



Friends Committee on
National Legislation
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*a world free of war and
the threat of war*

We seek

*a society with equity
and justice for all*

We seek

*a community where
every person's
potential may
be fulfilled*

We seek

an earth restored

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Finding **SAFETY** *in an age of* **TERRORISM:**

Reflections on
September 11, 2001

A speech given at the second FCNL
September 11 Observance and Lobby Day

by **Bob Burnett**
September 2003





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Finding Safety in the Age of Terrorism:

Reflections on September 11, 2001

What can we learn from the tragedy of September 11, 2001? How can we find safety in this new age of terrorism?

The attacks on September 11 have had a more traumatic impact on America than did the surprise assault on Pearl Harbor 60 years before. After the attacks on December 7, 1941, the nation pulled together, found a new purpose and for a period carried a new sense of democracy. Regrettably, since September 11 the U.S. has not found safety in such solidarity. Rather than create a culture of purpose—with a new national unity—the Bush Administration has been content to create a culture of fear. Americans continue to be extremely fearful; the result is an inattentiveness that has permitted dangerous erosion of our democracy.

For those of us who disagree with the course that the Bush Administration has embarked on, the questions are: How can we feel secure in this new age of terrorism that we are living in? How can we join together to provide *real* national security?

My premise is that all of us who are part of the movement for peace and justice—the heroic nonviolent movement—actually know quite a lot about safety, and we can use this knowledge to enhance our collective security. I believe there are six lessons that our history can teach us about finding safety in this new age of terrorism.

* * *

After September 11, I searched for ways to find meaning in these terrible attacks. I engaged in long, soul-searching discussions with my friends, called upon my Quaker spiritual practice, and reread the history of nonviolence. What I learned from this is that our common history clearly demonstrates that spirit does prevail. We can take refuge in the spirit—even in dreadful times.

Some Buddhists practice a mantra: “I take refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, and in the Sangha.” (That is, I take refuge in the spirit of the Buddha, the teachings of the Buddha, and the Buddhist community.) Those of us in the Christian tradition say that we take refuge in the spirit, but we mean different things by this. Some of us mean that we take refuge in the Bible and others that we take refuge in the church. Most of us who are faith-based activists mean that we take refuge in the nonviolent community. We share the conviction that a world of peace and justice can be achieved in this realm of existence—that it is possible to save the planet, to build “the peaceable kingdom.” We honor the lives of those that went before us and see ourselves as following in their tradition, making slow, steady progress. We take comfort from working together in this heroic movement.

So **the first lesson is that we can take refuge in the Spirit.** This does not imply a retreat from the world. We find safety by standing in the light, by standing together for what we believe in—to continue the struggle for a world of peace and justice.

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The second lesson is tightly connected to the first for we cannot take refuge in the spirit unless **we maintain a spiritual practice.** This means developing a daily practice where we take time to get centered—through prayer, meditation, or yoga. Once we do this, we can use this practice to seek the truth, to discern what the spirit intends for us—to find our moral compass.

In late July 2003, a documentary, *The Weather Underground*, came to Berkeley. I invited Friends to watch this movie and then to come to our house to discuss it. Members of the Weather Underground were the American terrorists of the 1970s. My thought was that because their leaders were, demographically, very similar to Quakers, seeing this movie would give Friends an interesting opportunity to talk about the Peace Testimony.

The movie illustrated that—caught up as they were in the tumult of the times and their own cult environment—the members of the

Weather Underground lost their moral compass. In their ardent desire to oppose the Vietnam War they had, in fact, adopted the morality and, therefore, the tactics of those they reviled.

This is an ethical trap that continues to plague the nonviolent movement. Some of us get so angry with the Bush Administration that in our righteous indignation we become like them. We lose touch with our moral compass.

The path of nonviolent activism is a rough one. To make our way along this path requires both commitment and direction. A vital spiritual practice nurtures both of these. It enables us to be centered, to involve our hearts as well as our brains in social activism. Being grounded helps us connect to the spirit and take in the energy we need to follow our path. And, having a daily spiritual practice connects us to our moral compass—provides us with the discernment, the sense of purpose that is vital.

* * *

Another lesson that can be drawn from the experience of the 1960s and 1970s is that we must **cultivate patience.** To travel down the path of nonviolence means that we need a connection to the spirit, a sense of direction, and the dedication to follow our path. To maintain a healthy spiritual practice it is necessary to have the patience to engage in this practice each day; to make the space in our busy lives to connect with the spirit on a regular basis.

And from this base we must steel ourselves to persevere in the face of adversity. The history of the Weather Underground shows us that they got frustrated after, really, only a short period of struggle, and then they turned to the dark side.

Succumbing to the temptation to become violent ignores the reality that the truly meaningful progress in building a world of peace and justice has almost always come after a prolonged nonviolent struggle grounded in a deep spiritual faith. The very early history of Quakers provides a classic example of this. The Religious Society of Friends began in England in 1652 and after 1661

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worship by Friends was explicitly banned. But Quakers continued to meet for worship in open defiance of the law. Their meeting houses were burnt down, but Friends then met on the rubble; when every adult member of a meeting was taken to prison, the children kept up the meeting. For more than 25 years Quakers persevered—thousands went to prison and hundreds died. In 1689, the Quaker leader, William Penn, convinced King James II to issue the Act of Religious Toleration, which established the religious freedom that we enjoy today.

But today American society is obsessed with the quick fix and as a result gets frustrated easily. Many of us were discouraged after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Some complained that the Bush Administration paid no attention to our protests—paid no heed to the antiwar movement. But, objectively, we have accomplished a lot. The February 15, 2003, demonstrations were the largest ever and Americans were joined by millions of protestors from throughout the world. The antiwar movement is having an impact: we have gathered millions of allies inside and outside the United States.

