

The 21st CENTURY ANNOUNCES ITSELF

By Michael Ventura

September 21, 2001

"New York, the capital of the 20th century" -- so Norman Mailer once described his city. The proof is in the architecture. In the 1930s there was no skyline like New York's. By the 1990s the New York skyline, and the way of life that goes with it, was mirrored by every major city in the world. The Manhattan-style skyscraper became the most visible global symbol of economic and political power, and New York became the nerve center of humanity's commerce. On September 11, two great buildings of the world's economy, New York's tallest, 110 stories high ... we watched them collapse, dissolve, in mere seconds. The intended symbolism could not be more clear: What was strong in the 20th century is fragile in the 21st; what seemed invulnerable is vulnerable; the very things that were designed by our strength, and for our convenience, can be transformed into the implements of our destruction. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon -- the 21st century has announced its terms by successfully assaulting two prime symbols of the 20th. Daily American life, from now on, will require a far greater capacity to endure uncertainty and fear. We don't yet know if the American dream, with its cocky mix of audacity and naiveté, can remain viable amidst the forces of chaotic instability that seem to be the 21st century's signature.

Granted that the World Trade Center, as architecture, expressed the buildings' functions all too well -- those monolithic rectangles were crude, massive, unimaginative expressions of raw selfish power. But those buildings were inhabited by individuals who, like most people, were trying to resolve the contradictions of their dreams within the humble, difficult, never-finished task of earning one's keep and doing one's best. How much love, and effort, and laughter, and hate, and regret, and bravery, and longing, and cowardice, and certainty, and dullness, and ambivalence, and sweetness, and greed, and illusion, and generosity, and truth, and memory, above all, their private special memories ... how very much died with each one of those people that day.

And the deluded cruelty of the terrorists -- that too is part of us. For it is also human to believe passionately and mercilessly; to sacrifice oneself for an ideal, and to blind oneself to the grotesque results; more than anything, it is horribly human to fail to see the Other as equally valid, equally human. And how much delusion and cruelty will these terrorists, in turn, generate? On the night of September 11, even a man I value very highly spoke in the most extreme terms of annihilating Islam. Horror begets horror. For it is also human, in times of crisis, to allow the lowest and ugliest to set the terms. So Hitler set the terms by which America justified the atomic incineration of a quarter-million civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. No nation that committed such atrocity can claim a moral high ground on terrorists. Which cannot excuse anyone's terrorism against our innocents. None of it is justified. And that is human too: to become so intoxicated with the unjustifiable that our very intoxication becomes our justification. How terrible can be the allure of the unspeakable, and how human it is to surrender to that allure.

It remains to be seen, as I write, what America will do. A military response is essential, but

it brings to bear an ancient question: How can justice be balanced by mercy? If we fail in justice, we cannot survive. If we fail in mercy, it won't matter whether we survive. As was said by the prophet whom we name as the fount of our civilization: "What does it get you, if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?" So America is about to be tested, and to test itself, by the form and extent of the unquestionably necessary violence to which we must resort. What America does now will set the tone and pace for the history of the next 50 years.

In Stephen Mitchell's translation of the Tao Te Ching, the 31st passage reads: "Weapons are the tools of fear; a decent man will avoid them except in the direst necessity, and, if compelled, will use them only with the utmost restraint. Peace is his highest value. If the peace has been shattered, how can he be content? His enemies are not demons, but human beings like himself. He doesn't wish them personal harm. Nor does he rejoice in victory. How could he rejoice in victory and delight in the slaughter of men? He enters a battle gravely, with sorrow and great compassion, as if he were attending a funeral." And yet fury also is necessary or you cannot win. Such a paradox used to be called "the human condition." We are learning again that all our sciences, all our achievements, have not and will not free us from the condition that we are contradictory beings who cannot satisfy one need without denying or giving short shrift to another and equally essential need.

Is a national response within the Tao Te Ching's terms possible? Of course. Acting with great audacity and compassion during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy administration faced the gravest threat and prevailed with virtually no violence -- though they were ready for the greatest extreme of violence if their gambit failed.

Is such a national response likely now? As the firefighters and police of New York City proved, rising nobly to the occasion is also one of the great human possibilities, and we cannot prejudge that possibility for any leader, especially our own. But no action will solve for very long the dilemma we find ourselves in. It would be delusional to think there's some ultimate solution. No matter what we do, the 21st century has announced itself in the starkest conceivable terms by how quickly, on September 11, we accepted this fact:

We know we're at war, but we don't know precisely with whom.

That's the 21st century.

But even though we identify the perpetrators and supporters of these gruesome acts, and even if we destroy them, our satisfaction will be temporary. It is one thing to war against a nation, for you can defeat a nation; it is quite another to war against a subculture, a movement that spans many nations and cannot be ultimately confined or pinned down -- a movement that uses the very instruments we've invented and depend upon: weapons, communications, financial arrangements, and tactics concocted by the ingenuity of the West. The biological, chemical, and atomic devices that we fear most in the hands of others -- they are our creations. And the fact that others can wield them is the result of our greed, arrogance, and shortsightedness. This does not in any way mitigate the moral culpability of our adversaries; but it is a fact as much as a metaphor that they threaten us with the devices

of our own paranoia and ambition. And that, too, is the 21st century.

Whether it is global warming or terrorism on the monstrous scale of the World Trade Center, the fundamental dynamic of the 21st century has announced and revealed itself: The underlying enemy of the Western nations will be the chaotic unleashing of the very forces that the West so proudly and hopefully created. Insofar as those forces were the expression of our selves, we will be fighting ourselves. For our adversaries, on their own, have invented nothing that could touch us. If we are wounded again (and we almost surely will be); if we are somehow defeated (and even that is a possibility) -- it will be by the tools we created and the forces we unleashed.

That, above all, is the 21st century.

At present, most of humanity lives in poverty and ignorance, under the constant threat of violence. Roughly three out of five children receive no education at all; these kids have no way of investigating propaganda, and are easily molded. We will not be safe until they are. Until they've achieved a modicum of security, education, and prosperity, they'll have every reason (emotionally if not logically) to hate us, and no reason not to attack us. We are learning the terror of fighting an adversary who has nothing to lose. Until they have more to lose than their lives, they're not going to quit. Which is why the satisfactions of retaliation will be fleeting -- however necessary retaliation, at the moment, certainly is. Killing one of their leaders and a thousand of his followers won't change the basic equation. Nothing can ultimately "win" but a foreign policy that has as its ultimate goal the well-being of the disenfranchised. Until that is achieved, it is only human for the wretched of the earth to take satisfaction in making our lives equally wretched -- and we've given them the tools to do so.

Fear and rage are natural but beside the point -- for acting out of fear and rage will only increase the chaos. What is necessary is vision, compassion, and courage. Nothing else can meet and tame the dragon-like energies of the 21st century.

Is this the first event of World War Three, a war unlike any before, to be fought in ways unlike any before? It may be. As I write I feel like I'm whispering, because in such a time all words that are not shouted feel like whispers -- small breaths of sound spoken in the dark, their meanings tentative and incomplete. It is very late, it may be too late, but still I propose a toast and raise my glass:

To the compassionate and brave.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.