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(Mis)Management of Grief: A Year since 9/11

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Panel: Reflections on a Global Year: The Worldview, Post 9/11

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Firstly, I extend my deepest condolences to all Americans and in particular to those in the audience who were directly affected by the catastrophe that occurred in New York last year. So much has been said and written about the event and much more will be said. Images of the collapsing towers and victims leaping to their deaths are forever seared onto the memories of the electronically-linked world.

This has been a year of living dangerously for America. A year of mourning, grief as well as war. To many people around the world, especially writers and artists, New York City is the new Jerusalem. Admit it or not, and many among us have admitted it to each other these past weeks, we have fancied living in New York sometime in our lives and finding that literary agent who will discover what awesome geniuses we are and turn us into bestselling authors if not Nobel prize candidates.

And New York City is in fact a melting pot of races and cultures. It is the possible future of every major city around the world. It is the home Yankees and the Knicks, of the bright, lovely ladies of ‘sex and the city,’ of Spike Lee’s urban jungle, of Woody Allen’s confounded characters. To strike at NYC is also to strike at the very idea of multiculturalism, even though the targets were symbols of finance capital.

It’s been observed that times of trouble, of war, of political turmoil bring out the best in many artists. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky wrote their best works at the end of the 19th century as Russia underwent social upheaval. The first world war gave us All Quiet at the Western Front, the Spanish Civil war spawned Guernica. Troubles in China in the early part of the last century as well as during the cultural revolution inspired both literature and cinema.

New York being home to so many creative minds, significant art is bound to emerge from the rubble of 911.

Political strife and terrorism is not new to peoples around the world and have been the subject of many stories, plays. Among my favorite short fiction is a story by Barathi Mukerjee called Management of Grief wherein the protagonist-narrator, Shaila, whose own family were killed in a terrorist attack on a plane is asked to manage her own grief by becoming a bridge between the Canadian government and members of her own Indian community.

Similarly, political leaders, like president bush are not only tasked with the management of war technologies during such times but, more importantly, with the management of
public emotion. This, to my mind, is the harder task whose mismanagement could lead to even more grief than is necessary.

The Philippines is America’s only genuine colony. And because of this, we have deep emotional ties to the US. Filipinos are among the largest minorities in the US, we all have friends and relatives here. We were required to memorize the Gettysburg address in school. And so our sympathies for America are genuine.

On the other hand, we also have more issues with America. Geography is destiny. And because of where we are we have been involved in the geopolitics of the great powers. We had been home to US bases for nearly a century. Lately, southern Philippines has become a new front in the so-called war against terror because of the ABU Sayyaf and their suspected links to al Qaida. But an American missionary, Burnham was killed after being held hostage for nearly a year and this had led to war games involving US and Filipino forces.

Still, at such times, when it is easy to be overwhelmed by present grief and pain, and fear, it is important, especially for a country as powerful as the US, to remember the past, to adopt a larger, historical perspective.

Let me talk briefly about two bells that are presently in Wyoming and have been there for over a hundred years. They come from a town called Balangiga in the island of Samar in the Philippines. The Philippines was a Spanish colony for 300 years. There was a revolution inspired by the execution of Jose Rizal, who wrote two novels in Spanish critical of the regime. And the revolutionaries declared an independent republic in 1898. But the US was a rising power at that time and through the Treaty of Paris bought Cuba and the Philippines from Spain for 20m.

To save face, the US and Spanish fleets fought a mock naval battle in Manila bay. The Filipino revolutionaries, having read the US constitution from cover to cover were convinced that Commodore Dewey had come to help liberate Filipinas from Spain, that the US would not colonize anyone as this is prohibited by its own constitution. And there were many anti-imperialists like Mark Twain who spoke out vehemently against colonialists. But Pres. Mackinley went down on his knees to pray for guidance and God told him it was America’s manifest destiny to Christianize 8m Catholics, and bring democracy to a land that had just elected its own congress.

So the Americans stayed on and war broke out. Eventually, it became guerilla warfare and many of the tactics employed in Vietnam were first used in the Philippines. Once US troops landed in the coastal town of Balangiga. One afternoon, while they were camped out, resting. The guerillas, many dressed as women, with their bolos hidden, ambushed the Americans killing some 50 of them. In retaliation, the Americans reduced the entire island of Samar to a ‘howling wilderness’ in the very words of Col. Jacob Smith who gave
the order that no creature in the island beyond the age of 10 be spared. Smith was court
martialled but never punished. The church bells of Balangiga were taken as war booty to
Wyoming where they remain to this day despite decades of entreaty for their return.

I speak of this not to draw analogy none can be drawn. Every catastrophe, every war,
every act of violence is its own metaphor, its own denouement. But its safer to be
reminded that democracy is not programmed into anyone’s DNA, as a writer in Time
magazine had claimed. That governments are always capable of bullying, of betraying
their own principles and lying to their own peoples.

So perhaps, the zealots of today are just as hard hearted as those of yesteryear. Perhaps
hatred for America and for modernity has been programmed into the DNA of certain
people. Still we might asked even if it is a question that matters only to an obscure
people in an insignificant corner of our brave new world, for whom the Balangiga bells
toll this hour?