

Violence and the Need to Belong

Reflections one year after September 11. By SAMAR ALI, '03

Those who can accept their diversity fully will hand on the torch between communities and cultures, will be a kind of mortar joining together and strengthening the societies in which they live.

—AMIN MAALOUF,
*In the Name of Identity:
Violence and the Need to Belong*

Almost an entire year has passed since the horrific, indescribably painful day of September 11, 2001. So much has happened since that morning, and nearly everyone has been touched in some way by those terrible events and their aftermath. Even the most passive observer is now acutely aware of the nature of the world in which we live: no longer can something happen oceans away and not affect a person living on the other side of the globe. We have reached a point in time where the world is a smaller place, one to be shared. The very idea of isolationism has now become one buried with the past and left as a joke for the future.

The events of September 11 aroused many different actions and feelings, and for many provided an opportunity for self-evaluation through reflection. Many people have begun

to ask themselves important questions: How did we reach this point? Can we responsibly handle this new age into which we have rapidly fallen?"

This summer I was fortunate enough to be able to carry out my own self-reflection not only in the United States, but in the Middle East and Europe as well. While many thought me insane for going to the Middle East after September 11, I considered it a unique opportunity, for nothing can replace a better understanding of life through firsthand experience. Thus, as I traveled from Vanderbilt to Egypt to Jordan and then to England, I began to learn what no textbook could teach me.



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If there was one common thread I continued to observe in these different countries—besides the fact that dehumanization exists on all sides—it was the emphasis everybody placed on the words and actions from the United States. Not a single day passed without everyone stopping to watch the news and hear what President George W. Bush said in his speeches and how that related to their lives.

Although I have been to the Middle East many times before, this time I realized more than ever how much attention is placed on Americans, the important role we play in the world

and the responsibility we carry with us whether we like it or not. For example, even my 12-year-old cousin told me that she had been studying the effects of September 11 in her Jordanian school on a weekly basis. I did not walk into a single house without someone asking me how I felt on September 11, and then sharing his or her thoughts on the situation.

I wish I could have taken all of America with me. In late June as I was walking down the famous, crowded Cairo market street known as Khan Khalili, I had to pinch myself to remember that I was walking the streets of Egypt, just miles away from the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx. I had just stepped off the plane the day before and was full of excitement, as I always am when I am embarking upon a new adventure. For those of you who have traveled, I am sure you will agree that part of the thrill is never knowing what awaits you or what discoveries you will make during your journey.

My own first discovery was that Khan Khalili is your typical Arab marketplace, filled with the smell of Arab sweets and freshly baked bread, the sounds of eager street vendors and tough customers, and the sight of crowded shops piled on top of one another—with each one selling the same thing. For a second, I thought I was back in my mother's hometown of Damascus, world-renowned for its markets as well. The only differences between these shops and the average American flea market were the bargaining tactics; the people are as normal as any

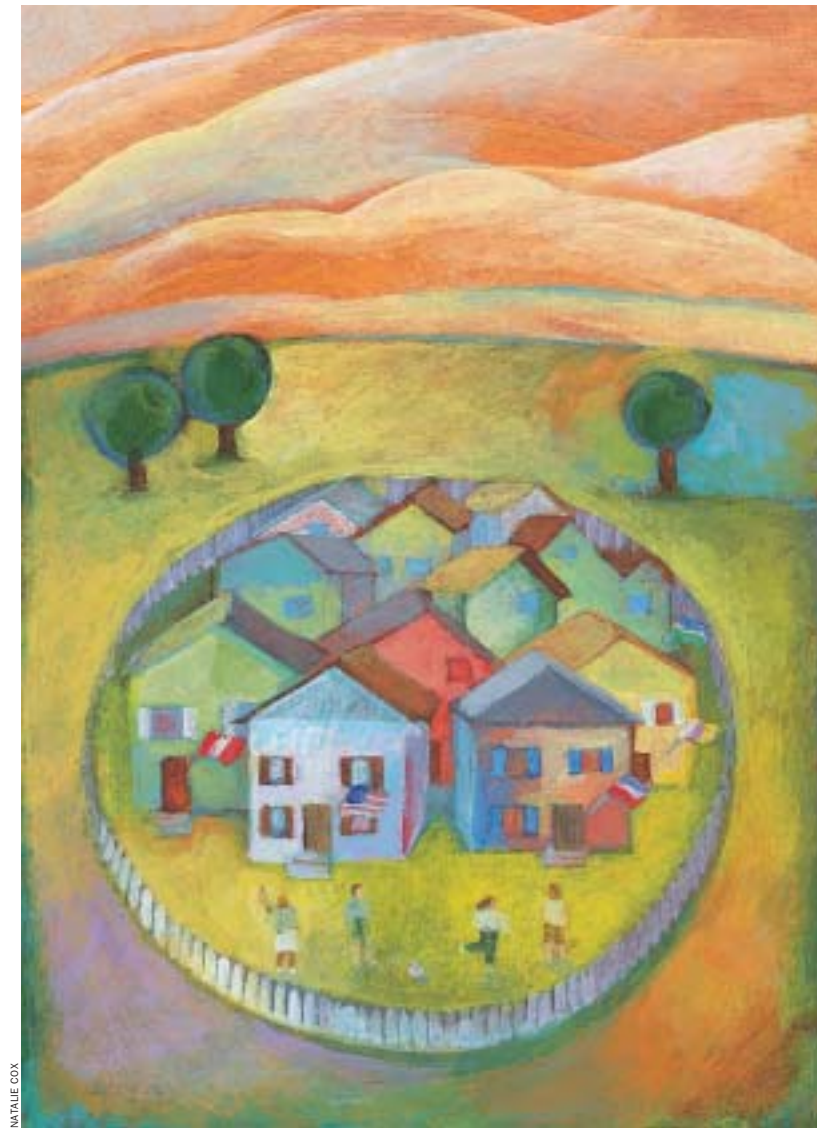
you would find anywhere. They are people trying to make a living for their families, people who like to laugh and strive for a good life. They are not people who are sitting around all day plotting the destruction of the United States of America.

