

END OF INNOCENCE

The Psychological Effect of Values, Symbolism and Mythology on Posttraumatic Stress in American Society, Following 9/11/01

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On September 11, 2006 we mark the 5th anniversary of one of America's tragic disasters in modern times. On the day that a thousand of innocent lives abruptly ended and the world's most powerful, most vital buildings collapsed, America changed. On that very day, whose early hours promised a shiny beginning, a few horrifying moments brutally swept away America's innocence. The extreme contrast and clash between what was, and what so abruptly and unexpectedly was no more, shook an entire nation's way of life as traumatized citizens were thrust against themselves to find the meaning of it all.

On September 10, 2001, a day before the devastating terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, America was relatively a peaceful nation filled with healthy diverse life routines. The American people in their respected communities, each with their versatile style of living, with their subjective personal experiences and values, enjoyed America the free, living relatively secure and safe and remotely detached from any possibility of doomed disaster prompted by outside invaders. The nation lived in an automatic pace, citizens concentrating on accomplishing financial security, educational, opportunities and familial tranquility reaching out to the American dream. The America of September 10, 2001 lived innocently, insulated from any remote waves of violence or atrocities committed by totalitarian regimes, fanatics or extremists in a far away continent who plotted to destroy America, the very symbol of democracy and freedom. The ocean remained always the seemingly secure buffer between America and the rest of the world. As the nation's life pace was conveniently separated from the world, it pushed away any echoes of violence coming from the distance, minimizing any alarming signals of impending danger approaching the shores. America the Beautiful lived in a bubble: self-absorbed and enjoying its relatively peaceful existence. The nation's freedom-loving people were preoccupied, sweating the small stuff and with the routine way of obtaining a life on the prairie.

On September 11, that tranquil picture of that America was abruptly changed when a national traumatic reaction caused by an unexpected vast scale of brutal violence and a life threatening catastrophe was thrust upon an entire society at once. It changed the lives of the Americans forever. Until that morning of September 11, a psychological condition called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was an unfamiliar term related only to stories about "shell shock" experienced by soldiers in World War I. Suddenly the disorder penetrated the lives of many Americans becoming a part of their daily existence.

Common post traumatic stress symptoms typically stemming from an abrupt and unexpected life threatening events such as recurrent intrusive thoughts, trouble sleeping, nightmares, helplessness, hyper-vigilance, avoidance behavior and preoccupation with mortality, safety, and/or doomed disaster became familiar emotional states to millions of Americans, many of whom were not necessarily directly involved with the catastrophe. Those watching the many replays on the TV screen of the horrifying

images of people jumping off the buildings to their death, and of passenger planes crashing and causing the collapse of the World Trade Center and Pentagon set off emotional turmoil in the form of traumatic stress as well as depression and anxiety related to loss and fear. Suddenly, the fear of the unknown set in and what was inconceivable prior to the attack became a reality. The American self-definition was at stake as the world watched the unfolding drama.

Indeed, in the eyes of the world, the United States of America presented on 9/11/01 a paradoxical phenomenon. The most powerful, rich, and advanced nation on Earth, a generous land of the free, of equal opportunity and of liberty. A society whose fundamental values reach out to the needy and to emigrate from all corners of the globe, found itself ironically vulnerable and on the defense, exposed to danger, unable to effectively provide its freedom loving people with what it has offered to individuals and nations away from its shores, namely, safety, security and freedom from extremists and terrorists. America, the world's only superpower and democratic patriarch that extends itself and stretches its strong eagle wings to protect the weak and the vulnerable everywhere had not been successfully able to protect its own turf or securing its own people from evil. America was found with its guard down. Indeed, one of the major triggers of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is the survivor's "caught off guard" syndrome and shock stemming from an abrupt exposure to danger and helplessness set off by the inability to defend oneself at the moment of the event. The intensity of the traumatic response depends to a large extent on the contrast between the strength of a particular mind frame and of values held by the survivor when the unexpected happens and the weakening of that value when its damaged or lost during the upheaval.

What were the values of America prior to Sept. 11th catastrophe that would have affected the scope of the traumatic response? What were the specific emotions and thoughts experienced by the American people watching helplessly the unexpected assault and the collapse of an American dream as they witnessed the destruction of the most powerful, most prestigious building in the world? What emotions were triggered when the people watched America's symbolism of life, vitality and power shift in minutes into rubble, death and destruction?

Historically, America has built its strength on liberty and economic power, priding itself on openness, and subsequently on its multicultural diversity. Its ideology welcomed immigrants from all countries, providing them with hope through liberty and freedom of equal economic opportunity. Imbedded in the value of reaching out to others was based the premise that being good to humanity, to people everywhere in the world, earned America protection and safeguarded the nation from any evil. Its underlying guiding principle was that good is equal to a deterrent of evil. Such a mythology is symbolized in the image of the Statue of Liberty that holds the light of freedom in the New York Harbor for all those arriving from overseas, entering the gates of America.