

COMMENT

Responding to the recent events in the USA

How can we talk with each other about this?

Here in Australia, many of us are struggling to come to terms with the brutal and tragic events that have recently occurred in the USA. We are finding ourselves constantly watching our televisions, listening to the radio and trying to understand what has happened and what the implications might be. At the same time, conversations are taking place within families, between friends and in workplaces and these are raising many questions:

- How can we offer support to those grieving in the US at this time?
- How can we talk about the role that we as Australians should play in response to this situation?
- How can we talk with our families if there are large differences of opinion as to the appropriateness of military retaliation?
- How can we take care that our conversations do not increase the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment that is already having powerfully negative effects on people's lives in Australia?
- How can we talk with children about these issues?
- How can we find ways to talk with one another across cultural and religious differences about these events, their meaning and implications?

This publication has been quickly prepared to try and assist in the process of coming to terms with these unprecedented events and what they might mean for us here in Australia. It has been written by Anglo Australians who are concerned about the rise in anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in this country and the increasing talk of retaliation and war. It has also been written out of a deep sadness for friends and colleagues in the US. It has been a complex task putting this publication together and we would like to acknowledge the wide range of people who have offered their thinking and varying perspectives. If you find these writings useful, we invite you to make lots of copies, to share them with friends and family, to leave copies lying around your workplace, or ask for them to be discussed at your next work meeting.

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Letters from North America

From Jennifer Fox in New York City

Jennifer Fox is an award winning documentary film maker who presented at our conference here in Adelaide last year. She wrote the following letter to us from her apartment in New York City.

Dear friends,

It is so good to hear from you. Thank you for your note and your love sent through the words. My life has changed so dramatically since the morning of September 11. The day it all happened I was supposed to leave for Denmark and then South Africa, where I have been working all year.

The night before I was shopping in the mall of the World Trade Center and planned to go back the next morning. At 8:30 am I was standing at the dog run with my dog, in the shadow of the towers, just two blocks away, gossiping with the other dog owners and having such a good time that I decided to stay and go home first before going to the Trade Center to shop.

I walked into my house and three minutes later I heard the sound of the first plane, low and whining overhead, way too low, right above my house. I knew something was wrong. Then I saw the crash into the tower from my window. Time stopped. I saw everything: the second hit, the explosion, the two towers falling. I will never be the same.

Now I am encompassed in a war zone. The streets here are deserted except the few remaining inhabitants and floods of police, army, rescue workers, that file in columns up and down the avenue, in and out of the zone. It reminds me of being in the green line in Beirut in the early 1980s. People there who stayed used to call themselves the 'front of the non-movers'. Well, I am on the front, not so heroic for sure, but remaining. Here we are in a no-mans-land and cannot move or work or do anything but watch the devastation.

I am so afraid of the words floating over the news here. I am so afraid of my Government's extremes. I am so afraid of war. People here are saying stupid, crazy things. I am sure you have heard them. But there is also a silent group who are ostracised and are laughed at on the TV who think that violence only begets violence. I am one of them. I hope we will also be heard.

Sorry to go on and on. It is so profoundly devastating what has happened here. I am lost in the debris too. I hear the cries of those who disappeared in the sky and are buried here. It is so hard.

Love to all of you and I hope we may meet again soon.

Best, best wishes,

Jennifer

From Vanessa McAdams-Mahmoud in Atlanta

Vanessa McAdams-Mahmoud is an African-American Muslim woman who is head of the Counselling Department at Spelman College where our conference is to be held next year. This letter was written in the midst of counselling young African-American women to assist in dealing with this current crisis.

Dear friends,

All of us are reeling from the events of the past few days... as an American, as a Muslim, my feelings are intense. I grieve for the horrible loss of life and unthinkable attack done in the name of someone's perverted interpretation of Islam. Islam means the way of peace and a Muslim submits to the way of peace...jihad can only be declared on those who prevent you from praying, from practicing your faith...and nowhere is suicide or murder condoned.

I am an American who has loved and criticized her country, but even when I was too angry and hurt to salute our flag I knew that my loyalty could go to no other land. All of my known ancestors were born and died here, my father fought in World War 2 in the Philippines for this country.

I am hoping that justice will be done and that a greater understanding of what Islam really is will be fostered in the world. I am proud of the ways this country has taken a stand in supporting the truth that the majority of Muslims want peace not war, want understanding and co-operation not enmity, want righteousness, not hypocrisy, defend the rights of women, not oppress them...

My thoughts turn to reconciliation. Are we truly ready to discuss this globally? Can we begin to handle the complexities of human cultures and faiths with respect and truth rather than prejudice and stereotyping... Thank you for your note. It meant a lot to me. Love,

Vanessa

From Norma Akamatsu in Massachusetts

Norma Akamatsu is Japanese-American family therapist who recently visited us here in Australia.