Upon seeing this, I felt terribly saddened to know that after September 11, more people than ever before have come to associate the Arab or Muslim identity with terrorism. We should keep in mind that simplistic, vilifying stereotypes are a catalyst for disaster. While it is true that many people have worked to increase their own knowledge and awareness of other faiths and cultures, I still too often hear dehumanizing quotes, such as this one from a member of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission: "If there is another terrorist attack on the United States, and they come from the same ethnic group that attacked the World Trade Center, you can forget about civil rights. Not too many people will be crying in their beer if there are more detentions, stops, profiling; rather there will be a groundswell of public opinion to banish civil rights." There is still some question about whether or not this was the view of the official. But after hearing them, one must ask how educated people could think that the answer to extremism is extremism.

As long as this mentality survives, we must step up our battle against undemocratic thoughts wrapped in ignorance and combined with hatred. It is at times like these when we should remember how Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, in the 19th century, stated that he was founding Vanderbilt in order to "contribute to strengthening the ties which should exist between all sections of our common country."

We have the responsibility to be constructively critical citizens, not silent specta-

tors, when confronted with uninformed malice. There is no time for passiveness or complacency. We must maintain faith in our democratic ideals, recognizing their value not only in preserving the essence of our own great nation but also in their potential to affect so many others around the globe. Furthermore, as members of the Vanderbilt com-



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munity, we should continually take the knowledge we gain inside and outside the classroom and apply it to make the international system in which we operate a more cohesive one—one that is steadily distancing itself from saturation with discrimination and oppressed voices. Of course, nobody has ever said that this task would be easy, but it is certainly better than the alternative.

As American college students and graduates, we have been exposed to an environment in which we are accustomed to discussing

ideas openly and searching for our own truth without fear lurking in the background. I am reminded now of the Arab proverb which states, "Fear not the path of truth for the lack of people walking upon it." In a sense, higher education promotes patriotism in that we do not blindly follow, but rather strive to lead and improve our society by strengthening its

positive attributes and feeling empowered to change the negative ones. Vanderbilt provides an incomparable atmosphere for this, one that I know I will miss once I have graduated. I have frequently witnessed the triumph of this environment in leading people who may have entered Vanderbilt with a closed mind to leave with an open one. This is, after all, what a true college education is all about. Teaching students to formulate their own ideas while still being tolerant of diverse opinions and beliefs brings us all closer to a calmer globalized society. Vanderbilt can thus serve as an example for all by continuing to fight for equal opportunities and to listen to every student in a spirit of growth and open communication.

As a Vanderbilt student, traveler, and human being, I understood this year how crucial it is for every person to play her or his own productive role with pride and without adding to the formula of xenophobia. We

must will ourselves to rise above the dangers of simplification and stereotypes, and not be afraid to speak out against ignorance. If we truly want to win the war against terrorism, we will not succumb to the same practices by which terrorists operate and thrive. Instead, individual by educated individual, we will direct our efforts to help ease the world's conscience.

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