

POST 9/11: I COULD HAVE BEEN THE MURDERER

By Arielle Lehmann, Israeli writer and psychologist (2001)

During the horrors of recent days I had the opportunity to read some words of peace written by Arab people and forwarded to my mailbox by peace-seeking friends. Being Israeli I had few opportunities in the past to hear Arab peace voices. I find myself wondering about that - since these voices do exist and are so crucial, how come they are not heard/listened to more often? Who benefits from presenting Palestinians celebrating the tragedy rather than showing the complexity and the diversity within each society?

I am trying to look at the events using my background as a social psychologist. If I have learned one thing from my long training as a social psychologist it is that virtually any human being is capable of enormous cruelty. Unfortunately fanaticism and hatred are not a Muslim or an Arab phenomenon. History shows it doesn't take much for people anywhere in the world to turn into cruel hating beasts. It is easy to talk about the "fundamentalism of the Arabs" or the barbarity of a certain religion while denying the fact that very similar behaviors appeared not that long ago in what is called the western world.

It is tempting and dangerous to project the hatred and the potential for cruelty that is inside oneself, to think "they" are dangerous while we are clean and good.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote about the need to acknowledge your own vulnerability in order to have empathy for others. Agreeing with him, I also think we need to acknowledge even a less pleasant aspect of ourselves: our own potential for cruel and murderous behaviors. Once we recognize the ugly side of ourselves, we can face it, confront it, work on it and eventually change it. But if we keep thinking we are good, harmless and most importantly BETTER, than we will not be able to face and tame our own beast.

I remember myself as a child during the Yom Kipur war. I used to listen to the news and rejoiced every time they announced the fall of an Arab plane. Like in the movies I was glad when the 'bad guys' lost their lives. I even counted the number of 'our planes' versus 'their planes' and felt good when the dead of the other side were more numerous.

Yes I was a child then. And yes I didn't understand much. Just like these smiling Palestinian kids on the news this week. You see I am no better. Under different circumstances it could have been me. I could have been a victim but I could also be the murderer.

After the catastrophic attack on the US many people started analyzing Muslim fundamentalism as if it was a unique Middle Eastern phenomenon. As if Arab people had something different about them that makes them more fanatical or crueller. For instance a British colleague told me about his Iranian sister-in-law that can hate and despise in ways he does not understand - he speculated that Iranians were capable of a different level of hatred.

I think this is a worrying self-denial. History shows us time and again that people from many different cultures can be just as cruel as these still-faceless terrorists who murdered innocent people in the States this week. Unfortunately no nation, religion or faith has monopoly over cruelty. Virtually all human beings have the potential to turn into murderers. Violence is the human default. It is enough to mention that the most horrible acts of cruelty during the Holocaust were conducted by completely ordinary people. The Nazis recruited very normal people for the special units that murdered Jews. There were no exams, checks or special requirements - they claimed anyone can do the job. And they were tragically right.

Hatred grows on two key emotions - fear and envy. These are basic emotions any person is familiar with. Any person is therefore familiar with the potential to hate.

This is somber and frightening, hence the profound self-denial you see around it. However I do not think it is hopeless. I know from first experience there is hope. From the 5-year old child celebrating the death of her 'Arab enemies' I turned into a peace advocate and a supporter of human rights. So I know for myself that transformation is possible.

This is where culture and education come in. What made the difference and enabled me to overcome my own beast is the love, empathy and education I've been receiving from my parents as well as from many 'significant others' along the way. Art also played a key role in my transformation exposing me to the great value of human life.

I believe that only when we acknowledge our full potential - the ugly sides as well the very beautiful ones - we can start the critical journey of making choices and eventually transforming ourselves. Yes there is a beast but there is also a great person in each of us. And wherever there is choice, there is hope.