The Lesson of 9/11

When we gathered ten years ago this evening, our community was shocked, filled with grief, frightened, and uncertain. At that moment no one knew for sure who had caused the tragedy, how many had died, or whether there were more attacks to follow. The members of our community reached out to one another in their grief and uncertainty. After the candlelight vigil here on the evening of September 11, Jewish and Muslim students came together. They invited the whole campus to another vigil three days later, where Jews and Muslims read words of comfort and hope from each other’s sacred texts. We responded to terror with tolerance and mutual understanding.

Tonight, with the perspective of a decade, this remains the principal lesson of 9/11: that the best weapon in the war on terror is an open mind. History teaches us that extremism – a dogmatic insistence that one is in possession of the unique truth – leads to nothing but misery and suffering. In a characteristically brilliant essay, the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin identified for us the dangers of “the pursuit of the ideal.” Those who adhere to rigid ideologies, to belief systems religious or secular that claim absolute certainty about what is right and wrong, are prone, indeed are almost inevitably drawn to persecuting, imprisoning, torturing, or murdering those who do not subscribe to their uncompromising orthodoxies. The fundamentalism at the root of 9/11 is not unique; it has many precursors – from the Inquisition to the witch trials of colonial New England, to the mass executions of Hitler and Stalin, to ethnic cleansing in Cambodia. Blind adherence to ideology, a conviction that one alone is in possession of the whole and genuine truth, is a recipe for disaster.

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1 Richard C. Levin, Remarks on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, Cross Campus, September 11, 2011.
Historically, terror has been confronted with force, with results that are sometimes successful, sometimes ambiguous. Hitler was overcome after a stupendous sacrifice of human life. The leader of Al Qaeda has at last fallen and his organization has been weakened, but the consequences of two costly wars, fought by many brave Americans committed to freedom and openness, remain uncertain.

Here at Yale every day, in the classroom and outside, we confront fundamentalism and terrorism by other means. We challenge established beliefs; we encourage each other to find reasons for our beliefs; we confront closed-minded dogmatism with argument. This is the essence of liberal education: we encourage everyone in this community to engage the power of reason to examine all points of view, to shape arguments, to weigh evidence, and to develop independently a view of what is true and what is not. We encourage each other, in the words of Thomas Jefferson’s advice to his nephew, to “fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion.”

Today, perhaps more than our Enlightenment forbears and our nation’s founders, we recognize that truths so obtained are rarely if ever certainties; they are contingent and provisional, subject to revision if confronted by superior logic or disconfirming evidence. And because our truths are not certainties, we tolerate those who reach different conclusions. Toleration allows us to hear opposing views, and open-mindedness allows us to refine our views of what is true, and our views of how to live an ethical life.

If we are tolerant, we can live in peace and harmony with those we cannot persuade. If we are open-minded and reason independently and creatively, we can improve ourselves as ethical beings, and we can, if we choose, make the world a better place.
Freedom, toleration, and open-mindedness: these are the values of the University. These are the values that America at its best stands for. Even as we remember and honor the victims of the terror inflicted upon us ten years ago this day, let us commit ourselves to reject blind adherence to dogma and affirm freedom, toleration, and open-mindedness. Let us ever confront darkness and prejudice with light and truth.