

MY LETTER TO AN ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALIST (March, 1993)

(Updated 7/07 web Preface of “My Letter”)

“My Letter to an Islamic Fundamentalist” was written and sent out to various Arab and Muslim newspapers a week after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and was printed by another soon after 9/11. Later work took these subjects to further depths and understanding.

“My Letter” was much more innocent in March 1993, and yes, often smacks of naivete in speaking to those who maybe continuing to contemplate blowing up our home and life. Since most all “terrorist and suicide bombers” use the name of God for their acts, I wanted to speak with them in the language of God as best I understood it. For secular audience it may sound too religious, but I ask you to translate God to whatever higher values in civilization you aspire to.

“My Letter” was an attempt at further understanding between us, in days when most hadn’t connected this concern to their daily lives.

It is misnamed. It should read, “Letter to the very tiny portion of Islamic fundamentalists who are contemplating terrorist activities.” Or had I known, to Osama and the movement the US administration helped popularize and expand, Al Queda and subsidiaries. And perhaps more importantly we now know, address it to our own administration, which has also misused the Name of God for their (need we validate our patriotism here?) ... crimes.

This Letter was written long before the Bush2 administration came to disgrace us (8 years before). A completely opposing response, and world view, ten years later, almost to the day, this administration would lead us into a self described world wide war for the unforeseeable future.

After 9/11 I was dumbfounded that the administration continued to reinforce defensiveness, “Who could ever have predicted this? Who thought we’d face such problems from the Middle East?” My question had been how could those responsible for our security not see this, especially when ordinary citizens were reading about and feeling the tensions and danger rising? The international tensions were multiplying and building by the day, and to the converse degree, purposely or not, these were largely being ignored by those responsible.

I do apologize for some of My Letter’s limitations in understanding at the time. We know much more now that it is not only injustice and poverty that brings us “terrorism”, and very importantly, that along with our other fundamentalists Christian, Jewish, etc, “Islamic fundamentalists” are not to be equated with being “terrorists.” There is a big difference. Fundamentalism rarely leads to acts of terror. They most often lead to acts of compassion and service.

If there be any, the only silver lining of the catastrophe of 9/11 was a great opportunity for the world to come together to face our common threats. This opportunity was quickly dissolved by those who lacked the experience of community building and the knowledge of basic principles of leadership and teamwork. There were other agendas. There were big lies. There was no listening to others.

Working there at Ground Zero on 9/11 the one strong emotion I could feel coursing through every cell was compassion. You felt this overwhelming love and attention pouring out from all over the world, but especially from those lives that had just been lost. In that moment, fear was no longer present, compassion wiped it out and flooded toward our breaking hearts.

While listening for any signs of life in the dust and beams that first eve and night, one could easily feel the presence of and hear the brave freshly transformed souls calling. Perhaps the strongest sense of compassion I've felt in a lifetime. The call I felt from those souls was to honor their lives by making the world a safer better place. It was a call for understanding the "why", for waking up and gathering together, a call of love for the life they valued, and for healing and comfort through this great sadness. Lost and buried in political maneuvers, I still believe this is their call, and it shall be heard.

Sure we needed security concerns addressed immediately, but did we listen and hear the rest of what was needed? Our leaders took the all too common, narrow, easily understandable and expedient lower human aspect of reaction, that of revenge. They brought the fear right back to the front shelf. The Chinese have an accent saying, "If you want revenge, dig two graves."

I felt strongly that revenge and fear weren't what the 3000 souls wanted. I maybe wrong, but I felt they wanted their young good promising lives to spark another great turning point in civilization, where we would come together for the benefit of the whole. Where humanity would grow in depth and spirit, not diminish. Where this kind of thing wouldn't happen to other innocents. I still feel this call from them, and that that is the best way to honor their lives, more than the grandest memorial in stone.

Why should their lives be responsible for more death and fear? They are not. Some of us are. At this point we have killed some bad people, but not those largely responsible, and we have led the world into a war which has already taken 100 fold the innocent lives lost here, magnifying greatly the tragedy. We have bolstered lies and confusion, and sacrificed so many more good lives, and badly needed resources.