Dear friends,

As a Japanese-American, the events of September 11th generate distinct and perhaps unique resonances. The many analogies to Pearl Harbor evoke not only the universal American shock, horror and outrage at that surprise military attack, but summon other associations for me as well. Pearl Harbor, the first battle of American involvement in World War II, was also the trigger for a definitive and culminating expression of decades of anti-Japanese sentiment and anti-Asian racism in the US. With the signing of Executive Order 9066, in the wake of Pearl Harbor, approximately 120,000 Japanese American residents, including US citizens, in an unprecedented abrogation of their civil rights, were ordered to leave their homes and incarcerated in the 'badlands', a mandatory 'relocation' from the West Coast.

Current reports of anti-Arab sentiment, verbal attacks and vandalism of Muslim mosques cannot but recall this Japanese American history. There are clear voices of reason among local and federal government leaders, including New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and President Bush who have warned against the danger of 'hate crimes'. Yet, the inchoate grief, confusion, anxiety, and the shockwaves of loss and a sorrow of unimaginable multiplication can find easy expression in an indiscriminate scapegoating.

In such scapegoating and 'otherization', we run a great risk of a cataclysmic dehumanization of those who look like our assailants and a retaliation that draws in other innocent civilians. In the words of the Very Reverend Nathan Baxter, Dean of the National Cathedral, at Friday's national day of prayer and remembrance: 'In fighting evil, let us not become the evil we deplore'. (cont...)

A final thought - the New York Times acknowledged newscaster Tom Brokaw's comparison of the scene of the devastated World Trade Center to a 'post-nuclear winter' as the definitively apt description. But no one makes explicit the obvious reference, no one speaks the names - Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Approximately 140,000 people were killed as a result of this 'last battle of WWII', the ultimate attack on a civilian population. The circumstances were vastly different but that bombing, like the terrorist conflagration Americans experienced on September 11th, represented the terrible crossing of a new boundary, destruction at previously unheard of and unthinkable proportions. I think one reason we find it hard to name 'Hiroshima' is that in so doing we must recognize all the ambiguity, complexity and human cost of such victories, such 'triumphs' of American 'will'.

The catastrophic assault on American citizens in New York City (my hometown) was also the occasion for countless acts of heroism, cooperation and selfless concern for strangers. These acts of instant regard and connectedness stand in utter and bold contradiction to the pressure toward otherization and de-humanization that hangs in the air like the gray plume of ash, soot, asbestos and bone above New York. A pending question: how do we, as a society and nation-state, appraise the dangers of dehumanization against these acts of connection; what standing and further expression do we give these extraordinary and courageous acts of compassion and empathy by ordinary people?

With love,

Norma

Messages of support to US colleagues and friends

From Dulwich Centre

As we watch memorial services taking place across your country, candles being lit, and lives remembered, we just want to let you know that our thoughts are with you.

Here in Australia, we are all grappling with the enormity of the events of this last week and what they will mean for you in the US and for others around the world. We are also struggling to comprehend how this could happen, what it means, and how we as Australians ought to respond. We are finding this process saddening and bewildering. If this is the case for us, we can only imagine what it is being like for you.

One thing of which we are certain is that we want to offer you our support at this time. There are Australian families whose relatives were in the twin towers. They are grieving now and through their stories we are offered a glimpse of the unutterable sadness that must now fill so many homes in the US. We are thinking of those mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, friends and partners who are now contemplating life without those they most dearly love.

Over many years we have been warmly welcomed into your country, homes and lives. We are now joined with you in sadness at these events and at the state of the world for making them possible.

With love from all of us here at Dulwich Centre

Further messages of support

From Audrey Kinnear (Chairperson of the National Sorry Day Committee)

I watched with shock and disbelief at the scale of the damage. Tears clouded my eyes and streamed down my face. My heart ached. I stared, not understanding quite what was happening. I cried as I watched people jumping out the windows. Cried to see emergency workers covered in dust. As hours went by, life's certainties were challenged. To see a President emotional and crying was new. I cried with him. Cried with all who cried.

We are all in this together, I thought. Australians of many cultures shared the grief, the damaged lives. Unity was a feeling and hope returned. We are strong, let's learn from this disaster. Let's care about people.

The pain I felt at the depth of the loss, is pain all felt before. The pain of a Stolen Generation. The loss of a mother, a father, brothers and sisters. A lifetime of loss. Who cares about your pain? We do.

Audrey Kinnear. Chair of the National Sorry Day Committee: An organisation formed by Indigenous Australians to facilitate the healing of the Stolen Generations.

From the Family Centre, Lower Hutt, Wellington, New Zealand

We were woken very early on Wednesday morning (our time) to be utterly stunned by the images of unspeakable horror witnessed live on our television screens and described in the rest of the media as a result of the terrorist attacks. We realise the security, freedom of movement and quality of life that we have all come to expect have been crudely disrupted by the indescribable acts of violence. Our hearts go out to you as you mourn your dead, support your injured and absorb the consequences of this unprecedented attack on your way of life and values.

