

ESSAYS

1. I HAD THE ANSWER

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I HAD THE ANSWER

..IN A GIANT HEAP OF RUBBLE, AND A CLOUD OF DUST THAT REFUSED TO SETTLE OR DISSIPATE. AS I STARED AT THE SCREEN, I BECAME DIMLY AWARE OF THE DEATHLY SILENCE IN THE ROOM. EVERYONE WAS IN SHOCK. THEN, ABRUPTLY, MY MOTHER'S SIMPLE QUESTION CUT THROUGH THE AIR, "WHY WOULD SOMEONE DO THIS ?"

I HAD NO ANSWER.

I COULD HARDLY SLEEP THAT NIGHT. COUNTLESS REPLAYS OF THE PASSENGER JETS, SUCH A COMMON SIGHT IN THE SKIES ABOVE MY OWN HOME, CRASHING INTO THE TOWERS, AND SENDING THEM CRASHING TO THE GROUND, HAUNTED ME. BUT WHAT REALLY GRIPPED ME WERE THE CRIES OF THE PEOPLE IN THE BUILDING AS THEY TRIED TO ESCAPE FROM THE FALLING DEBRIS, AND THE TEARFUL FACES OF THOSE WHO FRANTICALLY SEARCHED FOR THEIR LOVED ONES IN WHAT LOOKED LIKE A WAR ZONE. THE NEXT DAY, TOO, THE TELEVISION BROUGHT US MORE PICTURES OF DESPAIR. I FELT GLOOMY AND SICK. THE COURAGE AND SPIRIT OF THE RESCUE WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS SHONE THROUGH

[... PARA ABOUT CELEBRATIONS IN PALESTINE, PAKISTAN ETC, THEN WATCH AS THE GRIEF CHANGES TO RAGE]

SLOWLY, I FELT THE FEELINGS WITHIN ME CHANGE. LIKE A DISTANT BUT RAPIDLY APPROACHING AVALANCHE, ANGER CAME TO ME. IT WAS AS IF THE MELANCHOLY STRAINS OF WOE WERE STEADILY DROWNED OUT BY THE ROAR OF RAGE. THE IMAGES I HAD SEEN FLASHING IN MY HEAD AND WERE ENLIVENED FURTHER AS THEY GLARED BACK FROM THE TELEVISION SCREENS AND NEWSPAPERS EVERYWHERE. WHERE JUST A COUPLE OF MINUTES PREVIOUSLY I WAS WONDERING WHAT IT WAS THAT IMPELLED PEOPLE TO INDULGE IN SUCH MADNESS, NOW MY FURY WAS TAKING NO PRISONERS AND ASKING NO QUESTIONS. I WANTED TO SEE THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GHASTLY CRIME DIE, AND DIE A SLOW PAINFUL AND GORY DEATH. I BURNED TO SEE THE EVIL SMILES WIPED OFF THOSE BEARDED FACES, AND HEAR THE VICARIOUS LAUGHTER TURN TO SHRIEKS OF TERROR. NOTHING SHORT OF PUBLIC CAPITAL PUNISH-

MENT, THE KIND METED OUT IN THE ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTAL STATES WOULD QUENCH MY BLOOD LUST. AND IN MY DARK FLIGHT OF FANCY, I GLOATED IN THE PERVERSE PLEASURE OF SEEING THE PERPETRATORS' FACES, AS THEY FACED THE MOMENT OF TRUTH, STRUCK WITH REGRET, DISBELIEF AND HORROR, THE SAME HORROR THAT THEY HAD BROUGHT TO MANY AN INNOCENT FACE. AND SUDDENLY, IN A FLASH OF REASON, I SAW THE PICTURE MY ENRAGED IMAGINATION HAD PAINTED, AND FROZE. I HAD THE ANSWER.

IT ALL MADE SENSE. AS I SAW MY OWN INSANELY CHILLING CRAVING FOR VIOLENT RETRIBUTION, IT WAS LIKE STARING AT SOMEONE ELSE IN THE MIRROR. ALL IT HAD TAKEN TO INCITE THESE UNRECOGNIZABLE FEELINGS OF HATRED WITHIN ME, WERE A FEW PICTURES IN A 21 INCH BLACK BOX. WOULD THE REALIZATION OF THIS PASSION FOR VENGEANCE DO ME, OR FOR THAT MATTER, ANYONE ELSE, ANY GOOD ? WOULD IT RID THE WORLD OF THE MENACE OF TERRORISM ? ON THE CONTRARY, THE SPILLING OF MORE BLOOD WOULD ONLY SERVE AS FUEL FOR THE INFERNO, THAT STARTS AS A CONCEPT IN THE DERANGED MIND AND WILL NOT END EVEN AFTER BILLIONS OF INNOCENT PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SLAIN AND ALL THE TOWERS OF HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT LIE IN SMOLDERING HEAPS.

