

That Reminds Me of a Story...
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W.H. Auden wrote that you can't tell people what to do; you can only tell them stories. This doesn't stop people from trying, nor does it stop people from asking--particularly in ethics classes, particularly in times of crisis. It's difficult to imagine a time that *isn't* a time of crisis: a crisis is a turning point, and every point is potentially a pivot. Given an infinite number of points (even in finite times and spaces), turning and turning is not a surprise--not a symptom of a falcon cut off from a falconer's voice, but a dance of possibility.

That reminds me of a story.

Several weeks after the 11 September attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, three weeks into the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, near the end of a two hour conversation about freedom and necessity, a student in my ethics class asked, "What should we do?" Given the context, she didn't think it necessary to specify--and thought it odd when I asked--about *what*. This is a tribute to the speed with which contexts are constructed to make some things go without saying and other things difficult to say. Her question was about the bombing more than the 11 September attacks. Since I am a pacifist, the simple response was, "Stop."

But simple responses are points on which complex arguments turn. This one elicited a familiar response, a variation on "We can't do nothing," a theme often embedded in an unspoken argument. One benefit of having this discussion in an ethics class is the expectation that even unspoken arguments will be interrogated. So I asked, "Do you mean to suggest that the only alternatives are bombing and doing nothing?" The response was immediate: "Well, what would you do?"

This turn from "What should we do?" to "What would you do?" is instructive--partly because it confirms Auden's observation by inviting a story instead of stating an argument. But the two go hand in hand. What is an argument without a story, a story without an argument?

In this case, the question led, first, to pacifism. Where pacifism is a minority position suspected of aiding and abetting the "enemy," "pacifism" is often read as "passivism." But pacifism is not passive. Pacifists are often cantankerous, sometimes confrontational, and frequently argumentative--particularly in times of war. Pacifists may be off radar in times of relative peace, but war fever makes us visible. This is a reminder (conveyed most powerfully in life stories of people like Dorothy Day or Mahatma Gandhi) that not all struggle is violent. Violence is never the right choice, but struggle often is.

Pacifists are often called to speak in response to attacks such as those that took place on 11 September and those that began on 7 October. In these cases, it is easier to say what we should not do than what we should--partly because what we should do is what we should have been doing before. This is not to downplay the importance of saying what we should not do (few words are more important than "no" for human existence tottering on the edge of inhumanity), and that directs us to specific actions (including sitting at a table with people we may not understand or like while struggling through the tedium of real negotiation, or sitting in a court room struggling through due process toward a just verdict in a particular case).

Questions come in clusters that, like icebergs, are mostly submerged. The operative question just beneath the surface in this case is, "What are *you* doing?"—an opportunity to discuss the

continuity, humility, and activism of pacifism. *I am* doing what I *was* doing, working for peace and justice as persistently as I can in the little overlapping worlds I inhabit on a regular basis. On another level, the question is “What should I do?”—an opportunity to talk about varieties of response while insisting that every response be undertaken with eyes open. You can’t tell people what to do—but you can tell stories that expose actions and consequences. Another level is the question’s plain sense, which splits into what we mean by “we,” what each “we” is doing, and how each “is” relates to “ought.” This is an opportunity to discuss the academic “we,” marginalized in much of the current debate. It is legitimate, particularly in a university classroom, to ask after the public role of intellectuals. It is also an opportunity (given who I am) to discuss the “we” of the Left. Some on the Left have been reluctant to condemn the undeclared war against Afghanistan because of their conviction that the barbarity of the attacks on New York and Washington justify retaliation. It would be difficult to find an instance in which the attacked judge an attack as anything other than barbaric. Arguing that the barbarity of this act renders opposition to retaliation illegitimate risks rendering internal opposition to any retaliatory strike illegitimate. This puts a heavy burden on opposition movements abroad, and it enables progressive politicians to vote for across-the-board authorizations of force. This is why Barbara Lee’s vote against such authorization is important (as were the votes of Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and Jeannette Rankin’s votes against entrance into both World Wars). I repeat: few words are more important for human existence tottering on the edge of inhumanity than “No.” It is also an opportunity to discuss U.S. policy in the context of an international community subject to law. By casting both the acts and the subsequent retaliation as “war,” the United States has sidestepped international law and introduced a language of necessity that undercuts criticism. If the acts were crimes, the appropriate response is investigation, arrest, and trial in a court with legitimate jurisdiction. The question of an international court did not spring from the head of Zeus on 11 September, and “we” (the United States) bear a heavy burden for the long delay in establishing a permanent, internationally recognized Court of Criminal Justice (made heavier by the fact that 11 September is also the anniversary of the CIA-backed coup that overthrew Salvador Allende and brought Augusto Pinochet to power in Chile, a cautionary tale for those who contemplate replacing foreign governments). If the acts were acts of war, there are moral traditions designed to justify retaliatory responses (though justification fails in this case, because all possible options were not exhausted before force was used). Just as important, the language of war is a language of necessity that turns opposition essential to a criminal proceeding into a potentially treasonous act. If we are at war with unidentified enemies everywhere, there is no place for a loyal resistance from the perspective of the State.

Where does that leave us? I suggest the following as a start:

1. It makes it incumbent upon each of us to examine what we are doing in the light of what we were doing before. When I hear people say that what they did before is rendered irrelevant by the events of 11 September, I suspect the legitimacy of what they are doing now. I don’t mean to dismiss the possibility of radical conversion, but the mass of post-11 September patriotic advertising alone raises suspicion. What I am doing now is intrinsically connected with what I was doing before as long as I can say “I.” Likewise what we are doing now is intrinsically connected with what we were doing before as long as we can say “we.” One impact of the patriotic fervor that has swept the United States since 11 September is a redefinition of “we”—not always a good thing, as evidenced by hate crimes and deepening fear.
2. It makes it incumbent upon each of us to address the question of “ought” and to demand that, minimally, this include critical reflection on what we are doing. We have stories to tell, and we’d best tell them—and listen to them—with care (Ari Fleischer and George W. Bush included). It is unacceptable, e.g., to use a word like “Crusade” to characterize military action, then insist that it was not to be capitalized—particularly if we do not extend the same courtesy to “*jihad*,” a term that has more legitimacy. We are not plunged into struggle by 11 September but by being

human: as Frederick Douglass said, “where there is no struggle, there is no life.”

3. It makes it incumbent upon us to relentlessly interrogate the meaning of “we.” There are fluid, overlapping communities in play, and all of us belong to more than one. It would be disastrous to erect impermeable boundaries between these communities by speaking in terms of absolute evil and absolute good. Theologically, this is a good place for “confession” in two senses: first, in the sense of what we say together publicly (which makes us who “we” are); and, second, in the sense of acknowledging that we are flawed. It makes sense ethically to work our way out from where we are, reserving our harshest criticism for what is closest to us, tempering our criticism as we move into territory that is less familiar. Those of us who are descended from Crusaders should be most critical of the language of Crusade--most charitable to the language of *jihad*--and engaged in constructing a world in which struggle is not reduced to a synonym for violence.