We need truthfulness, and courage. We need to begin to correct this error. We can never get the lives back, but we can honor all by learning the lessons. Their sacrifice will be forever upheld if we face this duty and do our work. Only in this way will the good lives now gone not be for naught.

I put this "Letter" out again in 2003 pre-invasion, and now, because I still believe that we in this fortunate country can always improve, and as a citizen who feels responsible, it is never too late to try to do whatever we can, no matter how small. It's never too late to seek greater understanding of each other, to cross divides.

Indeed I could not write the same letter today.... for some of it I now question myself, about ourselves, about each other. It's a process. But let this small layer of understanding stand, for it was genuine at the time, and perhaps has some value as a reflection of a then more innocent culture.

The opening phrase below was used in respect, for it is the opening phrase of many passages in the Koran.

Unchanged, the letter was in 1993, and remains today, a plea for the work of one to one dialogue. We can do this. We must.)

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

We know little of each other. I do know that our Christian and Jewish “fundamentalists” here in America think, as I hear you do, that much in the world is going astray, not living up to the law of God, and that “Satan” is running rampant and must be fought against. Seeing the vast amount of man made suffering, I can agree with much of this.

We in the West are told the majority of you have little in life; That you have not been given access to education, nor proper health care; That you are not politically represented, or listened too. We understand that you have been repressed by many regimes over the years, which has included torture, imprisonment and death; That you share many hardships economically; And that while many of you are in this oppression of poverty, you have found the strength of each other, and the strength in common faith. Your clerics have reminded you, as our priests, ministers and rabbis have, of your worth in the eyes of God, and each other.

We hear that the Mosques have often helped provide essential community health care, food, and shelter, where the state was negligent. Repression, oppression and lack of representation are worth getting radical about. The founders of the United States of America did in the 1700’s. There are some aspects of your passion and conviction that we need reminding of in ourselves, and in which we would greatly gain from, in correcting our own social and political ills, and maintaining vigilance with our own hard earned Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights.

I read much of the Koran a few years back. There are

many beautiful and inspiring passages, and passages that we all in the world can benefit from. There are several references supporting the fact that Christians, Jews and Muslims worship the same God, and that we share many of the same prophets and their messages. I was however, often made aware of the strong “we/they” language and that because I may not be living by every precept, or that I was not a confirmed Muslim, that I was an “infidel”, an unbeliever. As you know, the Koran has very little to say about infidels that is nice. As a matter of fact, the Book tells you often that infidels are what is wrong with the world. It tells you that we are often evil itself, the bearers and cause of sin and injustice. Some passages encourage you to rid the world of infidels, and that in the eyes of God we deserve to die.

Scholars have a field day with all of our sacred books. There is language in them all which support a compassionate, caring and loving life of service, and language which also encourages us to judge, divide, and destroy those who do not believe as we do. Unfortunately, none of our rabbis, ministers, priests, or clerics singly possess God’s overview, and all knowing, and as a result some of them have misused their own limited understanding and interpretations of the “Word of God” to the detriment of a world of God, in my limited opinion. Very few will tell you or I, that there is no guaranteed copyright to the pure light of God owned by anyone. On the contrary, many will tell you they have it.

I have no doubt, and many here in America are aware now, that we along with several other countries supported some regimes in the Middle East that have been cruel, arrogant and unjust. And we did support these regimes often for our own resource needs. But what most Americans were not aware of, was the price many of you had to personally pay. I genuinely apologize for our part in this suffering, large or small, but it will take more than that.

Americans for the most part see themselves as a God loving country. We see ourselves as compassionate, as being for the underdog, the poor, the lonely, the unfortunate. These are many of the people who came to build America, and they haven't forgotten from where they struggled. But yes, along with our charitable ways there is arrogance, greed and selfishness among us.

Greed is a human element that is hard to keep in check. We do have laws and do put people in jail if they are caught stealing or making unlawful profit from others. However, greed and selfishness, two tools of Satan as the Koran says, are not solely with us in the West. I have traveled to the Middle East and other country's with large Muslim populations. I have seen Muslims here and abroad just as caught up in the symbols of greed, in limousines, in big houses with servants, and with the most fashionable and expensive jewelry and clothes, or arrogantly treating others inferiorly. I personally don't see having wealth as wrong, unless those individuals are not engaged somehow in making life better for others. This quality of soul is impossible to know from a passing limousine, or by the clothes one wears.

