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Osama bin Laden's death, an occasion for reckoning with our own terrorism

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NCR Today

Osama bin Laden is dead, shot by U.S. Navy SEALs during a helicopter raid on his million dollar mansion located outside the Pakistani city of Islamabad.

News of his death brought back memories of September 11, 2001, a brilliant day of cloudless skies and invigorating temperature.

Our Catholic Worker community had just buried Dan Lawrence, a former Trappist monk and beloved member of our household. For several days, we had been swept up in the rituals and emotions that accompany the passing of a loved one. On the morning of September 11th, I awoke, thinking, "Finally, we can get back to our normal routine."

But the day was far from normal. I can still vividly recall Brenna Cussen, then a member of our community, standing in the kitchen doorway, looking solemn and perplexed. She had just been listening to the radio and wanted to know if we had heard "anything about planes crashing into the World Trade Center."

Huddled around the small TV in the upstairs bedroom, we watched the surreal images, replayed a hundred times that week, of planes exploding into shiny, glass buildings and listened as news broadcasters reported attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, PA.

That evening, our 17-year-old son, struggling to comprehend the import of the day, read aloud William Yeats' "Second Coming."

". . . Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

Shock, fear and grief were among the country's initial reactions to the attacks. Vengeance was not the first word on everyone's lips. Condolences poured in from all over the world. In Manhattan, votive candles, flowers, personal mementos and love notes piled up along the sidewalks and the city was soon knee-deep in spontaneous, public memorials for the dead.

My friend Tsana Yu, who lives in New York's Lower East Side, later told how she and her neighbors cheered along the emergency vehicles as they sped down First Avenue toward the site of the crashing towers. Leaning out of their apartment windows, the residents sang and shouted "Go! Go! Go!"

"We did not then know that we were hastening some of the rescuers to their death," Tsana said.

The bravery and mourning of those first few weeks were quickly swallowed up in a war agenda. By mid-October, the US was dropping 15,000 pound Daisy Cutters on Afghanistan, an impoverished country already weary from two decades of war. I helped organize local anti-war demonstrations and later traveled to Afghanistan with a delegation that included relatives of those killed on 9/11. On a hot afternoon in June, our group met with family members of victims of U.S. bombing. At one point, the stories of loss so overwhelmed our American-born translator, she covered her face, sobbed and said, "I can't translate anymore."

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Looking back, those pre- 9/11 days seem so "innocent" for we then bombed only one country at a time. Today, our weapons wreak havoc on multiple fronts simultaneously. While still in Afghanistan, we invaded Iraq on a lie and utterly destroyed that country. Now we are in Libya, Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, as well as Afghanistan where, General David Petraeus tells us we will fight "for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives."

In the fight to eradicate terrorism, we have killed thousands of people, maimed and traumatized thousands more, expanded our use of torture and indefinite detention, and popularized the use of suicide bombings.

Our enemies keep tally. Our allies take inspiration. "What we did in Gaza was no worse than what the Americans did in Fallujah in 2004," said a defensive Israeli military official when grilled about the dropping of white phosphorous munitions on a UN compound and hospital during the 2008 Israeli assault on the Palestinian Territory.

So now Osama bin Laden is dead. According to U.S. military officials, his shroud-clad corpse lies at the bottom of the Arabian Sea. George W. Bush calls his shooting a "victory" for peace-loving people all over the world. America has sent "an unmistakable message: no matter how long it takes justice will be done," Bush said.

God help us if such a vengeful justice were applied to the United States.

Yet a reckoning is in order for all the terror we have caused in our war of this past decade. Instead of street celebrations, bin Laden's death ought to occasion a somber accounting and repentance for the harm

we have caused. Were that to happen then a small 'victory' would have been achieved.

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