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Critical Thinking After 9-11

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> "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." [*Constitution of Unesco*, 1946]

We can say with some confidence that the monstrous insanity of the events of September 11 will leave a permanent and indelible mark on the collective consciousness. For the rest of our lives we will remember where we were when we first heard the news of the attack on the World Trade Center, and we will carry with us the iconic and almost surreal images of apocalypse endlessly replayed by news channels around the world. Nothing will ever be quite the same again. Altogether new and terrifying possibilities now haunt the world.

Perhaps not surprisingly, some people have struggled to make sense of these terrible events by regressing to the reassuring comfort of simple explanations that reduce the world to familiar black and white categories: us and them, good and evil, tolerance and fanaticism, the West and Islam. This may be understandable, but it is, to say the least, unfortunate; and it is of particular concern to those of us involved in international education. In a quite different political climate, the poet W. H. Auden once observed:

> "And terror like a frost
> Shall halt the flood of thinking."

As educators, one of our main tasks in the present situation is to ensure that there continues to be a flow of intelligent thinking and discussion among our students. Students sometimes complain that critical thinking is "irrelevant" and that it has nothing to do with the "real world". It should, however, be remembered that the way we think ultimately determines the way we behave, and that this has real world consequences. As the philosopher Simon Blackburn starkly observes: "In the end it is ideas for which people kill one another." The terrorists who flew the loaded passenger jets into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon did what they did because of their tragically misguided convictions. Thinking *does* affect the real world. And critical thinking matters because if we never bother to examine our own unjustified beliefs and prejudices, we may end up with as distorted a picture of the world as the "fanatics" we are so happy to condemn.

We all operate with various "mental maps" of reality, and one of the most important things that critical thinking can teach us is that there is a difference between our maps and the underlying reality they describe. If we fail to grasp this deceptively simple point, we can all to easily end up identifying our own culture's way of looking at reality with the only possible way of looking at reality. History suggests that the results of such a

misidentification can be disastrous. As the German philosopher, Karl Jaspers observed:

> Man has an urge to consider his own life form the only true one, to feel every existence that does not resemble his own to be a reproach, and to hate it. From this arises the disposition to enforce one's own way of life upon everyone else, as far as possible to model the whole world upon it.

Since none of us can aspire to an omniscient, God's-eye view of the world, I think it is best to say that reality is not so much something that is given as something that is constructed. However, I would also say that the business of constructing reality out of our own limited, fallible and sometimes jaundiced experience is an essentially *moral* task. From the fact that no one can be said to "know" what the world is like in any ultimate sense, it does not follow that any map is as good as any other. For example, a map that is based on nothing more than a kaleidoscope of fleeting images, sound bites, and gut reactions can hardly be described as a *good* map. Probably the single most effective way of moving towards a richer, more insightful, and generally more inclusive understanding of the world is to look at it from a variety of different perspectives. No easy task, admittedly; but this, presumably, was one of the motivating ideas behind the development of international education.

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If we are to think critically about the world, then we must be willing, at least on occasion, to subject our beliefs to rational scrutiny, and assess the evidence on which they are based. In the swirl of rumours, claims and counter-claims that have followed the September 11 attack, the question "How do you know?" has taken on a new and more urgent relevance. Consider two popular stories that circulated widely on the Internet. According to the first, the attack on the World Trade Center was foreseen by the Renaissance seer, Nostradamus:

> In the city of York, there will be a great collapse. Two twin brothers torn apart by chaos. The third big war will begin when the big city is burning. [Nostradamus, 1654]

These well-crafted and suitably gnomic utterances may sound convincing; but it turns out that Nostradamus died in 1566 and that no such verse appears in his writings. The prophecy is a hoax. According to the second story, if you type the flight number of one of the doomed planes, Q33NY, using Microsoft's Wingdings graphics font, you get the following unnerving sequence of images:

The only problem with this is that it, too, is a hoax. The flight numbers of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center were AA011 and UAL175, and there is no connection between Q33NY and any of the highjacked flights.

The wide currency achieved by these stories suggests that at the beginning of the third millenium the appetite for paranormal explanations is as strong as ever, and that the authority of the printed word loses none of its mystique when transferred to the virtual realm. We may live in a cynical age, but we remain naturally trusting creatures, and when we read something on the Internet our default assumption is that it is true. In a world of instant communications, this means that baseless rumours can spread with alarming speed and generate a destabilizing climate of fear and uncertainty. Some kind of defence against this is clearly required, and intellectual vigilance is probably the only antidote to such gullibility and rumour-mongering.

Following the rubric of the Theory of Knowledge programme, we might analyse our mental maps in terms of four “knowledge filters”: perception, language, reason, and emotion. In this context, I use the phrase “knowledge filters” to draw attention to the fact that all of these elements are double-edged: not only is each one a potential source of knowledge, but it can also have a distorting effect on the way we see the world.

Consider perception: despite our everyday assumption that the eye is like a camera which faithfully copies what it sees, there is a wealth of psychological evidence to support the view that perception is more accurately thought of as a selective reconstruction of reality. This has serious implications in areas such as the law where there have been cases of wrongful criminal convictions based on mistaken identity. As a result, some jurisdictions are no longer willing to accept as valid the uncorroborated evidence of a single eye witness. In high profile and emotive trials of suspected terrorists, the inherent fallibility of perception is something that we would do well to keep in mind.

