

# Justice after September 11<sup>th</sup>

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Last spring, a valued former student bludgeoned me into agreeing to be a keynote speaker for a colloquium to be held in conjunction with the 125th anniversary of Texas A&M University. The colloquium was to be entitled “Higher Education In and For a Just Society.” Not having a clue what I would talk about, I foolishly submitted my title: “What Would It Mean to Be a ‘Just’ University?” I had planned to write the speech over the summer, but of course I did not. I was fortunate, however, to have a brilliant research assistant, Simon Stacey, who read selected texts on justice and universities for me. So, just after Labor Day, I ruminated about the texts and prepared to write.<sup>1</sup>

I took the photocopied texts with me on a train to Washington, D.C., that left my hometown Princeton, New Jersey, at 6:45 A.M. on September 11. I intended to read on the way down, and begin writing on my laptop on the way back from a daylong meeting. Like the rest of us, however, I was mugged by reality. I got to a friend’s office at 9:10 A.M. and spent about an hour watching the world fall apart on television before it dawned on me that I should try to get home before Washington shut down. I was, of course, too late.

When I arrived at Union Station around 10:30 A.M. (having taken the subway against my friend’s advice), I found the station in the process of being shut down. I was forced into the plaza outside, where I seemed to be the only person without a cell phone-and for the first time, I felt hopelessly isolated without this technology. I walked back to my friend’s office, had lunch, and checked into a hotel so that I could continue to watch American life imploding. But, luckily, I discovered that the trains would start up again at 4 P.M., and took the subway (nearly empty) to Union Station and caught the first Amtrak heading north.

Imagine yourself trying to write about justice and universities on that train. Of course, I could not write a word. I spent the whole trip asking myself if there was anything in my religious or philosophical repertoire that could sustain the concept of Justice. As of 6:30 P.M. on September 11, when the train stopped to let me off at Princeton Junction (and me alone, since the train crew was responding to individual requests for service!), I could not. And cannot.

And I suppose that is, for me, the most profound damage of September 11. My moral universe has been rendered dysfunctional. I envy those who seem to have come through the experience with renewed confidence in justice, humankind, God, and the United States. My friend David Halberstam has just written a beautiful prose poem in praise of the United States as a nation in the November issue of *Vanity Fair*. I admire the writing, but I do not share his affirmation. My mood is closer to the dark thoughts of my colleague Toni Morrison, whose memorial statement delivered at the Princeton outdoor service for the victims of September 11 is printed in the same issue of *Vanity Fair*.

But I have to say that being a university teacher at such a time is for me a tremendous consolation. I have many people to talk to about this crisis, and I find it especially helpful to engage students. I moderated a public discussion of September 11 at the university on September 15. Much of it was what I expected-grief, confusion, outrage, pity, and anger though none the less difficult for that. But

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there was a minority (I use my words carefully) undercurrent of a special sort of anger I had not anticipated, anger against the United States as an imperial power that deliberately raped the developing world and deserved what had come to it. The thought was not so surprising as the tone (totally dispassionate and unengaged) and the language (somewhere between H. Rap Brown and Franz Fanon). The angriest voices sounded very middle class, as though the speakers had awakened (to their astonishment) during the Vietnam War.

But that sentiment has not reappeared at Princeton. The two most prominent streams of reaction to September 11 here appear to be antiwar and antiterrorism, the latter a bit hard to distinguish from prowar and pro-Israel. But, so far as I can tell from reading the *Daily Princetonian* and talking to students, only a small number are truly engaged in dispute. Indeed, it is hard to know if most students are thinking or feeling much about September 11 at all. I confess that I am disappointed that there is not more contention and more discourse. Princeton is not a very political place. But of course I cannot know what students do not articulate, and I suppose there is, the silence notwithstanding, some deep and widespread damage.

I am of course a professional, and I finally did pull myself sufficiently together the weekend before the Texas A&M colloquium to put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard). I am not a philosopher, and I doubt what I had to say is very profound. I distinguished between procedural justice in the university (being fair to individuals who work in, for, and with the university) and substantive justice (behaving justly in and to the larger society). I acknowledged the longstanding dispute between those who, like myself, have wanted the universities to speak and act justly on the “big” issues (like war), and those who have made cogent and reasons arguments to the contrary. I have a position on the matter, and I certainly cannot resolve it. But I did conclude by saying that if we are to be just in our substantive educational purposes, our first responsibility is to be just in our teaching of students, especially undergraduates, and to inculcate in them the capacity to determine what, by their own lights, justice is.

And I guess that is as far as I have gotten as I write these words on October 21. I have not recovered my personal intellectual or moral balance, and just now I do not see how I will. But I am by calling and profession a teacher, and I cannot think of a more urgent or welcome challenge than to try to work this nightmare through with my students. I suppose that is all I need for the moment.

## Note

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