So many of you, our friends, have struggled to stop violence in all its forms through your work and interests. So many of you have worked tirelessly to create justice and to build understanding in your own society, and we have shared together on numerous occasions our work and strategies in the two hemispheres. It is doubly tragic, that you who give hope and new possibilities to so many, should suffer so cruelly. Please know that your searing pain is deeply felt by all of us down here and that our hearts, though not comparably close to your tragedy, will remain heavy with loss as you continue to suffer. Our hopes and prayers are for you, your families and all your loved ones.

As the days move on, we wait with some trepidation for the unfolding of military and political responses. Like you, we hope and pray that a campaign against all forms of terrorism will be truly international and will succeed. As with many of the families we work with where violence occurs, the immediate goal is to stop the acts of terror as quickly as possible, and then secondarily to address the deeper underlying causes to develop ongoing safety. So also we hope that the military, political and religious responses will be reflective, sophisticated and wise enough, to lead us out of the current hatreds and help all create both safety and understanding throughout the world.

We send you all our deepest love and heartfelt sympathy.

Arohanui, Alofa atu,

Warihi Campbell, Mike Deacon, Loudeen Parsons, Katrina Roen, Kiwi Tamasese, Luisa Tanuvasa, Flora Tuhaka, Charles Waldegrave and Kasia Waldegrave (16th September, 2001)

Creating your own message of support

If you are interested in creating your own message of support these can be sent to the US Embassy in Canberra. Webpage: www.usembassy-australia.state.gov Email: usiscanb@ozemail.com.au

Creating a context for constructive conversations

These recent events have brought into the open significant differences within families, between friends, in workplaces and between communities. Some of us remain deeply saddened by the events, others seem to be primarily angry, others are both, while for many people this is a depressing time. Where some people see the main priority at present to involve supporting the US in taking strong military retaliation, others believe in differing priorities. Some people who have grave concerns as to where a 'war on terrorism' might lead are worried that to speak about such concerns now will be experienced as not supporting those who have been devastated by recent events. At the same time, those from Muslim and/or Arab communities, are having to deal with a wave of racist abuse and action. These are potentially polarising times and we are often hearing simplistic proposals for action. Many people here in Australia, let alone in the US and other parts of the world, are confused, frightened and worried.

It is a challenge to try to think through what might make constructive conversations more possible. We have come up with some thoughts that we are finding helpful to guide us. Perhaps upon reading them you will have ideas of your own, if so we'd love to hear from you.

- ◆ Some people spoke of the usefulness of asking questions rather than getting into arguments/debates.
- ◆ Some people have found it useful to try to invite conversations that involve a mutual exploration of how each person has come to think in the ways that they do.
- ◆ Other people spoke of how it has been helpful to take time to explore the real effects that these recent events have been having on the life of the person they are speaking with and why.

People felt that remaining aware of the effects of our conversations and taking care to create a good context in which to speak about these issues are good starting points.

Talking about 'retaliation'

One of the most difficult issues to talk about seems to be 'retaliation'. While all those we have spoken to agree that in order to prevent future tragedies action needs to be taken in relation to those individuals who are identified and proven to have been responsible for last week's devastating events, many people are concerned that 'military retaliation' against groups and/or countries is being seen as the only possible response to this current crisis. While it does seem that talk and plans of retaliation are a major focus in the US at this time, it is also clear that people and communities in New York and elsewhere have already shown that there are many different ways to respond to this situation. Indeed, as Jennifer Fox's letter conveyed earlier, there are those who fear the implications of vengeance and this fear is shared by many Australians. So we thought it might be helpful, in thinking through how we as Australians are going to respond to this crisis, to consider the many categories of response that North Americans have already engaged in:

** Achieving safety / preventing further acts of violence*

The most urgent issue for many people in the US at present is to achieve safety and prevent further harm. Across North America, and indeed many parts of the world, wide-ranging action is being taken to try to ensure that the events in New York and Washington cannot occur again. Some of these actions of prevention are quite specific to the recent events such as revising security processes at airports, in training pilots etc. Others involve broader security measures and people are trying to work out how these can be put in place without compromising the civil liberties of individuals or communities. Other acts designed to achieve safety involve tracing and apprehending those who organised these acts and bringing them to justice (see below).

** Acts of healing*

People in the US are engaging with different forms of healing for those who have lost loved ones, for the city of New York, for North Americans in general, and even more broadly. Some of the different ways of healing are including inter-faith services (involving Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu religious leaders), counselling, the linking of families who have lost loved ones, the creation of songs, writings and rituals of healing. Also important has been the creation of shrines - so many have been created that some are now describing New York as a 'city of shrines'. Of course, medical healing is also taking place for those injured.

