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TEACHING 9/11

The next year will be difficult. It will be the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11. Already we see a kind of religious hysteria about the Sufi-Islamic Cultural near Ground Zero. A Christian clergyman is planning to burn publicly copies of the Qur'an. Mosques are being vandalized. Soon repeated images of the collision of planes and building will flow through television screens. I sometimes find all the media so troubling I cannot endure it. But I often wonder how my students will react. And I remember how shocked I was several years ago by what I learned from my undergraduates in a course I taught on religion and violence. I have still not completely come to terms with what happened in that course. Perhaps it is now time to reflect.

It was the first day of the course, a survey of the history and meaning of religious violence. I had decided to show several clips from a PBS Special called *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*.(Whitney & Rosenbaum, 2002) I thought the program was excellent, and one clip in particular moved me quite deeply. This was a Rabbi so affected by the attack that during his morning prayers, he would sing the cell phone calls made by people about to die in the towers. Several of these calls were left on telephone voice mail and retrieved by the victims' families. Watching the scenes of the towers collapsing, the horror of the carnage as people jumped to their deaths, the wrenching attempts of survivors and observers to make some kind of sense of the attack in their respective religious worldviews, and then hearing the words of the dying as prayers arising from that horrendous moment left me in tears the first time I watched. So, I was certain it would be a moving entrée' into the themes of religion and violence for the rest of the course.

I had planned my lesson around the expectation, in fact the certainty, that the students would be affected more or less in the same way as I. I had forgotten the first rule of classroom planning. Never presume! As the images flashed on the screen and the media presentation went forward, I sensed that the students were not all that interested in the material. People were not really paying much attention. Some were even chatting with each other. (I cannot stand people chatting while the television is on. It drives me nuts). When the Rabbi intoned his prayers for the dead, I thought I even heard someone chuckle.

Keeping my outrage in check, I asked with what calm I could muster, what was behind this response? The students answered with a stunning consistency that they were bored by this whole thing -- this "whole 9/11 thing."

"Bored? How can you be bored? This is seminal moment in modern history. Your lives, your culture, your whole mode of existence will be affected by what happened here."

"Yeah, we know," they said. But with a unanimity that amazed me, they agreed that they were quite "ready to move on," They felt the images being shown again and again, in fact the very topic itself, was part of a much larger context of political or social manipulation. They resented the manipulation. They wanted to shout, "Oh no, not this again."

I was shocked. The sacredness of 9/11 was challenged, indeed violated by this boredom. We are not allowed to be bored of the sacred.

Could the cause be something specific to my students? Was my class truly representative of "this generation?" Were they particularly apathetic, or disaffected, or lazy, lazier than the mainstream? Somehow I doubted it, and the ongoing processes of the class showed quite the opposite to be the case: These were good students, thoughtful, critical thinkers, concerned about their world, and intellectually involved.

So what lay at the root of my students' boredom? What exactly were the students talking about here? Was this a matter for concern? Had the students lost or repressed a capacity for compassion? Had they so little comprehension of the enormity of the events that they had capitulated to some kind of head in the sand attitude? Could it be that these students were too cynical, consummately apathetic, or simply uninformed? My task was to find out.

I soon realized I was facing, in part, a generational problem. Certainly these students were more conservative than I, less likely to protest, more open to a kind of cynicism about social institutions, more suspicious of the utopian fantasies of those of us who protested in the sixties. But this explanation failed once we began to discuss the issue.

The boredom of my students had arisen, I discovered, because the media, in any number of ways, had produced what Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle call a "failed ritual." (Marvin & Ingle, 1996) The images of death and destruction that initially gripped the nation, producing what seemed at first to be unification of national consciousness, the lionization of heroic sacrifice of the police, firemen and perhaps even the victims in the towers, that mobilized support for the "war on terror," and for a moment offered a

national transcendence of conflicts of race, gender, political ideology, and even economic status -- these images and their repetition had lost their ritual force.

It is important to note, in passing, that my students are not all that unusual in their emotional bearings. In spite of the media's reluctance to broadcast the fact, the emotional responses to the 9/11 attack have not been altogether consistent. Nor have all felt the "proper" or even the expected sensations. Damien Cave, writing for Salon Magazine online in September 2002, found a surprising range of reactions the year following the events.

... cooperation and empathy were not the only emotions of the day; they were simply the publicly expressed emotions of the day. Many of us didn't just feel sad or angry or proud in the face of the day's horrors -- or when President Bush and the media requested it. We also felt indifferent, confused, selfish, annoyed and, in some cases, even happy or excited. We had thoughts that we couldn't explain or control, thoughts we didn't express, except perhaps in whispered conversations.

