

Back to normal? The prophets address the evening news: The prophets address the evening news

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Anyone who has done much hospital calling knows about the awakening that often accompanies serious illness or injury. All of a sudden, someone who ran a small business (or a large household) cannot walk to the bathroom unassisted. Sitting upright in a chair for two hours becomes a full day's work, and tomorrow's goal includes eating solid food. The simplest mechanics of staying alive require heroic effort. Without all kinds of help, no one could survive.

If you happen to have been the patient yourself, then you also know what a revolution of values can occur during such a time. Work is removed from the driver's seat and put in the trunk, while a succession of loved ones—many of whom you have been meaning to see for months—show up with food, flowers, lame jokes and magazines. You wonder why it took this crisis for you to remember how much you care about them. How long has your heart been running on fumes?

Before you can even hold a pen, you begin your list of resolutions. If you get out of this alive, then things are going to be different. Shopping is not important. Relationships are. Remodeling the kitchen can wait. God can't. Having a good job matters. Having a life matters more. Your clarity is stunning. Then you begin to improve, and as you do your old life returns like the tide. You do not forget your resolutions, but they are not as urgent anymore. Plus, revisiting them just reminds you how scared you once were. It is a relief to get back to business as usual—a triumph, really—and you decide that the best way to express your gratitude is to live as normally as you can.

Having been through this cycle a couple of times myself, I am now watching it at work in the national psyche. On September 11, thousands of Americans died violent deaths, while millions of others were scared to death. In the weeks since then, we

have seen some awful things. We have also seen some remarkable ones—true heroes at Ground Zero, interfaith alliances across the land, lawyers’ associations declining lawsuits, Hollywood producers yanking blockbuster films—in short, an entire country engaged in a revolution of values.

It is apparently something we could not do on our own, but the stunning tragedies of the past several weeks have brought with them equally stunning clarity about what matters and what does not. Our lists may not match but at least we are working on them, many of us with a level of humility that is entirely new to us. Every time I hear a presidential challenge to return to normal, my heart skips a beat. I do not want to go back to the way things were.

I want the kids at the college to keep stripping the newspaper rack clean. Six weeks ago most of them did not even know what the Taliban were. Now they not only know how many different kinds of Muslims there are in the world; they also know more than they ever did about U.S. policy in the Middle East. I don’t want them to go back to normal conversations about the comparative virtues of their car stereo systems or the best party prospects for Saturday night.

I want people in my community to keep up the conversations we started while we were waiting in line to give blood. Six weeks ago many of us had never talked with someone from Mexico, Laos or Vietnam, even though we live in the same county and our children attend the same schools. Now we know that goodwill cuts across cultural lines and that “GodBless America” includes newer immigrants as well as older ones. I don’t want to go back to normal traffic patterns that allow us to steer clear of one another so that we have no reason to speak.

I want members of my church to keep struggling with the polyvalent symbols of cross and flag. Six weeks ago many of us did not even notice whether or where the U.S. flag stood in our houses of worship. Now there is some heated but fertile disagreement among us about what the flag means and where it belongs, especially in relationship to the cross. I don’t want to go back to the normal assumption that the Christian cross and the American flag stand for the same things.

I want to keep opening myBible and getting smacked between the eyes by what I read there. Six weeks ago, “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you” sounded like advice about how to live with my ornery next-door neighbor. Like many Americans, my circumstances were such that I could afford to read scripture as

domestic good news. Now when I read the Gospels or the prophets it is as if they are addressing the evening news from truly radical pulpits. I don't want to go back to my normal way of taming the gospel.

I want to keep exploring this strange new wilderness, as uncomfortable as it is. Six weeks ago I took most of my national and religious landmarks for granted. Now some are gone, others are damaged and a few are being exposed for the idols they always were. With the loss of so many illusions at once I cannot remember when I have felt so vulnerable or chastened, but neither can I remember when I have felt so alive. I don't want to go back to my normal maps, which so often allowed me to navigate with my eyes closed.

The injury is not a personal one this time. Our whole country has been in the hospital, wide-awake to the question of where we go from here. As we contemplate our discharge, many of us are considering the best ways to express our gratitude. Among the many options open to us, I hope that returning to normal is the last thing on our lists.