The selective nature of perception is particularly apparent when we consider television which, in the modern age, can be thought of as an extension of the senses. We acquire much of our information about the world through TV news; but despite the claim to objectivity implicit in the statement, “Here is the news”, the news is at best a nationally-biased interpretation of the most significant events that have taken place in the world. Rather than speaking of “*the* news”, it would be altogether more accurate to speak of “our *interpretation* of the news.” This is particularly so when we bear in mind that all kinds of political factors influence what goes into a news broadcast or gets picked up by the media. To take a recent example from the United Kingdom: within a few hours of the attack on the World Trade Center, a government advisor called Jo Moore circulated an e-mail to high-ranking officials saying that it could be a “very good day” for “burying” bad news. Despite this Il-judged and shocking display of cynicism, Ms. Moore did not lose her job; and the incident gives us a disturbing insight into the way politicians seek to manage the news. This tendency is particularly apparent in times of war, when governments often demand complete news blackouts. National security considerations aside, the reason for this is that in an age of mass communications television effectively determines what constitutes reality. If something appears on television, then we accept it as real; and if it does not, then as far as we are concerned it does not exist. So if we do not see any pictures of bombed villages, injured civilians, or other “collateral damage”, we are unlikely to protest about our government’s execution of the war. I

leave it to the reader to decide the extent to which such censorship is justified.

Language is another powerful knowledge filter, which does not so much passively describe as actively structure our experience of the world. Every day, a growing army of political activists, media consultants and "spin doctors" seek to mould our perceptions through an stream of persuasive definitions, painted words and urgent narratives. To illustrate the power of language, consider the question of whether you should describe political groups that resort to violence as terrorists or freedom fighters. Notoriously, the problem is that one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist. Recall that in the early 1980's Osama Bin Laden himself was a CIA sponsored freedom fighter fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The vast majority of people would probably agree that if the attack on the World Trade Center is not an act of terrorism, then nothing is. But how should we classify other less clear-cut cases, involving the "legitimate attempts by people to resist foreign occupation", or so-called "state terrorism"? Given this linguistic minefield, the international news agency Reuters refuses to use either "terrorist" or "freedom fighter" in its news reports - a policy to which it has steadfastly held, despite substantial criticism, during the present crisis.

Since September 11, there have been many other examples of the importance of using language with care. Perhaps the best known is George Bush's "slip of the tongue" in calling for a global *crusade* against terrorism. Given the history of the Middle East, this use of language was unlikely to endear him to the Muslim allies he was seeking. Another example is the misconceived original code name for the US military response to September 11 - "Operation Infinite Justice". Not only does this smack of hubris, but Muslim groups objected to it on the grounds that only Allah can dispense *infinite* justice. The code name was subsequently changed to "Operation Enduring Freedom."

Turning now to reason and emotion, I would like to explain the distorting potential of these two knowledge filters with reference to the concept of a stereotype. If we are to make any sense of the world and negotiate our way around it successfully, we must of necessity make various generalizations. What distinguishes stereotypes from innocent generalizations are, first, that they are based on pre-existing emotional prejudices rather than observable facts, and, second, that they are resistant to change in the light of contrary evidence. When we think in terms of stereotypes we do not reason about things on the basis of thoughtful observation, but simply rationalize our pre-existing prejudices. And since we tend to notice only what accords with such prejudices, and are blind to everything else, our stereotypical expectations can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies. This is why it is so difficult to change the mind of anyone who has woven a collection of false beliefs into the fabric of their life. Two recent examples spring to mind: first, the insistence by some fanatics that the World Trade Center was in fact blown up by Israeli undercover agents seeking to discredit Islam; and second the American television evangelist Jerry Falwell's claim that the attack on America was God's punishment on feminists and gay rights activists. When the world is viewed through the lens of prejudice, it can all to easily lead to such systematic and alarming patterns of intellectual distortion.

According to some analysts, the tendency to stereotype is exacerbated by the mass media, which is under constant pressure to meet deadlines and provide easy to follow stories in short sound-bite-sized chunks. The influential Palestinian intellectual, Edward Said, claims that the Western media's coverage of Islam has done much to encourage the formation of negative stereotypes:

> Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West.

For many people in the West, Islam equals fundamentalism equals terrorism; and the face of Islam has become a bearded, gun-touting Arab. But as Said reminds us, the Islamic world "numbers a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages, and, of course, an infinite number of different experiences." So it is simply crass to reduce such a rich and complex tapestry of experiences to a few journalistic cliches about the nature of Islam. At the same time, I suspect that similar, albeit opposite, stereotypes exist in many Islamic countries concerning the West. Consider, for example, the description of the United States as the "Great Satan", the tendency to identify Westerners as "crusaders", and the frequent diatribes against Western "decadence" and "degeneracy". Since there is no monopoly on clarity of perception, it is likely that there as many prejudices and misconceptions on either side of whatever cultural divides exist in the world.

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When confronted with complex and unsettling global events, there is always the danger that we simply retreat into the comforting myths and prejudices of our own cultural background. In the foregoing discussion, I have suggested that since thought is a crucial determinant of action, any such intellectual retreat is likely to encourage intolerance and fanaticism. Unless we are aware of the various ways in which our beliefs systems can be distorted, and are occasionally willing to examine them, we are unlikely to rise above our own cultural prejudices and move towards a more inclusive understanding of humanity. My hope and belief is that international education in general and critical thinking in particular can make a modest but significant contribution to making the world a safer and more tolerant place.

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