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Despair Is Not an Option

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Many people believed at the time that the trauma of 9/11 would change the world. My feeling was that our American response would be far more crucial. The President, after all, did not have to declare war. He could have called the terrorists mass murderers, their deeds crimes against humanity. He could have said to the American people and the world, "We will respond, but not in kind. We will not seek to avenge the death of innocent Americans by the death of innocent victims elsewhere, lest we become what we abhor. We refuse to ratchet up the cycle of violence that brings only ever more death, destruction and deprivation. What we *will* do is build coalitions with other nations. We will share intelligence, freeze assets and engage in forceful extraditions of terrorists if internationally sanctioned. I promise to do all in my power to see justice done, but by the force of law only, never by the law of force."

It was a ripe moment--to educate the soul of the nation, to improve the quality of our suffering. We had lost our sense of invulnerability and superpower invincibility, but as these were only illusions, we should not have grieved their passing. Other nations too had been unfairly hurt, many of them, and far worse than we. But instead of deepening our kinship with the world's suffering, the President chose to invoke an almost unlimited sense of entitlement to pursue in our own way what he termed a struggle "to rid the world of evil."

As a result we squandered the widely felt sympathy that was ours on 9/11, symbolized by the headline in *Le Monde* the following day: *Nous sommes tous Américains*. We also squandered the near-record budget surplus that could have helped victims abroad as well as the homeless and hungry in the United States, where poverty is a tragedy that great wealth makes a sin. Finally, ironically and predictably, the Bush doctrine of unilateralism and preventive war has recruited more terrorists than it has cowed. Clearly the past two years have been morally and politically disastrous.

But *tempus fugit*--an election year is upon us, another ripe moment for educating and for changing regimes in Washington. While turned off by the President's chirping optimism, I still find encouraging such developments as the following:

Although still claiming moral clarity, the President is clearly losing moral authority. The stubborn persistence of evil in Iraq, Afghanistan and here at home is helping Americans to slough off the self-righteousness that threatens our capacity for self-criticism.

Reservoirs of anger and common sense have already been tapped by the presidential campaigns, especially those of Dennis Kucinich and Howard Dean.

The mammoth mistakes of globalization, highlighted by developing countries like Brazil, are being acknowledged by First World nations and important world organizations.

At home the bloat of the military, the plight of the poor and the sorrow of the aged and infirm are mounting concerns of big-city mayors and state governors, who stare helplessly at their deficit-plagued coffers.

When the chief legal officer of the land fears freedom, more and more Americans are fearing for the freedom of the nation. Federal courts too are reacting to preserve constitutional rights.

Like politicians, clergy can be so cautious as to become moral failures. Now, however, they are signing on by the hundreds to the Clergy Leadership Network, recently formed to counter the influence of the Christian right. They are eager to resurrect two great biblical mandates--to pursue justice and to seek peace. They are appalled by tax breaks that fill the rich with good things and send the poor empty away; most are for the global abolition of nuclear weapons; and most, I would imagine, view marriage as a human right, not a reward for being heterosexual.

Finally, I think of the Women in Black in Israel, the Liberian women praying alongside the road, the whistleblowers everywhere who are trying to dim fears and raise hopes. So much is at stake in the new year that despair is not an option. Better by far to heed the poet and double the heart's might.