

Since 9/11, we have become a nation of wimps
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I want to make two things clear from the outset. First of all, I am a wimp by every definition of the word. Once, some jerk in the smoking section blew smoke on to the non-smoking table at which I was sitting. What did I do? I stared blankly into the distance. I admit it; I am a wimp. In fact, I am proud to be a wimp. It is a way of life that suits me well, and there is nothing wrong with being a wimp.

Second of all, I do not want to talk here about the real and tangible losses of lives and well-being suffered by victims of 9/11 and their families, the first responders and their families, the members of the military and their families, as well as those who have any real and tangible connection to places that have been attacked and targeted and threatened since then. I myself have a more than cursory connection to New York City. As a mental health professional, I work with people who experienced, witnessed, and were victimized by violence of all flavors, and there is nothing wimpy about acknowledging one's own pain and working through it. In fact, every working day I am awed by my clients' courageous journeys from victimhood to empowerment.

Instead, I want to talk about national character. First, a little perspective.

In 1938, at least 500,000 people perished in flooding along the Yellow River in China. Almost 30,000 people died in floods in Bangladesh in 1974, and since then they have seen 4 floods that each killed at least 1,000. In 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake in Japan killed more than 100,000 people. The 2011 earthquake in Japan claimed at least 15,000 lives. Closer to home, the 2010 Haiti earthquake caused at least 300,000 deaths.

Moving on to human-made disasters, almost 4,000 people died from the chemical leaks at Bhopal, India, in 1984. Civilian casualties from 1945 bombing of Hiroshima may be as high as 200,000. Perhaps 300,000 have died in the Darfur genocide, 100,000 in Bosnia, and 500,000 in Rwanda. And how could we forget the Holocaust, which sacrificed something like 6,000,000 lives?

So, how did a nation of 300,000,000 react to the loss of 3,000 on 9/11? Crudely put, we freaked out. No, let's be accurate. We were shocked. We were baffled. We were surprised. We were in pain. It was our leaders who freaked out. And they have spent \$3,000,000,000,000 of our not-so-abundant resources to directly and indirectly claim the lives of at least 1,000,000 foreigners and 6,000 of our own. That is \$3,000,000 per foreigner killed.

An analogy comes to mind. Imagine a father who, upon hearing that someone sexually molested his child, picks up his rifle, and, along with his other, more mature children, guns down not only the alleged molester, but also everyone else in that household, and, just to be sure, the whole household where another known child molester lives in the neighborhood. And two of the siblings die in the process. Perhaps it is justified. Perhaps it is the right thing to do. Perhaps it is worth it, even if it bankrupts the family.

But what does that do to the child? Who is there to help the child deal with the pain and anguish that comes with being a victim, to calmly and lovingly guide the child through the healing process? Who is there to help the child heal from the trauma of watching the siblings die, and watching the father judged harshly by the legal system and by history?

We were left with no one, and, as a result, the nation has lost its way. We were once a nation of strength and vigor. Now we are a nation of victims, of 9/11, of bad economy, of natural disasters, of other people's marriages, of tax policy, of environmental regulation, of health care, of evil corporations, of anti-union sentiment, of Chinese entrepreneurs, of Greek debt, of social media, of

conspiracies, of drugs. We are no longer a nation of doers, of bootstrap-pulling entrepreneurs, adventurers, and pioneers. We are a nation of whining, frightened wimps.

We have sacrificed billions, maybe trillions of dollars in economic activity to achieve impossible levels of airport security, and for what? To prevent the loss of 300 lives? 400 lives? We subject ourselves to the indignity of taking off our shoes and putting them in plastic bins along with infant formulas, shampoos, and itch creams. How many backs-of-hands have we permitted to glide over our genitals? Just for the off-chance that we can guarantee our safety for the next few hours?

In Eugene, Oregon, one police officer dies after a car chase, and the main artery between two cities is shut down for hours during the business day to pay tribute to him. The officer himself, as with anyone who has fallen in the line of duty, is deserving of such a tribute, I'm sure; in fact, there are probably others who deserve it, and perhaps we should make it a regular affair (as long as we do it on weekends). Still, is this also not a sign that we have never truly healed, that the loss of one person became the occasion to obsess about our vulnerability? If police officers feel that vulnerable, who will keep us wimps safe?

At the Pearl Harbor attacks, more than 2,000 people were killed on a single day. We were in shock. We mourned. But, more importantly, we responded with strength and poise, not with indiscriminate demonstrations of raw anger. We sacrificed. We put ourselves to work. We prevailed, and came to be the most powerful nation on earth.

Individually, our suffering is real. Working through this suffering one person at a time is my daily task as a mental health professional. As a nation, however, we need to believe in ourselves again, not in the bullying, boisterous ways of violence and childish heckling—which *everyone* knows comes from vulnerability and suffering, not true courage—but in ways that truly heal and strengthen us as a nation.