



Mourn, but also organize

by Jack Hammond

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Friends, I wanted to tell you about the vigil Friday and how my classes reacted to the attack, but as I wrote I realized I had a bigger message so I'll put it up front: we have a lot of organizing to do. Quickly. Congress has already voted Bush a blank check, but we need to raise our voices against warmongering, urge restraint, and do whatever we can to prevent the precipitous, unilateral, adventurist military build-up now being prepared and the strikes against the innocent, even as we recognize that the attack was unprecedented and we have to find effective measures to protect ourselves.

There was a vigil for peace, Friday, in Union Square. It was called Thursday. I learned about it from fliers on campus and then by email. In Union Square are posted many, many fliers with pictures of missing people. Other posters and fliers expressed various messages of mourning for the victims and the desire to maintain peace; many urged that Muslims be treated reasonably and not be made victims of retaliation.

My guess is that there were 2000 people at the vigil. It was low-key; no speakers, and while people did not maintain absolute silence, they mostly talked quietly in small groups with some singing, with people holding posters, and many more with candles. Someone gave me a rose, and I brought it home with me. It was scheduled to last from six to eight but, after eating dinner nearby, my friends and I came back at about 9:30 and there was still a fair-sized crowd. Many people had left row upon row of candles, and it was quite lovely. With no speeches, the only overt political content was provided by the posters. But I am glad I went because this was the first chance to make a public statement against the Bush administration's threats.

On Thursday I had two classes and I turned them both over to discussing the situation. Attendance was light; transportation was still disrupted, exacerbated Thursday by bomb threats in several locations.

Students' reactions covered quite a gamut: one student had a sister missing. One had a husband who worked in the World Trade Center but had to be somewhere else that day. One belongs to a service organization at Hunter, which was collecting contributions in money and kind. One went to give blood and then bought bananas and juice to give out to the people still standing in line to give blood. One went to her neighborhood deli and told the Yemeni owners to call her if they had any trouble.

Most people were silent at the beginning, but more joined in as the period went on. Many were concerned that the US could act precipitously or that individuals would harm Arabs and Muslims here in the US. On the other hand, some felt that we had to do 'something'. Some were particularly offended by the clip on the news showing Palestinians laughing and cheering. One student pointed out that there was only one clip, shown over and over, and we had no idea whether others were also cheering. (A report I got later claimed that the clip was not from that day at all but from the Gulf War archive.) A Danish student who had traveled in Pakistan tried to explain, not aggressively, why a lot of people around the world did not hold the US in the high esteem that most Americans do.

I was struck that there was more concern to avert war than there was revanchism. On the other hand, as I walked into school I heard a young man exclaiming to some other students, 'We need to build a fuckin wall around the whole fuckin country and keep all the fuckin foreigners out. Only US citizens can get in!' A large space in a hallway offered boards for people to write up their thoughts. The invitation to write clearly asked for ideas that would not be provocative. The tenor was a lot more aggressive than what I had heard in my class. Still, most messages called for calm and judgment. I heard Daniel Schorr comment that there seemed to be more call for caution among the public at large than in the executive branch. And voices from other parts of the world seem to be reasonably sane. Let's make sure we are heard.