

On September 13th, 2001 - contrary to all expectations - Jane and I took off for Italy as planned. This was but two days after the unspeakable crimes of September 11th. I was of two minds after those events: to cancel our trip or to go anyway (if it were at all possible what with the airports shut down). I chose to go, if only to immerse myself in another atmosphere and erase the images of that fateful day.

But after an eleven hour flight on Alitalia from San Francisco and a sojourn in that jewel of a city, Spoleto in Umbria, the images remained. It was as if I had tried to outrun those clouds of dust that cascaded down Manhattan's streets only to have them catch up to me and engulf me after all. I had thought that the ancient facade of Spoleto's cathedral with its marvelous blue and gold mosaic of Christ and Mary and St. John or its interior frescoes by Filippo Lippi depicting events in Mary's life or the civilized panorama of a medieval city with its narrow streets and crowning citadel would be powerful enough to purge my memory of the inconceivable evil I had beheld and restore my faith in humanity.

But initially they were of no avail. I would stand there in the cathedral piazza, enter one church after another, sip coffee from a terrace whence I could take in the beauty of the Ponte delle Torri, a 14th century bridge of many arches spanning a gorge 240 feet deep and ask myself: "What relevance do any of these frescoes and facades, these charming Umbrian towns have in the aftermath of so violent an event?" September 11th's manifestation of human hatred, intensified by a righteousness bereft of the least compassion, turned everything beautiful - before my eyes - to ashes.

And then I realized: I was letting the toxicity of that event infiltrate my very heart and mind; a toxicity that would render me one more casualty. And it was fright over such a consequence that awoke me, possibly for the first time in my life, to the fact that faith is indeed a feeble thing if all it amounts to is a passive inheritance, a habit, a mere reflex as involuntary as breathing. It hit me that faith must be a wilful thing possessed of a kind of defiance. True faith is no mere "maybe" to be easily shaken by contradictions no matter how terrible. True faith amounts to an invincible Yes to life rendered *all the more vigorous* by any subtle or outrageous coercion to despair.

And so I resolved that henceforth I would target - not the airfields or bunkers of some political landscape - but the very landscape of my heart, to nip in the bud my least tendency to sneer, to criticize other people, to damn inconvenience, to doubt my own worth, to ridicule the politically or aesthetically "incorrect" - in a word, to purge my own heart of those sour, resentful, negative tendencies that throughout humanity's history have been the seed bed out of which the chilling hatred we saw manifest on September 11th eventually emerges.

On the other hand, I resolved to cherish every apple I see (be it bruised or not), every park and tree (even the unwelcome eucalyptus). every check out person or banker I meet, every Cal Trans worker sweating over the asphalt, every human artifact (be it a billboard or a cathedral or a cheap vase tucked in the corner of a second-hand store window), - in other words, anything that testifies to humanity's capacity - however modestly - to create rather than destroy a world.