

Transforming enmity: 9/11: Ten years later

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Inescapably, September 11, 2001, brought up a question brewing under the surface of my faith and profession: How do we transform enmities? The faith I embrace and the nonviolent transformation I am professionally committed to seeking both arise from the life and teachings of Jesus, who measures love in terms of how we respond to those who wish us harm.

The brutal events of 9/11 brought life and work to a standstill. Wherever we were, we stopped and watched, staggered. I felt a mix of deep sadness and anger beyond words. To paraphrase W. B. Yeats, the center broke. The central tenets of my faith and vocation seemed uprooted, naked and irrelevant to the rising impulse toward seeking an adequate response.

In settings of violent conflict, peacebuilding inhabits a liminal existence—it is the carving of a home for people whose lives are defined and held together by enmity. Peace-building chooses to build relationships and trust where pain and hatred run deep. The violent acts of fall 2001 challenged the very core of this vocation: How do we pursue justice and love those who wish us harm?

In the decade following 9/11, the U.S. entered the slippery but well-justified pathway of fear in the search for security. We were increasingly presented with a world divided between "us" and "them." This was particularly true of how we understood and engaged the Muslim world, at home and abroad. We spent our national wealth on war and on isolating our enemies.

If 9/11 changed anything for me, it was to lead me back to the essence of peace-building. The profound truth of Jesus' life came home in the form of his simplest yet most radical act: befriending the enemy. To his disciples' consternation, Jesus ate with his enemies and he went to their houses. None of this implied that he changed his fundamental beliefs or values. It implied, rather, that he wanted to build relationships with those deemed untouchable and a threat. He chose love over fear, engagement over isolation and separation.

What endures since 9/11 is the need to build relationships across our perceived divisions with those who see the world differently and with those whom we may most fear. This is the work I have engaged in at Eastern Mennonite University and at Notre Dame. Hundreds of Muslim brothers and sisters have participated in the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at EMU and the recently launched Contending Modernities research project at Notre Dame, which provides a platform for building understanding and constructive change between the world's two largest religious bodies, Roman Catholicism and Islam. The path of love starts with the simple yet unexpected act of engagement and befriending.