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Opinion: Middle East peace


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| **By STEPHANIE RUTT** | Published: 11-01-2023 - 17:00:11 |
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During these challenging times, seeing war raging in the Middle East, the terrorist attack of Hamas on innocent Israelis, and now the subsequent bombardment of the Gaza Strip, it's easy to succumb to despair. I refuse. Even as I watched the shock and horror on the faces of those Israelis being suddenly snatched, taken prisoner in broad daylight, and now hear the cries of the innocent ones trapped in perpetual darkness in the Gaza Strip without the basic necessities for survival, I refuse.

Hope is only lost when we decide we can do nothing or remain silent. Silence leaves a vacuum for hatred that only escalates as a result of fear fear of alienation and annihilation. Hope gives rise to conscious action, possibility, as a result of love, love not based on personal emotion but rather on a sense of clarity, that what we do to the other, in the end, we do to ourselves.

Certainly, as we determined after 911, any act of terror must be met with the swift sword of justice. Simply, evil, in any manner, cannot be allowed to prevail. Still, I believe it's the hope of many that we not simply re-act arbitrarily, but, rather, strive for that conscious action when balancing the scales of justice. It's a fine, some might say lofty, point but I would argue a critical one influencing the decisions we make.

For example, this distinction has risen as many are contemplating the plight of civilians, particularly those trapped in the Gaza Strip. It might serve us well to ask what happens to our collective psyche when we decide some innocent lives are more worthy of our care than others. It becomes all too easy, framing the argument as perpetrators versus victims, to lose sight that today's victims are tomorrow's perpetrators and vice versa. And so, the wheel of reactive retaliation spins without end while the innocent on both sides continue to suffer and grieve as they bury their children.

Eleanor Roosevelt asked, "When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?" Herein lies an important key to stopping reactive retaliation. As I highlighted in my April 30 My Turn, "Our Common Humanity," making opportunities to forge dialogue, expand understanding, and raise awareness is key to helping assumed enemies step off the perpetrator-victim wheel and, together, forge new pathways. Not easy. Messy and challenging for sure. But worth it? Ask the many helpless ones, this moment, watching their loved ones suffer and die, and can do nothing about it.

Something happens when we move beyond the more superficial differences and see into our common humanity that place where it no longer matters, we don't notice, or forget to ask, what religion, ethnicity or nationality a person is when we see someone in need. We respond because something bigger compels us. In that moment, if ever so briefly, we contact the common ground of our humanity. And it changes us.

As an Interfaith minister, I have hope because I've personally experienced that common ground, one might call our Oneness from a religious perspective, with both my Jewish and Muslim friends.

My Jewish friends practice the great message from the Talmud: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the whole law. The rest is commentary." I've learned from them the mysteries of the Hebrew script and where, for example, the first letter is "Alef." It's silent signifying the One behind all creation. As Lawrence Kushner writes in "The Book of Letters," "It [Alef] also begins the most important thing about Him: ECHAD. One. Know that God is One."

And it didn't matter that I was not a Jew.

My Muslim and Sufi friends hold fast to the enduring message from the Hadith: "None of you truly believes until you love for your brother what you love for yourself." I've danced in circle form many times to the sacred phrase, "La Ilaha Illallah," generally translated, "There is no deity but Allah," and points to the Muslim concept of "Tawhid," the Oneness of God. I learned the 99 beautiful names of Allah and discovered that the infamous phrase, hijacked by terrorists, "Allahu Akbar," simply means, "God is Great."

And it didn't matter that I was not a Muslim or Sufi.

It would not be possible for the Jews and Muslims I know to participate in any form of terror against others. Their religious practices bring them again and again to stand for hope, possibility and love.

Let's not allow fear and hatred to dominate. Let's strive for conscious action to balance the scales of justice. Let's allow ourselves to imagine the possibility that we could stand together in search of freedom and prosperity for all.

And, above all, let's choose hope that propels us to love.