** Seeking to understand*

People in the US are already engaging in many different avenues of enquiry, including: how the events took place, who was involved, and what their motivations were. Wide-ranging investigations are also taking place in relation to the possible broader context of these tragic events and ways of responding to these. Some people are trying to understand what conditions enable groups such as those responsible for the events in the US to gain influence and followers. Others are asking why would people be willing to engage in such desperate acts and what actions could make a tangible difference to preventing this in the future. Still others are trying to understand if these events are linked to earlier acts of US foreign policy over the last few decades and how these could be redressed. Different forms of exploration are also taking place into how people who were subjected to this violence tried to deal with the terrible situations they were in, and how other people in different contexts who have survived acts of terrible violence have dealt with the trauma involved.

** Putting forward alternative views of action*

Many North Americans are talking with others about how the US can respond to these devastating events without perpetuating further violence. Some people are calling for a civilian response to these events and peace gatherings have been taking place to try to propose alternative responses to military retaliation. Others are stating that a strategy to prevent terrorism and political violence needs to include steps towards building a world where the vast majority of people feel that the political and economic systems of their own countries, as well as of the world in general, are fair and equitable.

** Disseminating information, making offerings, coming together*

People are creating websites, recording people's stories, documenting good news at the local level. People are also stopping to talk in the streets and in the parks to share the latest stories and information. Others are offering their physical labour, their blood, their clothing, their prayers. And across the US and in other parts of the world families, friends, women's groups, local community groups and spiritual communities are all coming together at this time to be in each other's company and to talk issues through.

** Actions for tolerance*

Due to a number of frightening anti-Arab and anti-Muslim attacks that have occurred in the aftermath of the devastation in New York, many people in the US are trying to ensure that Muslim-Americans and Arab-Americans do not become scape-goats and victims of further violence. According to the Arab American Institute a wide range of people are taking positive action including: the President, the California Governor, the Attorney General, the Secretary of State, the US Senate and 'grassroots organisations representing Americans of Asian, Italian, Jewish, Hispanic, Portuguese and African-American descent' (see www.aaiusa.org). What's more, various churches are offering safe havens and around the clock security for Muslims, and there continue to be very many individual acts of kindness and support.

** Seeking justice*

In the search for answers, and also to ensure that such events cannot happen again, a massive investigation is underway to bring those who assisted in these recent attacks to justice. There seems a wide range of opinion as to what means ought to be used for this purpose. Some are advocating the use of policing and courts in relation to particular individuals and groups. Many people are trying to think through what justice could look like in these circumstances and what processes and mechanisms could be involved and/or developed.

** Many different forms of retaliation*

Some within the US are articulating that even within the realm of retaliation, a military option is only one of many possibilities. Other forms being discussed include diplomatic, legal, and economic actions.

What this means for us in Australia

Here in Australia and elsewhere, some people are becoming increasingly concerned as to what military retaliation may look like and what the long term effects might be in this region. In trying to think through what sort of response to the past week's horrific events we can make, as individuals, workplaces and more collectively as a nation, some people are suggesting that we can offer our support to our friends and colleagues in the US in a wide-range of ways independent of offering collaboration in military strikes.

Responding to prejudice

The other issue that people have been telling us is difficult and disturbing in conversations involves the degree of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia. It seems that people's genuine shock, horror and outrage over the events in the US are being joined with prejudicial thinking that is somehow holding all Arabs and/or all Muslims responsible for the events of the past week. This is having devastating effects on many Arab Australians and many Muslim Australians. These days are being particularly difficult for those whose families are living in countries that are now facing possible military retaliation.

We have tried to include here some of the ideas that people have shared with us in relation to responding to this urgent issue:

- One response to the recent racially motivated attacks against the Arabic and Muslim communities here in Australia has been the establishment of a hotline for those who have experienced such incidents. Anyone who experiences such an attack is encouraged to call this 24hour hotline: (02) 9716 2260
- Some people are responding by enquiring into the history of this prejudicial thinking. They are exploring its sources, trying to understand them and are talking with others about this process. Others are taking care to enquire as to the real effects that this wave of racist thought and action is having on Muslim Australians and Arab Australians. These communities are very diverse and so the effects are differing greatly in different contexts. It is hoped that this enquiry may then be helpful in addressing the harmful effects of this current wave of racism.
- Some people are thinking through and taking the first steps in building connections and partnerships with Arab Australian and Muslim Australian communities to be able to work together to creatively respond to these issues. Other people have been exploring how it might be possible to indicate in a public way their good will to Muslim Australians and Arab Australians. People's suggestions include making a public statement of support and posting this in one's workplace.
- Some women's groups have been arranging transport for Muslim women so that they can get their children to and from school and get themselves to places they need to go without feeling unsafe or harassed. People are also making a point of frequenting Arabic shops and food places.
- Others have suggested hosting educational meetings for schools and/or workplaces in which members of the Arab and Muslim communities are invited to speak, or videos are shown about the diverse Arab and Muslim worlds.
- A number of people have raised the issue of taking care with their use of language. People are indicating that not only are they trying to take care not to generalise between those who perpetrated the acts of the past week and Arab Australians or Muslim Australians, they are also trying to be thoughtful about the language they use to talk about these issues. Using phrases like 'the civilised world' and 'barbarians' runs the risk of playing into racist, dehumanising stereotypes. Many people seem determined to find ways of talking about these issues that don't contribute to prejudice, dehumanisation or demonising ways of speaking. Other people are examining the ways that meanings and uses of certain words change over time depending upon the current political context.
- Many people have talked about how it has been helpful to actively analyse and deconstruct the media coverage in relation to these issues (especially with one's children). Others are using this time to inform themselves more about Islam and Arab people's experience here in Australia and elsewhere. In so doing they are learning about the extraordinary diversity of the histories and cultures of the Middle East. We have included here a number of resources that we have found helpful in relation to learning more about Muslim and Arab experience.

Resources

- *The Muslims in Australia* by Wafia Omar and Kirsty Allen (1996 Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra). This booklet offers lots of interesting and helpful information about Australian Muslims. It describes basic Islamic history, beliefs and practices. It also indicates the diversity of the Islamic community in Australia which has drawn together people from many parts of the world, including Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

- *A Heart Turned East: Among the Muslims of Europe and America* By Adam LeBor (Warner Books 1997). This book takes Sarajevo as its starting point and then ranges widely into the predicament of Muslim minorities in Europe and the United States, and through this investigates the relationship between Islam and the West. Amongst other things this book offers an enormous amount of information including the following:

“Contrary to popular belief, only a small minority of American Muslims are Arabs. In fact most of America’s Arab population of about 2.5 million are Christians. By far the largest group, over 40 percent of American Muslims, are African-Americans, according to the American Muslim Council. Many are converts...who have turned to Islam as much for political reasons as religious ones, as a statement to express their separation from, and dissatisfaction with, the Anglo-Saxon Christianity of America’s ruling elite. The next largest group, about 25 percent, hails from the Indian sub-continent. Arabs...comprise about 12 percent of America’s Muslim population.” (p. 250).

- *www.tolerance.org* This North American website contains information about current anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment in the US and ways of responding to it. It contains sections including: Americans vs. Americans: Turning on Our Own, Who are the Arab Americans?, What is Islam?, Challenging Bias in the Classroom and Community Forum: Speak Out

Some complex considerations

Apart from the issues of ‘retaliation’ and ‘responding to prejudice’, there are a number of other key issues that are causing heated discussion and debate. Here we have tried to explore some of these issues in the hope that this will provide people with some different options in future conversations.

One of the areas of significant disagreement in conversations seems to be whether it is appropriate at this time to consider why some people in different parts of the world have a profound anger at the United States. Why is this contentious?

There are a number of major dilemmas associated with this issue. Firstly, so many families in the US are in a state of profound grief and mourning. One of the key priorities at this time is to support those in the US to come to terms with what they have just experienced and to try to achieve some sense of safety. A second dilemma relates to the concern that in considering why some people in various parts of the world feel outraged at the US, this could in some way contribute to excusing the inexcusable. People around the world have felt that it is important to state that no cause could justify this action. And thirdly, the events of this past week may have nothing to do with the anger felt towards the US in relation to its foreign policies. Although there are statements being made as to the likely perpetrators of this act, it is not yet known for certain who committed the acts of gross violence or their reasons for doing so.

And yet, despite these significant considerations, if the Australian Government supports US military action in the coming days, weeks, months, it would seem that we do have a responsibility to understand the history of US foreign policy and Australian support of it. In relation to the current public conversations about this crisis there are a whole range of complex histories to consider – including histories of US involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Palestine and elsewhere. We wish we could easily refer you to helpful resources in this regard and yet many of the writings we have come across either simplify complex situations, and/or are written in antagonistic and adversarial ways. One book, which we have found interesting and helpful in relation to the US, is a more general text by historian Howard Zinn entitled ‘A people’s history of the United States’. This book, which has sold more than 500,000 copies in North America, traces the history of the US from alternative perspectives. It includes sections on US foreign policy as well as on the movements of resistance within the US to aspects of these policies. It also places recent US foreign policy in a broader social and historical context. Hopefully you’d be able to find this book in good libraries. Its full reference details are: Zinn, H (1995) *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. HarperPerennial, New York.