You yourself know how hard it is to be a saint, a perfectly holy Muslim. If you have gotten to know those among you, and even your loved ones in your family, you must have witnessed hypocrisy, and transgressions from "God's law". Having done some soul searching of myself through the years, I am aware of the hypocrisy at times in my own thoughts. And I imagine, we being both humans, that you have similar inner struggles at times between what you are told is correct and what you feel to be correct, or between what you believe is right and what you actually do in every instance.

I can assure you that most of the people that I know in America are very respectful of others, of themselves, and of God. They believe that material things are not what is most important in life. They would be upset if they found out something they or their country were doing was harmful to others in anyway.

As you feel, many of us feel strong in righteousness. We think of ourselves as trying to help people in the world, and as people who try to relieve suffering when we see it. We will stand for good morals and for what we think is right and just. The problem lies in that neither you nor we have all the facts. We are both fed stereotypes and propaganda which antagonize, create and exacerbate our divisions.

Our press and yours have bias. They both have a strong proclivity to label. That makes things only seem easier to understand, more black and white. For you, any attack by “the Great Satan” is against all of Islam. For us, any bombing by "Islamic fundamentalists" is an attack by terrorists trying to bring down all the goodness that our society is worth. Please know that in both our lands this simplistic labeling is the irresponsibility of the press and politicians, and those few among us who stand to profit from divisions, fear and war. These people often do not share your moral commitment, nor your moral courage to sacrifice your lives for the larger truth, God’s truth.

Most citizens are horrified at the loss of life. And especially at the loss of innocent life, of women and children, and unarmed working civilians. It is true that America really came to action only when our access to oil was threatened, and Kuwait was run over by Saddam Hussein after our years of supporting him. I readily admit oil is not the most noble of reasons to go to war. But what really horrified us, and I would assume would horrify you if you knew the

details, and made us especially regret not following through with Saddam's removal, is when we people found out that the person we had been supporting for years was murdering his own, executing any political rivals and those not agreeing with him. We are now finally admitting to and getting the evidence of him and his Baath Party killing over 100,000 Kurds in the north; men, women and children of all ages. Here, the man should lose all credibility with both you and us. Mass executions of the innocent can never be God's work, and claiming to be God's servant makes this worse.

He does this in the name of Islam. This confuses us. It must also confuse you when we say we are Christians and believe in brotherly love, and yet you hear about CIA assassination plots, our bombs blowing up hospitals and orphanages, and you hear that money and wealth in our society is our prime motivator, something we idolize. From my perspective you see a life terribly distorted by our own advertising business. It is mostly hype, and twists the reality that the majority of us toil and live in. We have come to know this ourselves, but you may not know this. It is true that sex, wealth and violence attract people's attention, but the vast majority of us live modest, simpler lives. Most of us work hard and pay heavy taxes, much of which go to social programs, but yes, more goes to the military. And yes, we along with many other nations are still supplying deadly armaments around the world, which in my eyes, is feeding Satan's fires of intolerance, of might is right, of communicating to our fellow human beings with guns and death, rather than the basic human interaction of listening and talking.

And yes, it is true, you are correct, even though many in our government have lobbied for a stronger international response, we have been too slow to act in Bosnia. The whole international community can feel shame in not protecting the innocent from this unchecked horror. The international

process still lacks maturity, and the will. We need not take sides, but we certainly must all be in the business of protecting the innocent from such cruelty.

I consider myself a radical fundamentalist when it comes to the point of knowing that we can live in better harmony together. I know we can. I believe this deeply and fundamentally from my own experience. I know that we can develop a better knowledge of each other, and that we don't have to kill, or oppress each other. I believe we are more alike than different, especially now that we can look down from space upon our one precious planet.

Our great Holy Books can be used to guide and inspire us towards a better life. But these same books can be used by some of our preachers to divide us, and create suspicion. I have listened and had my heart warmed and my mind stirred to positive human action by Rabbis in a Synagogue, by Priests in a Church, by Gurus in an Ashram, by Chiefs in an Indian ceremony, Lamas in a Temple, and by Clerics in a Mosque. But unfortunately all too often, what I consider a common human limitation comes up. Eventually, I have heard in each of these settings a spokesperson bring up a "fact" that this particular path is the only true path.