A few rebellious thinkers with access to the media actually unleashed their forbidden thoughts, electrifying and infuriating a tender and almost universally righteous public. Some of these blurters issued contrite retractions, a few held firm in the face of public denunciation, sure to earn footnotes in future histories of the events.

All these forbidden thoughts are sometimes painful or mortifying to hear. Many could be accurately described as disgraceful. But they emerged from our mental ether, and they deserve to be part of the record of that day and its aftermath. They are necessary evils to be countenanced in an honest analysis of the time. They keep us from creating a distorted, overly sentimental picture of our national reaction to disaster. And perhaps, as in therapy, these are the most useful thoughts to confront as we attempt to recover from the violence of the day. (Cave, 2002)

Here is one example of hundreds Cave collected from usually anonymous responders online:

"I hated the New York Times profiles of all the deceased. It's just that everyone they wrote about -- all 2,000 people -- were depicted as really nice, really

devoted parents who came home every night at 5 p.m. to make dinner, play with the kids, never missed a soccer game, and proposed to their girlfriend in a really sweet, creative way. I would read these profiles every day and think, yeah right. Was everyone in the WTC a super amazing person? Someone who worked there must have been an asshole." Female reporter at a major business magazine (Cave, 2002)

In religious terms, the reshowing of images from 9/11 has become a ritual reenactment of the 9/11 'blood sacrifice.' Media play a fundamental role in promoting the success of blood sacrifices. Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, writing in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, make this point clearly:

"In the system of nationalism mass media perform the same functions that sacred and priestly texts perform in other religious systems. They recall central moments of group identity, rehearse ritual and mythic structures for believers, and pull from the flux of daily life what is grist for the mill of religious nationalism...Media are instrumental in reporting blood sacrifice and assembling congregations who acquire knowledge of group threats and sacrificial occasions, and are socialized into the proper execution of ritual forms by media" (Marvin & Ingle, 1996)

In the modern world, these rituals are played out in electronic media.

Rituals have two major dynamics. They create the world by transforming chaos into cosmos, to use Mircea Eliade's terms, or they re-model and recall the transformation of chaos into cosmos. All rituals model and transform to one degree or another, but rituals may be classified by whether they are primarily transforming or commemorative. On the principle that the social is constructed out of the body, the most powerful rituals transform bodies directly. In relation to them media rituals are representational and commemorative. They do not have the power of blood sacrifice, but they do have a critical function. They re-present blood sacrifice that has occurred or is occurring, and they scan the environment for events that lend themselves to future blood sacrifice. Media preoccupation with violence speaks to their role in the ritual system of blood sacrifice. We stay in shape as a group by imposing ritual form on events of the world, large and small, as they offer themselves. Thus media constantly rehearse the structure of sacrifice and its supporting myths. Ritualized events focus group attention on threats to solidarity and help set in motion resolving rituals that work more or less well. In this way devotees ritually refurbish group solidarity and wait for the peculiar mix of events that signify more serious group threats. (Marvin & Ingle, 1996)

But the media has unexpectedly failed to fulfill their function with the events of 9/11, at least as far as my students are concerned. Michael Goldberg, again writing for Salon.com notes,

"After Sept. 11, countless commentators spoke of how cinematic the whole thing was. What no one mentioned is that "it was just like in the movies" is frequently the phrase Americans use to describe the pinnacles of experience -- a first kiss, a fairy-tale party, a trip abroad. Something that feels "like a movie" is something that has an addictive feeling of heightened reality....

Stockhausen wasn't so wrong -- in a media-glutted world, Sept. 11 couldn't help but become the ultimate reality show. So enamored were we of its rare, shocking authenticity that we replicated its image into infinity and leached it of its meaning. Of course, it still works as a rhetorical cudgel that the administration can use to suspend the Constitution and most accepted norms of international behavior, but that just underlies how hollow it's become -- it's a political device, like the Pledge of Allegiance, sanctimoniously recited on the Capitol steps. At ground zero, Americans suck the last morsel of flavor from the most exciting day they will ever know.(Goldberg, 2002)

But why does this ritual "work" still for me and not for my students? One reason might be that, in fact, the ritual commemoration was far more lasting and effective for me just because I do not have the same critical skills as my students. I think my distance from them on this issue at least has much to do with the way they experience media, images, and symbols, rather than some political or intellectual divide. Pedagogically, it is becoming increasingly clear to me that my students have developed a sophisticated ability to critique media images that far outstrips my own. This ability has led to a generation gap in my teaching that I need to address in the future

The issue that divides us, I came to learn, is the ability to think critically about certain forms of cultural expression. When the expression takes the form of written text, my students now tend to be rather inept at analyzing and critiquing what they read. One

said in class, "With writing, I assume that whatever is being said is pretty much the truth. After all, someone took the time to put this all on paper. Some one else made the decision to print it. So it must be accurate." My training, on the other hand, has led me to be initially skeptical about whatever I read. I automatically look for "holes:" in the logic, inconsistencies, lack of evidence.

