



Family Violence & Sexual Assault Bulletin

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An Appeal to Reason **Sandra L. Bloom, M.D. and Brian Barger**

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How did you sleep on the night of September 11, 2001? As you sat transfixed to the unfolding images of terror on your television screen, how was your concentration? How many times did you witness those scenes before your brain decided they were real? Did you crave a drink that night, unable to relax? Have you found it difficult to turn off the television even though you want to? Did you have an irresistible urge to call loved ones and be assured of their safety? Did you want to rush out and help? How long did it take before desires for revenge overcame your pain and horror? Did you load your gun and place it by your bed? Did you keep asking yourself, "Why?"

Welcome to your all-too-human, biologically embedded reactions, the product of thousands of years of evolution. Raw survival instincts prepare us to adapt to adversity, to respond quickly and dramatically, our attention riveted on the source of danger. Our biological fight-or-flight responses keep us aroused in a state of hypervigilance, prepared for more threats. But these innate responses, while useful in fending off say, a hungry lion, have failed us when faced with threats by what became our principal predators, fellow humans.

As civilization evolved, so too did our ability to respond. Uniquely human is our ability to reason. Early societies cultivated the principle of reciprocity, bringing order and a framework for justice to our lives. When treated well, we respond in kind; when abused, we also respond in kind. Reciprocity also bred another uniquely human trait, a desire for revenge.

But as our demonstrated ability to perpetrate unimaginable brutality on others evolved, our ability to respond failed to keep pace. Faced with overwhelming injury we cannot process, we become traumatized, as individuals and as societies. Our

memories literally engrave vivid nonverbal imprints of the sounds, the sights, the body sensations and emotions that haunt us long into the future, triggered by even faint reminders of the terrible pain of mass destruction.

Today, we are a traumatized nation, impaired by the overwhelming nature of unimaginable events. We aren't concentrating as well; we aren't sleeping as well; our sense of individual and collective safety has been shattered. We have an urge to do something, and do it now.

As we come together as a people and as a nation in the face of such adversity, we face an age-old dilemma that in many ways determines the future of our society: Do we unite on the basis of our innate desire for revenge, or do we rise above our primitive biological drives and instead come together, bonded by reason and a desire to seek greater meaning to what has happened, and seize this opportunity to transform this tragedy into a heightened state of social consciousness, finding the courage to blaze new trails on the road to social harmony.

With certainty, this duality of human nature will play out on the national and world stage, with reason contending with revenge for the leading role. We already know what revenge will bring; it is the easy route, the one requiring the least imagination. For reason to take center stage requires the most enduring type of courage, by our political and military leaders, and by each of us.

The days to come will be challenging, as we dig out the dead and begin coming to terms with the magnitude of this tragedy, not only on the thousands of promising lives cut short, but on the hundreds of thousands of family, friends, co-workers and rescue personnel who survive them in deep pain. Since Tuesday's attack we have, as a society, sought to

restore a sense of safety. U.S. Navy ships and Air Force fighter planes now form a protective shield around our country. The most powerful military might in the world is on its highest alert. Police across the United States are deployed as never before. While these efforts are critical in helping to restore a semblance of safety to our lives, no amount of military force can restore our desperate need for emotional safety. After all, we now know an attack can happen anywhere, at any time.

Emotional safety can only be restored by giving ourselves time to grieve for our losses, to find meaning in what happened, and most important of all, to find ways to rebuild a shattered trust. Americans have now learned just how horrible humans can be toward each other, and presumptions that people are "basically good," are, for many, destroyed. Countless Americans have lost trust in our government to protect us.

Deeply complicating the possibilities for social healing are the drumbeats of war, driven by political leaders succumbing to their own sense of helplessness and seeking to restore a sense of control by giving way, again, to revenge. Before we react to satisfy our retaliatory urges by fueling a crisis already laden with hatred, we need time to process our feelings, to mourn and to take stock of the meaning and value of life. True justice requires every ounce of reason, balance and judgment we can muster. We need the time to ask why, and be willing to listen to what may be very uncomfortable answers. We need to gather together, in every home, school, and community across America and ask not, "How do we get even?" but rather, "How do we overcome the barbarity in this world, and what role can each of us play?"

Only then can we say that so many thousands of innocent people did not die in vain.