Some people here in Australia are now claiming that refugees from Islamic countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq are a potentially dangerous ‘third force’. We are being told that they could contain terrorists seeking to gain entry into our country in order to carry out further attacks and that we should ban all asylum seekers from these countries in order to protect ourselves.

These statements about the potential dangers posed by refugees are being made in a particular context here in Australia. Over the past few years asylum seekers have been dehumanised and maligned while simultaneously they have been subject to mandatory detention. Many people are trying to bring to light the history of these attitudes to refugees and the fact that there are alternative ways of responding to this issue. Despite their efforts there remains in Australia at this time a significant animosity to asylum seekers. It is in this context that these more recent statements about the dangers posed by refugees need to be understood.

From what we know, terrorists are highly unlikely to enter the country as refugees. Refugees are much more closely scrutinised than people entering on tourist or business visas, and it is apparent that terrorists have the funding and expertise to gain all necessary false documentation, such as passports, visas and business credentials. It also seems unlikely that refugees will be antagonistic to the countries that offer them refuge; in fact refugees are generally powerfully appreciative of countries that offer them safety. In time, refugees and their descendants very often feel compelled to offer something back to their new home.

The governments of countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan are conducting persecution and even genocide against ethnic and religious groups within their own populations. Rather than seeing the refugees from these countries as potential enemies, some people are seeking out those Australians who left these countries to ask for their help in understanding what is going on in their original homelands, so that our government’s policies can really make a difference.

Some people here in Australia are saying that it seems that more attention is being paid to the grief and trauma associated with these terrible events than all the other tragedies which occur in different parts of the world. How can we respond to this?

The events of the past week have been terrible. It appears that thousands of people have lost their lives and therefore at least tens of thousands of people have lost loved ones. There have been other crises in different parts of the world that are similarly terrible, and tragically this will no doubt continue. Rarely do such tragedies occur in English speaking countries, however, and rarely in the context of such media resources. Because of this, and perhaps our own priorities, we generally do not hear from other tragedies the particular stories of grieving, trauma and family sorrow that we are engaging with so painfully this week. Rather than engaging in comparisons of suffering which often cause further anguish, what would it mean if from this tragedy came a determination to find ways to bear witness to the experiences of all those who are subject to acts of violence and oppression in different parts of the world? For some people in the US, this is one of the things they realise they will be taking away from this week’s events – an increased sense of connectedness to other people who experience similar traumas. Some people are already talking about what it will mean for them if bombings begin of civilians in other countries. This new awareness of trauma will make witnessing other people’s hardship and terror all the more painful. Some people are already talking about how this will lead them to act to prevent the occurrences of such bombings. Perhaps here in Australia we can draw meaning from their words and actions.

Some people here in Australia are now stating that if these attacks were by Islamic terrorists, then Islam is a threat to us, that this is a religious conflict between Islam and the west.

In the eyes of many Australians, Islam is associated only with extremism and fundamentalism. This is due to two main factors. Firstly, these are the images that the western media presents - they are not representative of the diversity that exists within Islamic societies.

Secondly, there are historical factors that have led many countries in the Islamic world to be in the grip of poverty, political instability and economic insecurity. Histories of exploitation are a part of the picture that have created favourable conditions for violence and extremism. Similar conditions in the west at different times in history have also given rise to violence. To understand this violence and extremism it can be helpful to understand the historical, political and economic context. The primary causes of so-called ‘Islamic terrorism’ are political, not religious. The situation can be compared to that in Northern Ireland.

For years the media insisted on referring to this as a religious conflict, despite the fact that it was based on political and economic issues, with deep historical roots. In the Middle East, as in Ireland, religious sentiment is often manipulated by various groups for their own political ends, but it is not a primary cause of violence or conflict.

Some people, in the US and here in Australia, are using this current time to explain how Islam is not a monolithic religion. They are trying to articulate the rich tradition of liberal Islamic scholarship, Islamic mysticism, the ways that Islam has adapted to the different cultures within which it has taken root, and the inter-faith dialogue which has been enthusiastically entered into by many Islamic scholars and clerics.

Talking with children about these events

Children here in Australia and around the world are currently witnessing images of destruction and death and hearing the stories of people who have lost loved ones. They are also hearing of calls for retaliation and that a war is coming. News of the events in the US are running constantly and replacing the usual programs watched by children. Adults are trying to find ways to talk with the children in their lives about these events and what they mean.

We have tried to list here some of the ideas that we have heard about ways of talking with children about these events. We have especially focused on ideas for children who are thinking and talking about these issues and who are finding them upsetting.

