

-- Original Message

From: Payton, Robert

Sent: Wednesday, September 12, 2001 8:43 AM

Subject: Public teachers

First things first: As far as I know, all of you are safe and in good health. Rusty had reported from New York that as far as he could tell, those of you in the area were shaken but all right. When Rusty called last evening I told him I would try to write something to all of you today.

The other day I sent you a note announcing the birth of our grandson Matthew to our son David and his wife Odil. That same day our other grandson, Joe, the son of our late son, arrived from France to spend the year with us. Yesterday Matthew and his mother went home from the hospital; Joe and I spent the day, as you probably did, watching events unfold on television. We will probably spend much of today in the same way; we are in the midst of a crisis but it is too early to know the shape and force of it. It isn't the way I expected the year together to begin.

I've always hoped that the Jane Addams Fellows and my other students would be prepared to act as "public teachers." If you don't have your notes from seminar handy, a public teacher is someone who helps others think about complex and difficult public issues so they can come to their own conclusions, as is appropriate in a democratic society. In such situations it is a good idea to explore the issue; in seminar I recommended a term from the late James Kinneavy, "exploratory discourse." No one in the discussion can claim to "know the answer," and in fact no one can be quite sure of the questions. I also suggested a short list of questions that might help to guide the discussion in those awkward but familiar circumstances.

The first one of those questions, you might remember, is "the first ethical question" -- *What is going on?* The day after Pearl Harbor, we know the answer to that question: We were at war with Japan. We don't as yet even have a name for what happened yesterday -- perhaps "September 11" will be enough -- nor can we be certain which among our several enemies may have done this. The news yesterday declared an "Attack on America," but leaves the question of *whose* attack on America unanswered. It may very well not be one of the member nations of the U.N.

Some commentators described yesterday's events as the beginning of the new kind of war. Donald Horowitz, who wrote the definitive book on ethnic conflict, would include yesterday's events under that rubric. One of the most disturbing aspects of ethnic conflict is that it is unconcerned about political boundaries; another is that ethnic conflict has no place for reason, no place for negotiation, certainly no place for exploratory discourse.

Horowitz's research also persuaded him that ethnic conflict is the most destabilizing force in the modern world. Yesterday was a textbook demonstration that he was right.

The worst possible outcome, it seems to me, is that this crisis be permitted to descend into the kind of madness that afflicts Northern Ireland, where Christian men kill Christian schoolgirls on their way to school and convince themselves they've acted honorably in a good cause.

President Bush has promised retaliation; an army veteran was quoted in the *Star* this morning as declaring himself ready to go to war again. There was a brief television report from the Middle East -- Palestine, I think - showing people cheering and celebrating the attacks in New York and Washington. The time seems ripe for what John Gardner called a "creeping crisis" to escalate rapidly into something out of control, our actions driven by our anger and outrage rather than guided by our reason. The most reassuring thing about yesterday was that the voices I heard were calls for justice rather than revenge. There is a difference.

The second question on my list asked "What is to be done?" and the third asked "by whom?" The fourth asked what resources are needed to deal with the situation, and the fifth asked "Why us?" Helping people think their way through that list of questions is the work of a public teacher.

To quote myself again: The only justification for an elite education is a life of service. The service expected of you now as public teachers is to help other people think their way through this crisis -- especially others who are less well-prepared to think and less well able to express themselves but who have as much invested in the outcome as you do and who want to be heard. This is a situation in which your liberal education in philanthropy has immediate practical value.

Tomorrow belongs not to me and my generation but to you and David and Joe and Matthew. This is tomorrow.

RLP