



Fear and Response after Paris . . .

Michael Lerner

*The largely knee-jerk responses to the Paris terrorist attacks are called into question by Michael Lerner in this article from Tikkun below. Questioning what Walter Wink calls the myth of redemptive violence (see also my review of **Spiritual Activism** below) he calls for a grassroots expression of a new and nonviolent culture – from domination to generosity.*

I have seen on social media and heard from friends the depth of fear that is permeating our society since the attacks in Paris. Seeing and hearing the stories of Parisians who were impacted by the attacks is bringing the violence home in a way that is similar to 9-11. The media is bringing the lives and sorrows of Parisians into our homes with interviews, photos and stories of their lives. This pierces the veil of security and safety in ways that the children washing up on the shores of Europe, starving children around the world and bodies in Beirut did not do. When our government is sending drones into communities, dropping bombs in far away lands, and supporting economic policies and sanctions that create daily suffering and death around the globe, it does not pierce our sense of safety because we can easily (and even realistically) tell ourselves this will not happen to us. We will not be the target of a drone strike or a U.S. bomb and we fail to see the connection between U.S. economic policies on the daily suffering around us as clearly as an attack of the magnitude we saw in Paris. It is as if you can imagine, as one friend said, “Coming soon to a café or theatre near you.”

So what do we do? How do we respond? Can we really be safe in a world in which violence seems to be the only response to violence? And if so, how? What would you do if someone entered a theater and started shooting? (I want to acknowledge that the likelihood of being killed by a young white man at a school or in a movie theater, or by a drunk driver or in a random car accident, or, if you are African American by a police officer is far greater than the likelihood of being killed by Daesh [ISIL] and yet at this particular moment, that is what is most terrifying.)

I want to explore what underlies this fear, how the Right (and even the hawks on the Left) capitalise on this fear to push their pro-war, pro-weapons agenda and how we might respond in the face of knowing that ultimately there is no way to protect ourselves from random acts of violence anymore than there is a way to protect ourselves from random accidents.

When tragedies like Paris (I am focusing on Paris, not to minimise the tragedies in Beirut, Syria, Iraq, Kenya, but instead as an acknowledgement that it wasn't until the attacks in Paris, or attacks in the U.S., that the veil of safety was shattered) happen, we feel horrified, terrified and often enraged. One of the reasons it impacts us more powerfully than the other places I mentioned above is because many of us could imagine us sitting in a café or being at a concert in Paris (or we can easily imagine that if it can happen

in Paris, it can happen in our own backyard). And so we, understandably, get very scared and we want to know what we can do to protect ourselves and be safe.

What is being triggered is our own sense of vulnerability and powerlessness. We all have a desire to have some say and power over our lives and our destiny, over how we will live and die. What happened in Paris, in some profound way, got under our skin so to speak and powerfully and violently reminded us of how very fragile and vulnerable we really are. In some ways it reminds me of what a baby feels when she is crying and no one responds right away or picks her up or sings to her. It is terrifying to her because she thinks she will die. The vast majority of times she will not die and the vast majority of times, we will not be shot in a theatre by some random person. Nonetheless the feelings are extremely raw and real. At that moment, we realise that in fact we don't have as much say or power, as we'd like, over the most important aspects of our lives (when and how we will die). And when that happens, we have to confront our fear, our impotence, our vulnerability and ultimately our powerlessness.

How do we do that? Naturally we respond by wanting to lash out, to defend, to create safety for ourselves, to try to figure out how we could be safe if, God forbid, a shooting or a suicide bomber came to a theatre or café near us. Perhaps you try to imagine what you would do in that situation (I know I have). Perhaps you wonder if you would be Adel Termos (the man who jumped the second suicide bomber in Beirut and tackled him to the ground) ensuring your own death but saving hundreds of others. Perhaps you wonder if you could flee to safety. This fear permeates us at a cellular level. It is a natural and primal response to terror.

Are more bombs the answer?

And the Right and hawks on the Left are capitalising on that fear, by rallying for more weapons, more bombs, more destruction, and ultimately more war. Just like the days after 9-11, the President of France is reacting in the only way leaders of the Western World seem to know how to react - dropping more bombs, declaring “war” (as if the bombs dropped against ISIL before Friday night in Syria were something else) and declaring that “we will be ruthless.” I have to ask, do they really believe that more bombs will build a safer world? They've been dropping bombs for years and still the world is not safe. And the double standard, while not surprising, is disturbing nonetheless. When France, the U.S.

and Western countries kill hundreds of innocent people that is not terror, but when Daesh (ISIL) kills innocent people it is terror. And yet, that dichotomy is easily picked-up by the warmongers in the West and manipulated to buttress their calls for perpetual war.

This is the case even though we know that violence and attacks only lead to more weapons, more bombs, and more destruction, bringing the devastation and destruction coming closer and closer to home. The hawks quickly respond with answers (we will crush them eventually, they cannot out fight us) but their answers are empty of a real solution. But what they do very well and effectively is speak to and address the real fear that lives within us. That helps, on some level, to make (some of) us feel better and that is the draw and strength of their short-sighted, short-term responses. But what they ignore are the long-term needs and strategies that can actually address the underlying problems and begin to truly undermine and dismantle terrorist groups around the globe.