- If children are feeling very upset for the people in New York, some people have said that it has made a difference to ask them what they think they might be able to do to try to offer some support. Perhaps the child or children can be asked about what helps them when they are upset and then these suggestions may be able to be applied to this current situation. For example, some children have made cards of sympathy and picked flowers from their gardens and taken these to the nearest US embassy or consulate. Children can also be asked about how they might support each other during these times and various suggestions (like offering a hug, or lending someone a particular toy) can be accumulated and put to good use.
- Some people have said that it has helped to develop some simple rituals of acknowledgment around meal times and sleep times. These might be rituals that acknowledge all that is going on but then mean that conversations about distressing topics do not have to occur at these important times of the day. Children may come up with some good suggestions for these rituals. Some children have suggested the singing of a particular song, the reading of a favourite poem or story, or even having a minute's silence at these times before going on with usual routines.
- If children are upset by witnessing the harrowing stories of people who have lost loved ones, one idea is to ask the child why they think these people are so upset, what the child thinks it says about the relationships these people had with their loved one who has died. It may be possible to talk about what sorts of things these people used to do together, what they really treasured about the person who has died. In doing so, this might enable some reflection about the things about the child's relationships with people that they treasure, and how this can be acknowledged in some creative way. After these sorts of conversations some children have suggested writing little notes in which both the adult and the child write down what they really treasure about each other and what they'd really miss if one or the other wasn't around. Then they agree to hug and reassure each other that they are going to be around just as long as they can. People have told us that this can be very beautiful but care needs to be taken to ensure that these conversations are not upsetting.
- Some people who are concerned that all the talk of retaliation will influence the ways their children respond to their own conflicts are asking children about their beliefs in relation to how they respond when someone has hurt them and why. Some parents are trying to find ways of conveying that retaliation has different meanings and implications depending on how big and strong you are. Others are exploring children's creative ideas about ways of addressing their own experiences of victimisation.

- With all the discussions happening now in the US about how military retaliation is now imminent, many children are saying they are scared that we will be going to war. For children who are particularly fearful it may be important to clarify when the fear is most and least present. From this discussion it may be possible to collaboratively come up with some suggestions to lessen this fear. Some people have said that it has been helpful to recall other times in the past when fear has been around and what has lessened its impact. At the same time, however, this is a time when many adults are frightened and simply sharing this and coming up with ideas together to address it may be helpful. Sometimes simple things, like when to watch the television and how much to watch, may make a big difference.
- Other people have told us that these times are also opportunities to talk with children about what they value in life, what they feel is important and why and to listen to their children's views on these sorts of topics.
- Many people are trying to offer their children a language to describe these events that does not increase hatred and discrimination. Some are choosing to talk about times and events in their own lives and in the broader world when resolution to very difficult situations have occurred without violence.
- On the web page of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (www.adc.org) is a section entitled: Advice to Arab-American Parents – Helping Children Cope. Reading this helpful piece is a reminder of the extra complexities facing different families at this time.
- In children's play at present they may be enacting the events of this past week. Similarly, those living in multicultural places may now be witnessing or exposed to bullying related to these issues. Acting out the events is often children's ways of making sense of these events. Some people are taking this as an opportunity to talk with the children about what these scenes mean to them, and even how the 'playing' is being seen by different children from different groups.
- Children who have lived through war zones or experienced other forms of violence will have their own concerns and thoughts. Again, stories of what enabled the children to cope with these times may provide some clues as to what may assist this time around.
- Some people have told us that they feel it is important during these times to be talking with their children about how children in some parts of the world are struggling with the effects of poverty and violence on a daily basis. Some are especially thinking of children in countries who may be facing military retaliation.

Of course, it's also relevant to note that some children here in Australia may not appear to be particularly affected by the current situation and adults in their lives are simply trying to maintain as normal a routine as possible.

A few last words...

Each morning people in New York are still waking with a sense of disbelief at the enormity of sadness and grief that surrounds them. And each day around the world we are trying to come to terms with what this will all mean. These are sad and confusing times. Our hearts reach out to our colleagues and friends in the US, to our Muslim and Arab friends here in Australia, and to all those in different parts of the world who are frightened as to what the future may hold.

This publication has been put together quickly in the hope that it may assist people in talking about the issues we are all facing as a result of the past week's events. If you find what is written here helpful please feel free to distribute it as widely as you think would be useful. We would love to hear from anybody who has further suggestions, ideas or reflections to offer.

This seems a time to be building connectedness and thoughtfulness. To find our way through the times ahead it appears we will need to draw on the wisdom of all our communities, all our cultures.

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Learning from history
Jeremy Jones
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As anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice is now on the rise, it seems vital at this time that Australians from different cultures and religions come together to re-affirm our commitments to living together in this country free from racial harassment and abuse. This is important for our fellow Arab and Muslim Australians but it is also in the interest of all Australians to try to take action to reduce racism and racial harassment. It is particularly critical for Jewish Australians if history is our guide.

