

A Traumatized Nation

By *Zhiwa Woodbury*

On a daily basis now, America and its allies drop bombs on civilian populations in Syria, traumatizing Muslim populations by maiming and killing women and children. American news media reports the numbers of bombs dropped - so far over 20,000. They do not show the terrorized populations. On Facebook, however, you can find foreign news reels posted by the Syrian Network for Human Rights. It is heartbreaking. A Muslim family man shouts in disbelief at the camera, aiming his outrage at Americans: "We are PEACEFUL!" The scenes are reminiscent of the terror campaign waged by Israel on the West Bank, with full American complicity and support, just last year.

America knows trauma. We are currently trapped in a cycle of traumatic mass killings, which occur with frightening regularity in public places we'd grown up thinking were safe - elementary schools, movie theaters, college campuses, workplaces, Christmas parties... We even have an idea now what it is like to have terror rain down from the sky, randomly killing men, women, and children. It happened in New York, and we've encoded it in our everyday language: 9-11.

But here is a most vexing question, the answer to which may determine whether we ever know peace again: Do Americans have empathy for the trauma of other human beings? When we hear about drone strikes on wedding parties that turn someone's dream into a nightmare, can we imagine what that would be like? When we hear about war planes attacking hospitals run by *Doctors Without Borders*, can we imagine our own reaction if our local hospital suddenly turned into a war zone?

I think the answer is: it depends. When the evening news brought a Vietnamese girl running into our living room, running and screaming with naked pain from the invisible fire of a Napalm attack, it was the kind of image that turned hearts and minds here at home against a war being waged in our name. When we saw the lifeless image of a Syrian toddler washed up on shore in Europe, we suddenly had an empathetic understanding of the refugee crisis in Europe. And so our news media shields us from images of the terror in the West Bank during the heartless Israeli campaign of revenge that was cynically labeled "self defense," and they shield us now from images of Syrian children lying bleeding in the streets today as a result of our President's misguided campaign to make us feel safe again.

And when a zealous young Muslim couple with a child of their own bring this so-called "War on Terror" home to us, on full display in our living rooms, we somehow don't make the connection that years of 'shock and awe' campaigns that have resulted in hundreds of thousands of dead women and children and elderly parents in places with names like Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and Syria - names that refer to nations that really no longer exist on the ground - could somehow result in attacks on civilian populations here at home. But war is terror, and desperation leads to madness.

If we ever want to live in a peaceful world again, Americans must begin to address the roots of our own violence. We are a nation built on trauma - genocide, slavery, civil war, nuclear bombs, Viet Nam... And we are trapped in the dissociative cycles of behavior that trauma induces. We keep dropping bombs on civilians, somehow expecting a different result. If we want to be a peaceful

nation, rather than one that continually picks fights it cannot win, we need to replace 'Shock & Awe' with 'Truth & Reconciliation.'

Zhiva Woodbury is an eco-psychologist and dharma practitioner who lives in Boise and advocates for community solutions to the climate crisis. He will be moderating an interfaith panel on "Healing Cultural Trauma" at the Cathedral of the Rockies on Tuesday, December 22 from 1-3 p.m. that the public is invited to attend.