It is this one sentiment, fueled by strong need for assurance and an identity, that leads us to distrust each other. The one and only true path language attempts to make us completely right, by others being completely wrong, and leads us to separating each other in our hearts and minds from the human family.

The wise ones of all religions know all about the human family. I have been in hospitals, clinics, and schools run by Muslim Charities, by Jewish and Christian Charities. There

is a tremendous amount of sacrifice, generosity and kindness put forth by our better aspirants in the service of God through their faith, and for humanity.

One good thing about our country is I can never assume that I am speaking for anyone else, certainly not for the country. Probably much like you, I gather my information from those I'm in contact with. I have my friends. I have my relatives. I have my work, and I read the newspapers. Even my closest relatives can argue with many of my cherished thoughts, so I don't expect less from you or anyone else in the world. Luckily, I have traveled in many different countries, and live in a city where I have been required in my tasks to interact with all colors, and nationalities and religions. This has helped me see through the false stereotypes and labels put on all of us. I have found myself "at home" in the homes of Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. I have witnessed friendly spirit, respect, and a kind, generous hospitality in each home, sometimes in different ways, but none more, or less than the other.

Many of the "Western Values" that you want to protect yourselves and your children from, are the same characteristics of society that many of our parents make efforts to shield their children from, i.e. violence, unchecked lust, prejudice, and greedy, selfish life styles. Don't think that because Madonna posters sell all around the world that we don't know the difference between image and reality, or that we all listen to the same music. When thinking of art, I would like to read someday more of the Arabic manuscripts. For me, it remains the most beautiful writing among all others.

"Satan" is a reality to some, and a concept to others, but for both, "Satan" is something we each have to struggle with in our own selves. Satan doesn't like Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindu's or Muslims any more or less than the

other. When a hard working, God fearing American wakes his children up in the morning and reads in the news that a bomb has killed innocent people doing their daily work, to him this is Satan's work. To your radical element this same bombing is God's work and the people who planted the bomb are "soldiers of God, martyr's for the cause".

When our military fires rockets to destroy a military command center that is believed to be planning and supporting executions and assassinations, it is seen as a tough measure, but is done with much of the same strong sense of righteous duty. Of course, if you or your fellow countrymen are on the other side of this attack, and especially if a rocket has gone off course and killed innocent people, this attack is the work of "Great Satan". I personally would like this cycle to end, for you and me. I am not alone.

I know that if the only way to stop you from harming my children was to kill you, I would. And I know you would do the same to me. We both have courage, and uprightness. God is on the side of the righteous, and we both feel very righteous in protecting the innocent and the poor. But we both must know that there are people among us that are cowardly. To me there is little bravery in planting a bomb, and there is even less bravery in pointing a rocket on a computer screen. I don't think either person is assured a place in Heaven for their work. I think the real courageous work of healing and building a more caring world is what we will be judged by. And we both view ourselves as doing that. We both need to know who the enemy around us is; lies, greed, poverty and a hateful heart. There is none of God's love, compassion and mercy in us when we hate.

I would also ask you not to assume that the people you are told who are at the center of evil, those who work in the institutions on Wall Street, or in the big banks, don't have

consciences, that they don't have family values, or a belief in God. I am sure there are a number of people that don't have these values, as with anywhere in the world, but I know many who do share these values and live for them. I know because I have some family members who work and make a living in these institutions.

In ending, let me say I would like us to join hands and gather our forces to end oppression throughout the world. If I may pray out loud: Let us together renounce the torture and killing. Let us stand up against wrong, whether it is in our own land or another's. Let us respect each other's differences and individual needs. Let us support our common humanity. Let us not be fooled by words, by slogans or by images, but let us find the reality behind all the propaganda and rhetoric we are each bombarded with. Let us work cooperatively to end poverty. Let us face together the larger problems and challenges that make our streets unsafe for our children and elderly. Let us pray to God together that we do God's good work here on earth.

When we meet in that mutual respect, know you are most welcome in my home.

Most Sincerely,

Anthony J. Donovan
NYC
March 1993