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In the boys' locker room of my high school, a wonderful aphorism was written on the wall, "Life is like a grindstone: whether it wears you down or polishes you up depends upon what you are made of." Today, we live in grinding times. To show what we are made of, we must cultivate patience; we must find safety in the spirit and *then* we will shine.

* * *

The Bush Administration can be characterized by its impatience. It rushed into the invasion of Afghanistan without a plan and then it repeated this mistake in Iraq. In its haste to provide a quick fix, the Administration has violated a basic moral tenet.

During my teens my grandfather would dine with us most evenings, and invariably would pontificate about the communist menace. Night after night he warned us to be alert because the Bolsheviks would do anything to win, because for them *the ends always justified the means*.

I've thought a lot about this lately, because it does seem that my grandfather was right. We do need to worry about a threat to our democracy from treacherous forces that will say and do anything to win. Only these are not external threats, they are internal; they are not the communists, they are the Republicans *and* Democrats who have led the country over the past 20 years.

Sadly, since the fall of the Soviet Union, the leaders of our country have adopted a "winning is everything" philosophy. In doing so they have become the moral equivalents of the people they warned us about. They have become those who twist the truth, who say and do anything to advance their objectives, who believe that the ends justify the means.

There is a deep moral lesson here. **At the core of nonviolent morality lies the ethic that says that the ends do not justify the means**—the way we do things is as important as the results we seek! So, to find true safety we must pay careful attention to the process we use.

* * *

Another important lesson is to remember that we are not alone—our struggle is a common struggle and **we can take comfort in our community**. The paradox is that when we stand together for what we believe, we are empowered and feel safe.

You will remember that the modern civil rights struggle began on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to accede to the segregated seating on a Montgomery, AL, municipal bus. After 11 months of nonviolent struggle, on November 12, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional Alabama's laws supporting segregation on buses. That night 40 cars filled with Ku Klux Klan members drove slowly through the black section of Montgomery. In the past, such an occurrence would have caused residents to lock their doors, turn out their lights, and fear for their safety. But the black citizens of Montgomery had found a new sense of solidarity from their participation in the bus boycott. On that tense evening of November 12, they found the collective courage to

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leave their lights on and stand and face their oppressors in what proved to be a seminal point in the civil rights struggle. They found new safety in solidarity.

Today, when we are beset from within and without—fearful of both terrorist attacks and the actions of our own government—we too need to strengthen our bonds of community. So let us learn from the history of the nonviolence movement. Safety does not result when we hide in fear inside our houses. We must walk into the light and stand in solidarity with our community!

* * *

The final lesson is another paradox: In this time when so many of us are fearful, we can find safety by **reaching out with love**. As we look at all the lessons learned not only from the terrible attacks of September 11, but also from the history of nonviolence, the most difficult is to stand our ground and reach out with love.

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In January 2003 my wife and I attended the World Social Forum in Puerto Allegre, Brazil. The highlight was a panel on Peace and Values where Brazilian activist-theologian Leonardo Boff observed, “When we care for each other, we are no longer afraid.” He was repeating what is truly the seminal lesson of the nonviolent movement that when we reach out with love we find safety.

The history of nonviolence teaches us that the tide turns when we truly reach out to our adversaries. Gandhi reached out with love to the British and sapped their will to continue to enslave the Indian subcontinent. Martin Luther King and the black citizens of Montgomery reached out with love to the white majority and broke the spirit of oppression. Recently, we saw this in South Africa when the actions of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela broke the spirit of apartheid.

This phrase—“reach out with love”—rolls easily off our tongues. It is part of the mantra of the nonviolence movement, and yet it is often difficult to practice. Most of us find it hard to reach out with love to the Bush Administration!

Reaching out with love takes practice. Often it works best to start with your support community and then gradually expand the circle. As you do this, be sure to include both those in power—your elected officials—as well as those who have lost hope—those who believe that the American dream has passed them by.

The miracle is that when we care for each other, when we reach out with love, we are no longer afraid. We find safety.

* * *

Reflecting upon the tragedy of September 11, these six safety lessons jump out of our collective history:

- Take refuge in the spirit,
- Maintain a spiritual practice,
- Cultivate patience,
- Remember that the ends do not justify the means,
- Stand in solidarity with our community, and
- Reach out with love to those around us.

At each critical stage in the struggle for peace and justice, the movement has had to relearn these six vital lessons. There is something about being part of the nonviolent movement that requires that we take in these values viscerally—ultimately they are not lessons of the mind, they are lessons of the heart. Now we have to relearn them in the context of our common struggle against the violent forces that threaten our democracy.

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In August 2003, I attended the Pacific Yearly Meeting gathering of Friends. One evening, after I talked with a group, a young Friend approached me and asked why it was that Friends were not afraid. It was his perception that unlike most Americans, Quakers were not fearful after September 11. I responded that, of course, Friends at first were afraid after the terrible attacks, but we typically are not consumed by this fear—we live within a supportive community. We place our trust in the Spirit. We believe that if we are faithful, the Light will guide us. This confidence helps us to persevere in the face of dreadful circumstances.

As I've thought more about this, it has occurred to me that Quakers exist within what a psychologist or sociologist might call a robust community. We are resilient because we support each other. We stand together in the Light. We take refuge in the Spirit.

So, my final thought is that we should take comfort in being part of such a robust community; knowing that we are all part of a heroic struggle for peace and justice. From this sanctuary we should face the world and reaffirm our belief that by caring for each other we will ultimately find the safety we all fervently desire.

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