In looking at Australian history, we don't know how to predict when antisemitism decreases, but we do know when it gets worse. Antisemitism in Australia doesn't necessarily increase when economic conditions are worse. It also doesn't increase if Israel does something that the world doesn't like. And it doesn't increase simply if there is an issue in the Australian public life relating to Jews. When it gets worse is when general racism and intolerance increases towards any group. When the Geoffrey Blainey inspired debate on Asian immigration took place in 1984, there was also a huge increase in antisemitic attacks in this country. When this debate quietened down, so too did antisemitism for two or three years. Then came the public debates about Aboriginal land rights in the late 1980's, and just as Aboriginal activists were finding their tyres slashed if they had a land rights sticker on their car, Jewish shops were also being vandalised. Again things quietened down until 1991 when the Gulf War led to anti-Arab prejudice increasing dramatically. At the same time as this rise in anti-Arab prejudice, Sydney earned the reputation for being the city in the world with the most arson attacks on synagogues since the Second World War. There was considerable physical anti-Jewish violence at that time. This rise in antisemitism seemed to us intimately related to the fact that at first racist groups had got away with anti-Arab racism. When the Gulf War was over the racism quietened down too. Then we had the early days of the Mabo discussion which brought with it increased racism towards Indigenous Australians and a simultaneous rise in antisemitism. This pegged down a bit until One Nation (a right-wing political party) came along and the more recent anti-immigrant, anti-asylum-seeker rhetoric and now this rise in anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim prejudice.

Australia, in the broader scheme of things, is a remarkably tolerant, open and accepting country. And already a number of community actions have taken place in different cities around Australia which have reaffirmed commitments to address racism and intolerance. This, I believe, is very hopeful as perhaps it indicates a country ready to rise to the occasion.

Afghan histories in Australia

Many people here in Australia are using this time to learn about the current situation of those living in Afghanistan or seeking to flee that country. Some are also seeking to understand the history of Australia's relationship with Afghan people. In the process, we are being surprised at what we learn, especially in relation to the unsung contributions which Afghan people have made throughout Australian history.

In the mid-nineteenth century Afghan camelmen played a critical role in opening up the vast Australian outback to Europeans. In these times camel trains were a crucial life support system to outback communities. The cameleers came from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Turkish empire and their labour and skills in hot, dry arid conditions made possible a number of key projects including the Overland Telegraph Line between Adelaide and Darwin, the Queensland Border Fence, the Transcontinental railway Line between Port Augusta, South Australia and Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, and the Rabbit Proof fence and Canning Stock Route in Western Australia. Cameleers were also vital to the early wool and mining industries. What's more, some of the exploratory expeditions which traversed the most inhospitable parts of Australia only survived due to the expertise and endurance of the cameleers in the hot and waterless land (they were also dependent upon Indigenous Australian skill and knowledge of country).

There are still remnants of these Afghan histories in many Australian cities – the date palms in Alice Springs, cemeteries in Broken Hill, Marree, Coolgardie and elsewhere, and mosques in Adelaide and Perth. Camel races continue in various parts of the country, while the train line that connects southern Australia to Alice Springs is still referred to as the 'Ghan' in honour of the early contributions to this country of Afghan people. And, of course, camels themselves remain an enduring part of life in northern Australia.

In every book which focuses on the Afghans in this country, after tracing the histories of Afghan contribution there are further chapters entitled: 'No alien hawkers, please' or 'The period of usefulness has passed' or simply 'Afghans not wanted'. By the end of the nineteenth century, racial intolerance swept across Australia directed primarily at the Chinese, the Pacific Islanders in Queensland, and the Afghans. Acts of violence and harassment at the local level, linked with the national policies of *The Immigration Restriction Act*, later to be known as the White Australia policy, and refusals to grant Afghan people naturalisation (even those who had been living in Australia for up to thirty years) gradually debilitated the Afghan community in Australia. Many Afghans were forced to leave the country and gradually the role of the camel trains was replaced by trains and trucks. The Afghan people who had contributed so much to life in opening up the outback to Euro-Australians were rewarded for their work with harassment and exclusion.

Over the last few years, boat people fleeing from Afghanistan have been arriving on Australia's shores. They have been met with hostility and mandatory detention. Recently they have been expelled from Australian waters by the use of military vessels. Many people have been shocked at the attitudes shown towards these Afghani people who are seeking refuge.

As we try to establish what part Australia should play in relation to the humanitarian and refugee crisis looming in Afghanistan and Pakistan, what would it mean if we considered the histories of Afghan contributions to Australia? What would it mean if we also kept in mind the histories of racist exclusion that led to the destruction of the early Australian Afghan communities? What's more, how could these histories inform our response to the current crisis and how we act towards the people of Afghanistan?

For more information about these histories see:

The Afghans in Australia

by Michael Cigler (1986: Australian Ethnic Heritage Series. Australasian Educa Press. Blackburn Victoria)

In the tracks of the Camelmen

by Pamela Rajkowski (1987: Angus and Robertson Publishers. North Ryde NSW)