

Dorothy Potter Snyder: The Charlie Hebdo Murders – Why I Am Charlie

By Dorothy Potter Snyder

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Stéphane, Georges, Jean, Bernard. They and eight others were all executed, some as they sat down for a morning production meeting at Charlie Hebdo in Paris, others as they tried to protect the offices of the controversial French satire magazine.

The cartoonists and editors were starting an honest day's work. The two masked gunmen and their accomplice were not. An honest job doesn't require a face mask and an automatic weapon. That's for criminals. Assassins.

Many of the dead were killed for their ideas. For pictures they drew. For words they wrote.

Shocked and heartbroken by the news, I immediately posted in social media "I am Charlie" in all the languages my circle of friends speak. The meme is now my Facebook banner.

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But meme is not meaning. It only points at meaning, the way a Chinese character points to an idea. It requires further exploration. Why am I Charlie? It's not a fashion statement.

I am Charlie because I was a New Yorker on September 11. I watched Tower 1 crumble, saw a man fall from the sky rather than burn to death. I walked uptown with debris-dusted survivors on that ironically sunny day. I know what it feels like to have an ordinary workday dismembered by an act of wanton violence.

9/11 propelled me out of New York to seek a living as a touring musician in Europe. Based for a while in Berlin, I learned that multiculturalism has a different feel in Europe than in New York. A very visible contingent of immigrant Turks remained ostentatiously apart in my Kreuzberg neighborhood while still enjoying the material benefits of the German system. I'll never forget being bullied by a 12-year-old Turkish boy in an Internet café who tried to harass me off a computer he wanted to use. "You're just a woman," he declared shrilly. Now he's old enough to kill.

I am Charlie because I've worked at magazines most of my life. The atmosphere and offices of Interview where I was employed in the late '80s were similar to what I imagine Charlie Hebdo's offices to be. At Interview, we enjoyed an open office space on 33rd Street, a former electrical substation that Andy Warhol had converted into a quirky headquarters for his pet publication. The loft space encouraged the creative atmosphere of a close (though sometimes dysfunctional) family. I imagine assassins barging into one of our cozy production meetings, the receptionist taken off-guard, her telephone receiver hanging in mid-air, the incongruous gunfire. These mental images repel me. I can't get rid of them.

I am Charlie because I am a writer, my sister is a writer, and many of my friends are writers and artists. I am taken off-guard by how few in my circle have reacted publicly or passionately about the Paris murders. I posted my support for the staff of Charlie Hebdo on the group page of my MFA program, and was surprised that there were no "likes," no comments. It was a loud silence. Why? On 9/11, all French people were Americans. Why are we, American writers in particular, not responding with equally passionate and immediate fraternity?

Finally, I am Charlie because I live in a neighborhood with two Muslim households, and my relationship with them is strained. They live here as if by accident, maintaining themselves deliberately apart and separate from their neighbors. The men of these households greet me, a woman, only grudgingly when I smile or wave first. At Halloween, there's a prominent sign on the front lawn saying "No Trick or Treaters," when simply turning off the porch light would do. These are explicit statements of a self-imposed "otherness," an unfriendliness that teeters on the edge of disdain. A simple wave recognizes shared humanity, and my Muslim neighbors deny me this.

Propaganda machines world-wide have always dehumanized the “other” as the first step in making him easier to kill. We must beware of dehumanizing the Muslim community, and Muslims must do better to communicate a message of friendship and social cooperation in the communities they inhabit. Muslims, though they may not know it, are Charlie too.

I am Charlie. Everyone is Charlie.

Dorothy Potter Snyder lives in Durham.

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