When you try to make this argument, they often respond that we have to address the immediate threat and then we can address the long-term, underlying problems. Yet we know that they never actually move beyond the short-term solution because it sucks our resources and energy and because most of them do not believe that we have contributed to the underlying problems that would explain these acts of terror.

And, at the same time, we have to acknowledge that there is still this burning desire to think we can do something, anything to protect ourselves. We need to acknowledge and respond to this need to have a sense of power over our lives, to be able to create the world we want, and to be safe.

A deeper analysis – from domination to generosity

But what if more wars and more weapons are not the answer? What if, in fact, we actually cannot ensure our safety (whether from a car accident or a shooter entering a movie theater or school), at least not until we tackle the underlying problems of our society – the problem of violence being an appropriate response to violence; the problem of using one's power, might and money to get one's way; the problem of believing that we can just drop enough bombs and eventually there will be no one around to hate us and kill us.

What if the wake-up call of these kinds of acts are to help us see that the only real response (once we recognise the existential crisis of being alive, being vulnerable, not knowing if we will live or die today and try to find some acceptance and peace with that while we go about living our lives and perhaps in remembering our vulnerability we choose to live our lives more fully, love more unconditionally, and be more generous and kind) is to build a movement and take back our country and our world. Perhaps this moment is a call to action – not to create a false sense of safety or security or to turn more inward – for ordinary people to rise-up and lead because our leaders are failing us. They continue to promote and use the same strategies of violence, weapons and war to try to bomb the world to peace and impose global capitalism around the globe. And yet we know this strategy and approach has not worked for thousands of years and it will not work now. We need to engage in massive nonviolent civil disobedience and demand that we move from an approach of homeland (and global) security through the current strategies of power over and domination to one of generosity. It is time for a sea change and it is we, the people, who are the only ones who can create it. We need to demand a complete boycott of companies that produce weapons – divestment like the efforts to divest from fossil fuels.

Enough is enough

This is our power. Decades ago enough mothers got outraged enough about their children dying in car accidents by drunk drivers that they created Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Through their incredible mobilisation efforts we have much stricter drink driving laws, much greater awareness of the dangers of drink driving including education campaigns at high schools and colleges around the country such that my teenage sons say they would never drink and drive and never get in a car with someone who is drunk, "that is just stupid". It is time for the mother bears of the world to rise (and for the papa bears to join us) and say "enough is enough." We will not be safe until everyone on the planet is safe. Until all lives are valued. Until everyone has the resources they need to live peacefully, securely, eat healthy food, have drinking water, education, functioning communities, healthcare, etc. We need to stand-up in a loving, compassionate, powerful and nonviolent collective way and demand that our leaders do what is needed to build a safer world for ourselves and everyone else on the planet and to make it clear that more weapons and more violence is not the path. I don't think we can actually figure out how to protect ourselves if some determined person (or people) with weapons that are often manufactured by U.S. companies (43 of the 100 largest weapons producers are U.S. companies, including 8 of the top 10 and the 3 largest) end up being used to wreak terror and havoc in a theatre or café near us but we do have the power to build a massive movement to demand a change in our policies and approaches. And when our pain and fear are strong and powerful enough, we will mobilize because we will realize we have no choice. I hope that time comes sooner rather than later.

If you feel that way now, and want to be part of the solution to actually building a safer world, then how about joining the Network of Spiritual Progressives and help promote our Global Marshall Plan and Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and help us recruit hundreds of thousands of people so we can mobilise people to take to the streets in massive nonviolent civil disobedience demanding that those who support continued wars and those who support weapons industries either withdraw their support or we will vote them out of office. To demand that we move from a homeland security policy of power over, domination and submission to a strategy of generosity and kindness. To demand that our leaders are actually beholden to the people they represent not the wealthiest individuals and corporations. To demand that corporations be socially and environmentally responsible. This is a crucial moment in history. Let's capitalise on it ourselves rather than leave it to the warmongers to do so because we know what will happen if they do. With a massive movement, we can turn to the light and away from the darkness but to do so will require each and everyone of us to get out of our offices, our houses, our schools, our communities and even our comfort zones and take to the streets.

What do you say?

Since 1986, **Rabbi Michael Lerner's** major work has been as the editor of *Tikkun* magazine. Lerner has been a prolific author. His works have shown that Judaism has much to say about the central social, political, and ethical issues of our time. In his books ***Surplus Powerlessness*** (1991) and ***The Politics of Meaning*** (1996) Lerner developed the ideas that emerged from his training both as a rabbi and as a psychotherapist and philosopher—and applied them to the central ethical issues facing our society. In the fall of 2000, Lerner's book ***Spirit Matters: Global Healing and the Wisdom of the Soul*** was published by Hampton Roads. *Spirit Matters* was described as visionary, prophetic, "a miracle," and as the single best introduction to spiritual thinking. See www.tikkun.org