for your sake, and I ask you to be brave for mine. Even with tears in my eyes and fear in my heart, I offer you what courage and compassion I possess, and I call forth your compassion and courage, or how else can we bear this? We cannot let the fear of contagion stop us. For human frailty is a fact of life, and we cannot cure or heal our frailty.

The Londoners during the Blitz who went to work and school every day, and endured the nightly sirens and bombs, and got used to sleeping in shelters but never got used to the had to run through the streets from cover to cover to dodge snipers, knowing every day some of them would die... the kids in the South Bronx or South Central L.A. whose reflex was to duck at any loud noise because it might be gunfire from a drive-by, and went to school and sang their songs (which the white kids would later imitate) and made their lives every day... they exemplify what the English poet Ted Hughes called "the simple animal courage of accepting the odds."

What must psychotherapy jettison, and what must it cultivate, to teach this?

Addressing September 11, the anthrax attacks and whatever comes next, psychotherapy must let go of its deeply rooted assumption that the most serious problems are individual or familial. Some dilemmas, though felt individually, are generated by a collective situation which it is not in the power of the individual to address, much less resolve. This does *not* mean that the individual is powerless. It very much means that the individual needs to recognize the boundary and the difference between self and collective, and see that these are different spheres of being and of action. I can give blood, give money, give my time and energy, give of myself in ways that strengthen and aid the collective cause and beyond that, I have to trust and hope that myriad contributions like mine can make for a collective momentum that brings about an outcome I desire, or can at least accept.

And what must we cultivate?

I think of what the American essayist Randolph Bourne wrote in 1917: "One keeps healthy in wartime not by a series of religious and political consolations that something good is coming out of it, but by a vigorous assertion of values in which war has no part." That's a tall order.

I've heard people say, "I do not know what to *do* with all this, with what I feel about all this." A very American idea, and one common to therapy is that we must *do* something with all this, make something of it. (We are capitalists and consumers to the end, even of our own crises!) But the attempt to have some personal little victory or insight in the midst of such turmoil seems to me dishonorable, demeaning and futile. In war, it is never possible to make a separate peace. It is nevertheless essential to recognize that war does not trivialize the inner search.

On the contrary: war makes the inner search all the more urgent. The challenge that we face, as individuals within a threatened collective, is to keep searching until we find the place inside ourselves that is unafraid. (Isn't that the place that we've been looking for all along?) War and terror make the issue stark, because fear is their ground and air and water, and what is the inner search but a way to live past fear? Which is to say, in part, that in the midst of terror, healers still have a purpose, because they are always trying to reconcile the inner with the other, and trying to find or create an open space within that leads to more open spaces around.

Yes, we must teach our children, do our work, water our plants, take in a ball game--that goes without saying. All that part of life goes on whether or not we get highfalutin about it. It isn't a question of finding things to do or doing the usual things with a stiff upper lip. *Doing* is too easy. It is a matter of being. Can you find a place in yourself that's unafraid? Can you keep searching till you find that place?

And no, I have no clue about how you should go about it. A man and a woman held hands as they jumped from the tower. I think they had the clue.

*Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.*