I AM NOT ALONE IN MY THOUGHTS AND WHIMS. MANY A WITNESS TO THE MASSACRE OF BLACK TUESDAY WILL FEEL THE SAME RAVAGING WRATH. THERE HAVE ALREADY BEEN INCIDENTS OF COMMUNIST VIOLENCE IN UNITED STATES AND ELSEWHERE. THIS IS THE WAY AND THE OBJECTIVE OF THE TERRORISTS. THEIR ACTS ARE LIKE A DEADLY AND CONTAGIOUS DISEASE. NO TERRORIST WAS EVER BORN WITH THIS AFFLICTION. IT IS A CONTINUOUS EXPOSURE TO THE FANATICAL IDEAS OF THE EVIL REGIME THAT IMBIBES THE CURSE OF HATRED WITHIN A HUMAN SOUL, AND CREATES A TERRORIST. MOST OF US HAVE SEEN ON TELEVISION, HOW MILITANTS ARE INITIATED INTO THE LINE OF THEIR DEADLY DUTY. THESE ARE NO CONTRACT KILLERS; NEITHER ARE THEY FIGHTING FOR PRIDE. <FROM A VERY YOUNG AGE, THEY ARE SHOWN GRAPHIC VISUALS OF ISOLATED INCIDENTS OF OPPRESSION BY THE CAPITALIST STATES>. THEY ARE CONVINCED THAT THE ADVANCED COUNTRIES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THE STRIFE IN THEIR LIVES. POLITICAL PROPAGANDA IS FUELED AND HEIGHTENED BY RELIGIOUS DELUSIONS, IN A BLATANT DISTORTION OF THE ACTUAL TEXTS. THE MINDLESS SLAUGHTER IS SEEN AS AN ACT OF GOD, AND GLORIFIED AS SUCH IN ITS AFTERMATH, WITH ALL THE PLEASURES OF PARADISE IN STORE FOR THE 'MARTYRS'.

THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT WAR HAS ALREADY BEEN DECLARED. AND I, LIKE MOST OTHERS, WANT TO SEE THE PERPETRATORS BROUGHT TO JUSTICE IN A MANNER BEFITTING OF THEIR HEINOUS CRIME. BUT I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT A GREAT SHOW OF MILITARY MIGHT, AND THE INDISCRIMINATE KILLING OF PEOPLE WILL DEAL A SERIOUS BLOW TO THE TERRORIST REGIME. THE PEOPLE BEHIND THIS ATTACK CERTAINLY DO NOT SEE THE UNNECESSARY LOSS OF HUMAN LIFE AS A MAJOR DETERRENT. A FORCEFUL MILITARY RETALIATION WILL ONLY SERVE IN FURTHERING THE CAUSE OF THOSE WHO WISH TO SHOWCASE AMERICA AS AN EVIL EMPIRE, AND MORE TERRORISTS WILL BE BRED WITH THESE NOTIONS. THE WAR IS NOT ONE OF RELIGIOUS FAITHS, ALTHOUGH CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS MAY PORTRAY IT AS SUCH TO SUIT THEIR OWN FANATICAL CAUSES. IT IS A WAR THAT HAS BEEN DECLARED UPON HUMAN DECENCY, VALUES, MORALS AND ENTERPRISE. FOR THOSE WHO OPPOSE THE TERRORISTS, VICTORY HAS AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT MEANING. THE END OF THE WAR WOULD IN ITSELF BE A TRIUMPH OF GOOD OVER EVIL. AND MILITARY DOMINATION WILL NOT BRING ABOUT THIS END. WE MUST CALL UPON ALL OUR ...

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HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE.

MY PROMOTION BROUGHT WITH IT SEVERAL NEW RESPONSIBILITIES, SOME MANAGERIAL BUT MOSTLY TECHNICAL. THIS RATHER SUITED ME, FOR IT PROVIDED A PLATFORM AND A SPACE FOR MY IDEAS TO GROW, DEVELOP AND TAKE SHAPE. IT WAS THE FIRST TIME IN MY CAREER THAT I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO FULLY UTILIZE THE KNOWLEDGE I HAD GLEANED DURING ALL THOSE YEARS OF COLLEGE. MY POSITION PROVIDED SCOPE AND INCENTIVE FOR OUT-OF-THE BOX THOUGHT AND ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY. THIS WAS WHAT I HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO DO. THIS WAS WHERE I HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO BE, A POSITION WHICH IN THE PAST HAD OFTEN SEEMED LIKE A DISTANT DREAM. NOW I HAD A CHANCE TO EXPAND MY HORIZONS AND SET HIGHER STANDARDS FOR MYSELF.

