The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it... Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out light; only love can do that... — Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?", 1966

Last September I was struck by what seemed to be universal support for the US government actions against terrorism. It seemed to me that many of these actions were unlikely to achieve their stated goals and might even be counterproductive. The pain I felt and saw around me only heightened my concern that these actions were not addressing the problem.

When I questioned these actions, a common response was "but, we have to do something!" My feeling then, and now, was not to doubt that some action was needed, but that the US response was both wrong-headed in many ways, and not nearly enough. Even the idea of a "war on terror" seemed to reflect a lack of understanding of what terrorism is, how it arises, and the opportunities to do something about it.

I jotted down then a set of actions, which I thought would actually hold more hope of reducing the opportunities to do something about terrorism. In an effort to keep this relatively brief, I hope I didn't make the items too cryptic.

I have 12 steps to respond to 9/11, because "we have to do something!"

1. Educate: Institute major formal and informal education programs aimed at global understanding: history that is more than European and American experiences; investigations of the relations among globalization, new technologies, and economic development; dissemination of scholarship on world religions, economics, and cultures. Our lack of understanding makes it difficult to combat terrorism, and worse, serves as fuel for the hatred behind it.
2. Stop arms sales: Reduce, if not eliminate, global arms production and sales. The US supplies over half of the new weapons in the world today, and 2/3 of those sold to developing countries (see http://salt.claretianpubs.org/sgnews/2002/03/sgn0302j.html).
3. Cooperate with the international community: Become a full partner in international efforts to improve the environment, reduce disease, and protect human rights. The US go-it-alone approach after 9/11 is exactly what infuriates many around the world. Very few of those people would condone, or even consider, terrorist acts, but the response to terrorism would be greatly aided if the US were viewed more as a partner, and less as an overlord.
4. Support democracy: Establish a priority of supporting democratic governments and democracy movements. Where in the Middle East have we done that? Where in Africa? Asia? The Americas? All too often, the US sides with autocratic regimes, thus allaying itself with the enemy of ordinary people.
5. Alleviate poverty: Poverty, especially in contrast to conspicuous consumption, provides a fertile ground, if not justification, for a violent response. The US has the lowest percentage of GDP going to foreign aid of any industrialized nation in the world, currently 0.1% of the already low OECD target (see http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Debt/USAid.asp). What counts as foreign aid rarely goes to the areas of greatest need and allocations are often earmarked for buying military equipment from US manufacturers.
6. Open dialogues: The opportunities for communication across countries, religions, and ethnicities, or even within communities, are limited by governments and the concentration of media control in a few corporations. The US could lead the way in promoting new and improved channels for communication, especially for groups that have little voice today.
7. Conserve: The US foreign policy is inordinately shaped by our dependence on foreign oil. Even modest conservation efforts would reduce that dependence and allow a focus on other considerations for the long-term interests; this, in addition to the beneficial environmental effects.
8. Improve literacy: Most people in every region of the world are against violence and seek similar goals related to family, culture, economic survival, and personal fulfillment, but their participation in decision-making is limited, because they lack the basic literacy needed for written communication and access to information. The US poses the tools and means to have an enormous, positive impact on world literacy.
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12. Learn languages: It is difficult to do any of the items above without full communication, attentive to the nuances of culture and politics. The US educational system, which thrives for monolingual learning, is estranging against history. Although English is used widely in the world today, there is evidence that other spoken languages are growing faster than English and setting in the thousands of world languages is expanding with the support of new digital technologies.