

II – Another Meaning To September 11th

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Butler Shaffer, shocking attacks upon the World Trade Center

I have devoted the majority of my adult years to addressing the deadly, destructive, and dehumanized nature of the world in which we live. We live in conflict because our thinking is in conflict. We have organized ourselves into rigidly-defined categories based upon race, ethnicity, nationality, ideology, religion, economic interests, geography, and countless other identities, and vigorously defend the boundaries of such categories from those outside. Politics mobilizes such identities, promising each of these groups the coercive backing of the state to advance their interests.

Political systems operate upon a vertical, top-down model of decision-making, as was best represented in the pyramidal structuring of Plato's Republic. Those in authority are presumed to have a superior wisdom and access to information to justify their making decisions for all of society. Most of us have been conditioned to buy into this model, as reflected in the oft-quoted phrase "the more complex society, the greater the need for government."

In recent years, however, there has been a growing awareness of the fallacy of such a premise, and an understanding that only decentralized, spontaneous systems and practices – such as the marketplace – are capable of dealing with the uncertainties of a complex world. We have been witnessing the collapse of the vertical, and the emergence of a more horizontal, model of social organizations. Institutionalized health care is being challenged by alternative, individually-directed health practices. The awareness that police are unable to protect us from crime has generated an interest in martial arts, private weapons, and electronic protection of homes. The failure of government schools has led increasing numbers of parents into private schools and homeschooling. Most of us no longer depend on the vertically structured institutional media ("we will tell you what we want you to know") for information, but communicate with one another through the horizontally driven Internet. Even political systems have become subject to such decentralizing trends: secession movements and the collapse of the Soviet Union being the more evident examples.

The terrifying events of September 11th provided perhaps the most chilling evidence of the failure of the political model. After having trillions of dollars siphoned from our incomes to pay for the most powerful and sophisticated weaponry known to mankind; after years of having our persons and baggage subjected to searches at airports; after decades of being told that we must put up with the secrecy and personal intrusiveness of government "intelligence" agencies to ferret out threats to our collective well-being, we are now face-to-

face with the implicit realities of September 11th. The greatest wartime destruction inflicted upon continental America by foreign enemies was brought about not by nuclear weapons, large invading armies, squadrons of bombers, or fleets of battleships and aircraft carriers, but by a dozen or so men armed with nothing more than small knives and box cutters.

Our medical practices offer a fitting analogy. We have spent billions of dollars on research to create the most sophisticated chemical weaponry to fight and destroy the viruses and bacteria that threaten our bodies, and yet these microbial forces have been resilient enough to mutate into new forms that intensify the need for even more powerful drugs and vaccines. So weakened have our individual immune systems become, in the process, that many fear an onslaught from these unseen but empowered forces. Like the HIV virus that manages to insinuate itself into our bodies and avoid detection by our immune systems, these terrorists attacked America in ways to which the political system was unable to respond.

The trillions of dollars devoted to "national defense" were unable to defend two of the most visible symbols – as well as centers – of the modern nation, the WTC and the Pentagon. A President, criss-crossing the country in Air Force One, and taking refuge in a midwest bunker, was rendered irrelevant to that day's events. Such failures had nothing to do with the resolve or courage of any of these people to do something, but reflected the increasing insignificance of political systems to deal with a complex world. It is this fact, I believe, that will be the most disturbing to the psyches of most people: as with social problems generally, there is nothing that someone in authority can do to change any of this! In the long-term, the single greatest casualty in this horrible event may prove to be the political order itself.

Efforts will continue to be made to reinforce our conditioned thinking. Institutional leaders, establishment "experts," and the media priesthood, will remind us that our world should remain organized just the way it is at present – with more authority given to the state, of course; and that our problems can best be resolved by the very thinking that created them! You will look in vain for any dissenters or heretics who might deviate from the official line. But the impotence of political systems to do anything more than inflict death and destruction upon the world is being revealed, to those unafraid to look, in the aftermath of this atrocity.

Which is not to say that there is nothing anyone can do. The only people who were able to make a difference in thwarting these well-orchestrated attacks were not SWAT team members, or fighter pilots, or air marshals, but a handful of courageous passengers who, devoid of any formal training or authority, and armed with what one passenger told his wife was only his "butter knife," were apparently able to subdue the terrorists and bring down the plane, perhaps saving hundreds of lives. These passengers represent the real "new world order": men and women taking control over and responsibility for their own lives and, in the process, bringing decision-making back to the individual. We are once again reminded that whatever orderliness prevails in our world is determined by how ordinary people

respond to the immediate events in their lives.

As I thought about these events, my mind kept going back to H.G. Wells' novel, *The War of the Worlds*, wherein the earth was attacked by Martian invaders, and the political order responded with guns, tanks, bombs, and atomic weapons, all of which the invaders were able to resist. Just as humanity was prepared to give in to its apparent fate, however, the Martian spacecrafts began crashing to the ground, the victims not of massive weaponry, but of bacteria to which their bodies were not immune.

There is a valuable lesson in all of this, if only we can move beyond the anger and fear that most of us feel. That lesson has to do with our rethinking who we are, how we are to live our lives, and how we are to deal with one another in a complex world. If you think that these are only abstract philosophical matters that have no bearing upon "reality," take another look at your television screen and see if you can locate the World Trade Center! The massive destruction that is going on in our world – and which did not begin on September 11th – has been brought about by our thinking; our world will change only when our thinking changes: to think otherwise is to put our trust in magic. As Richard Weaver once said, "ideas have consequences."

Perhaps at no time in recent history has so much clarity of thought been demanded from each of us. The world has an abundance of anger; what it needs right now is our intelligence. There are only two people in the world who can change any of this: you and me, and we can make our world more peaceful, creative, and cooperative only by affecting a change in our individual consciousness. We must give up our dependence upon external authorities and learn, as Carl Jung has suggested, that "the salvation of the world consists in the salvation of the individual soul."

[The Best of Butler Shaffer](#)