THE NASCENT EUPHORIA OF MY ACHIEVEMENTS WAS QUICKLY BLOWN ASIDE BY A DELUGE OF ASSIGNMENTS AND DEADLINES, PERHAPS A DELIBERATE REMINDER BY MY SUPERIORS OF THEIR EXISTENCE. MY SITUATION WAS NOTHING THEY HADN'T SEEN BEFORE. TO TEST THE ABILITY TO RISE TO CHALLENGES THAT THEY FELT THEY HAD DISCERNED IN ME (PROBABLY THE FACTOR THAT EARNED MY OUT-OF LINE PROMOTION) AND PERHAPS ALSO TO CHECK ANY COMPLACENCY THAT MIGHT CREEP IN, I WAS ASSIGNED TO THE COMPANY'S LATEST VENTURE: AN AI-ENABLED PILOTING SYSTEM TO BE USED IN MINING OPERATIONS. THE PROJECT INVOLVED THE VERY BLEEDING EDGE OF TECHNOLOGY, CONCEPTS AND PROCEDURES THAT WERE UNHEARD OF WHEN I JOINED THE INDUSTRY. A GREAT DEAL OF MY TIME AND ENERGY WAS, THEREFORE DEVOTED TO hardcore RESEARCH. OF COURSE, IT WAS ALSO A NEW EXPERIENCE HEADING A TEAM AND SETTING TARGETS OF MY OWN.

THE WORK WAS DIFFICULT AND PROGRESS RATHER SLOW, SOMETIMES TO THE POINT OF FRUSTRATION, BUT NEVER WEARISOME OR INSIPID. EVEN SO, IT CAME AS A WELCOME SURPRISE WHEN ONE DAY I OPENED AN E-MAIL FROM X, INVITING ME TO HIS APARTMENT THAT WEEKEND. SEVERAL MEMBERS OF OUR MOTLEY HIGH-SCHOOL BUNCH, HE SAID WERE IN

TOWN AND WERE EAGER TO GET TOGETHER. THE MAIL CLOSED WITH A TYPICAL DEATH THREAT, WARNING ME OF DIRE CONSEQUENCES SHOULD I NOT SHOW UP.

MY INITIAL EXCITEMENT SOON DRIFTED AWAY INTO A WISTFUL DAY-DREAM, AS THE MEMORIES FLOODED INTO MY MIND. HIGH SCHOOL IS PERHAPS THE MOST PARADOXICAL TIME OF A PERSON'S LIFE. REALIZATION IS TINTED/LACED WITH CONFUSION AS THE DESIRE TO TAKE WING AND THE STUBBORN RELUCTANCE TO LET GO, BOTH MAKE THEIR PRESENCE FELT. THE LAZY YOUTHFUL NONCHALANCE MUST AT SOME POINT GIVE WAY TO STRONG YOUTHFUL DILIGENCE. DECISIONS ARE TAKEN AND CHOICES ARE MADE THAT DECIDE THE COURSE ONE'S LIFE WILL TAKE.

WE MADE THOSE CHOICES TOGETHER. NOT ALL OF US MADE THE SAME CHOICES, THOUGH. WE CAME FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND COVERED A WIDE SPECTRUM OF INTERESTS AND APTITUDES. THERE WERE THOSE OF US, SUCH AS X AND MYSELF, WHO MAINTAINED A GOOD ACADEMIC RECORD AND WENT ON TO COMPLETE OUR EDUCATION FROM PRESTIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS. WHILE BOTH OF US WENT INTO TECHNICAL FIELDS, THERE WERE OTHERS WHO VENTURED INTO MANAGEMENT, ARTS AND JOURNALISM. THEN THERE WAS Y, A NATURAL ATHLETE WHO WENT ON TO REPRESENT THE COUNTRY IN VARIOUS TRACK AND FIELD EVENTS. SOME OF US STRUGGLED, AND MET WITH SETBACKS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS BEFORE SETTLING INTO ROLES WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE SUITED THEM IN THE LONG RUN.

OFTEN, I AM LED TO WONDER WHAT IT WAS THAT BOUND SUCH A HETEROGENEOUS GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS TOGETHER. OUR DIVERSE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS AND ECONOMIC SITUATIONS NEVER CAME IN THE WAY OF OUR FRIENDSHIP. IN FACT, IT WAS NOT SO MUCH A TIGHT-KNIT, EXCLUSIVE GROUP AS A NETWORK OF FRIENDS. WE WELCOMED ADDITIONS TO OUR GANG. PROBABLY WHAT KEPT US GOING WAS THE IMPLICIT NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP WE SHARED; THE FOCUS WAS NOT ON THE RELATIONSHIP ITSELF BUT RATHER ON THE PEOPLE WHO MADE IT HAPPEN. WE DID NOT SEEK TO BRAND OR JUDGE EACH OTHER'S CHARACTER. EVERYONE WAS APPRECIATED FOR WHO HE OR SHE WAS. NOBODY HAD TO COMPROMISE ON HIS OR HER IDENTITY AND INTEGRITY TO BE ACCEPTED. IT WAS A VERY SPECIAL AFFECTION THAT WE SHARED - UNCONDITIONAL AND HONEST. WE TAUGHT EACH OTHER SO MUCH, WITHOUT EVER REALIZING IT.

THE ATTITUDES THAT I IMBIBED DURING THOSE MAGICAL YEARS HELPED ME GREATLY IN MY LIFE. WHEN I ARRIVED AT U PENN, IT TOOK ME LITTLE TIME TO BEFRIEND PEOPLE WHO HAD COME FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. MY NERVOUSNESS MELTED AWAY AS I FOUND SO MANY OTHERS LIKE MYSELF WHO HAD COME.

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