But when it comes to images, I have that same naiveté my students suffer from when they read. I see images on the television, and my initial reaction is belief. The images can't lie. They are pictures, documentaries, records.

When I said this in class my students laughed. "Remember the OJ Simpson portraits," they said. They were referring to an identical picture of O.J. Simpson published simultaneously in two major news weekly magazine. But one was doctored to make the subject look sinister, even guilty. The students' comment: "Anyone of us can do that on a computer." Students now know how to select and manipulate images at least well enough to recognize that any electronic display is suspect. And that is their initial response to what they see on television, in the newspapers or newsmagazines, or on the internet. "It is all just a movie."

My students have a capacity to see images as phenomena separate from the reality that underlies the images. Whereas I tend to see through the images, thinking of them as transparent lenses to a reality they preserve, the students see the images as a reality or better a creation unto themselves. When they are in a room with a media reproduction of the images, they are watching the image as image. They recognize that the image is selective, the product of an intentional act, an artifice or better an agenda, and that the use and showing of the images in a particular context and sequences is neither natural nor

intrinsic, but part of a planned mode of influence. And they have far more skill with this than I do. Students are able to process images, especially electronic images with far more facility than I. They can "see through" these images, understanding their mode of influencing attention and manipulating response.

Often my students' expressed suspicion and fear reflect the sinister implications of the ability of media to manipulate attitudes expressed by Ken Sanes in his introduction to *Image and Action: Deconstructing the News*.

We are developing a global media system in which Hate is becoming a commodity. What is new about this system isn't that it manipulates the emotions of its audience to achieve its ends. Rather, it is the scale and pervasiveness and sophistication with which it does so, based on high-tech tools of communications and image manipulation. As a result, we are all being drawn into a worldwide virtual gladiator game in which the stakes are all too real for the victims and for everyone who has to live and be brought up in an environment that encourages many of humanity's worst instincts. (Sanes, 2003)

What worries the students most is that they can't really trust themselves or others of their age to judge out what is real and what is not. Commonly, when I asked, How will you make these judgments, given your suspicions, they responded that for them these crucial issues are just too complex. When I asked, how can you folks make good judgments in the face of complexity, they seemed stumped. When I asked, what worried them most about the world in the next five years, they answered, "Us... our generation."

This concern is as much about values as it is about ontology. Students are more likely to trust a text than any visual electronic media. But they are aware that they get most of their information from the electronic media. The result is a vacuum of values and a vacuum of perceptual acuity. What is real? What is right? Two desperately important questions they find it difficult to answer at all. Add to this the question How should I feel? and the problem for them is raised to a crisis level.

What is the complexity? For them, it is partially information overload, partially manipulation and deliberate distortion, the sense that there may be some political and economic conspiracy afoot to deceive the public, and finally awareness that the media has such a power to affect our emotional responses. The sense of being able to "feel" what is right is also brought into question. It is easy to see why for them, the complexity of making judgments of value, or reality is difficult.

Just as crucial is the question, What are the implications for making judgments about religion and violence? First I must say, I am still not comfortable with my students' response. 9/11 is not boring and to diminish the tragedy in human suffering for the victims and for our culture as a whole is a crime. But who is the criminal? In some ways, I want to blame the media, a rather common ploy, I know, but sometimes clichés are true. The overwhelming presence of violence in our media has its effects on the morality of our children, a corrupting effect. Catherine Madsen Cross made the point well:

"Not the least of the crimes of television and movie violence is that it has driven out of the culture any general understanding of what makes violence necessary, not gratuitous, in a story. We are so accustomed to seeing death and damage presented suddenly, more or less cleanly, and without emotional squeal -- not for the sake of understanding, pity and change but for the sake of shallow excitement -- that we begin to think the violence in works of art has no wider purpose than that.(Madsen, 2001)

But this may also be far too simplistic and self serving. We must also ask if we as educators are giving our students the skills, methods and practical experience in dealing with political, moral, social, and religious complexity. Our students will soon enough acquire the position, power and influence to make decisions and take actions that will determine the course of our society and our culture. Clearly, they are concerned they have not been given these skills in their educational experience. After the course, so am I.

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