

## How college students made meaning of bin Laden's death

Jamie Manson | May. 4, 2011 | Grace on the Margins

Of all of the celebrations that rang out after the death of Osama bin Laden was announced, the festivities that erupted on U.S. college campuses were particularly intriguing.

Unlike the White House, Times Square, or the World Trade Center, which are located at or near the sites of terrorist attacks, most college campuses had no direct connection to the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001. Yet schools as far away as Penn State, Boston College, Ohio State, and the University of Delaware saw their quads suddenly transformed into rallying places of nationalist chants, passionate flag-waving, uninhibited emotion, and impromptu speeches and marches throughout the wee hours of the morning.

The college campus where I teach in Connecticut hosted its own night of spontaneous, communal jubilation. Most of the freshmen students in my introduction to religious studies course joined in.

For months I have labored, with varying degrees of success, to convince these students that religion is relevant not only to their personal lives, but to global politics. The majority of them were raised marginally Catholic in middle and upper middle class homes. Most are in college to study for careers in business, science, and technology.

To teach them religious ideas about ritual, community, and sacred story, I have to compete against the lures and entertainments of Facebook, YouTube, and text messaging. Some days the competition is as rigorous as an Olympic sport. Most of these students place little value on the role of religion in their lives. They are the first generation to grow up in an individualistic, post-communal world. One of the toughest topics to teach is the vital importance of community in human life.

And yet, in the early hours of Monday morning, they abandoned virtual reality and put aside their rugged individualism. They physically gathered together to sing songs and *speak* words, rather than text or type them. The smiles on their faces later that day demonstrated that they were moved by the experience.

*Why* they had a great time was cause for some reflection. Few of them thought that it appropriate to celebrate the killing of another person, even if the target was someone who caused so much pain and devastation. Something else led them to a night of rejoicing. And it wasn't just another excuse to party. This wasn't like any other college party they had attended.

One particularly perceptive student framed the discussion in terms of the collective memory that she and her classmates shared.

She reflected: "September 11 happened when we were nine years old. We were kids, but we weren't too young to understand what was happening. This is all we have ever known. We grew up constantly reminded of that day and all of the fear and uncertainty that followed it."

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Her insight was profound. College age students spent their pre-adolescence and teenage years in what is often referred to as a "post- 9/11 world." Their most impressionable years were colored by this perfectly filmed scene of fiery, cataclysmic destruction and the mass death of innocents.

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Like those of us who were adults on this day, they were saddled with the extraordinary challenge of making meaning of this horror. It forced all of us to face those timeless, ultimate questions about the purpose of life, God's power in the face of human suffering, and the mystery of death.

For millennia, human beings have looked to religion to answer these questions. Our scriptures, rituals, and prayers have served for centuries as vehicles for greater understanding and comfort. Sadly, many young people encountered these profound questions while growing up in a society where individualism had trumped the strength and importance of community. They grew up in families that felt abandoned by or disconnected from religion.

One of the key roles of religion in our lives is to help us make meaning of life, particularly in times of fear, persecution, and uncertainty. Religion also creates community, where values are shared and individuals are united by their collective identities and shared memories. Ideally, religious communities offer us support in dealing with life's deepest challenges and questions, and help us create a hopeful vision of the future.

Most of my students did not grow up experiencing religion in these ways or understanding that religion was meant to have this kind of impact on their lives. And yet, from its beginning, the "War on Terror" has typically been characterized in religious terms. We were told that the enemy was an "axis of evil" of Islamic extremists. We were told that Americans were the good guys who would ultimately triumph over this darkness.

This awareness of the triumph of good over evil has no doubt fueled the impassioned, jubilant response to bin Laden's death. Whether some of the more celebratory reactions mirrored the vengeful, bloodthirsty glee that we demonize in our enemies is a matter of debate. It's also questionable whether some of these responses were wise, especially given their power to incite retaliation and revenge.

But for the students I spoke with, Monday morning's gatherings were powerful for a different reason. In many ways, they were celebrations in a liturgical sense, rather than in a vengeful, triumphalist sense. The students used chants, symbols, speeches, and processions to help them make sense of a symbolic turning point in the cosmic battle that has been playing out for as long as they can remember.

At long last, the frightening, collective memory that they share from their childhood, a memory that so defines their identity, reached some point of resolution. A sense of order suddenly overcame the chaos and uncertainty of the past decade. The violent past was finally met with some manifestation of justice.

When the students gathered together in their quads, they were participating in a rare experience. They shared a moment of hope. Though the experience is symbolic and no doubt fleeting, they understood, perhaps for the first time, how vital community is to creating and expressing hope in the midst of fear and uncertainty.

They may have also realized, for the first time, how the ancient religious tools of ritual, words, music, and story are so relevant to the profoundest realities of their lives.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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