

Rev. David Herndon
Minister, First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh

Living in Canada for four years taught me that people in other countries sometimes view the United States more critically than we view ourselves. The metaphor I encountered in Canada was that of sharing a bed with an elephant, never knowing when you might be crushed if the elephant rolled over. Our awe-struck attitudes about ourselves here in America occasionally need a dose of skepticism.

We need this skepticism most when our retaliation against the terrorists becomes cast as a struggle between civilization and barbarism, or good and evil.

Rejecting the Kyoto treaty, alienating Europeans by insisting on missile defense, and, given our history of slavery, walking out of the United Nations conference on racism do not improve our international image. A healthy skepticism may help us understand the negative feelings directed at us in other countries.

A Pittsburgh museum is currently exhibiting photographs documenting the practice of lynching in the United States. The white people in these photographs often had broad smiles of self-assured self-congratulation. During World War II, we interned Japanese-Americans in camps. A healthy skepticism may help us discern when xenophobia is infecting our patriotism.

"If only it were all so simple!" wrote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Part of our spiritual preparation for our national response to terrorism must be avoiding belief in any myth of national innocence.

One visionary European leader said: "I hope the view will prevail that this kind of terrorism can only be solved by solving the political problems from which it lives and benefits." Rather than vengefully putting people in their place, perhaps our most important task is to help find a place at the table for those we have ignored or shoved away. Although some say that the attack on America discredited liberation movements everywhere, the need to relieve oppression or remove injustice remains so long as the oppression or the injustice remains.

America could earn worldwide affectionate respect, claim a place as a benevolent and wise elder among nations, and achieve greater security for Americans and others by helping find solutions to the political and social and economic problems that make for unjust and oppressive conditions for so many people.

Even in the midst of our shock and grief, American citizens need to engage in some soul-searching, avoiding the temptation to cast ourselves as the nation that can do no wrong. America needs to work with other nations in ways that ensure that justice and compassion are pursued impartially, remembering that all people have inherent worth and dignity, and are equally beloved in God's eyes.

What can individuals do? First, contribute toward the health of institutions in America that celebrate diversity, promote respect among different people, and seek an end to injustice and oppression. Second, speak of our deepest hopes for the unity of the human family. Speak of our concern for children around the world. Speak of our faithful understanding that all souls are equally and unconditionally and infinitely precious.