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## From a Distance

Remarks made in Keohane Quad on September 11 2006

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Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* describes a man who joins a republican guerilla group in the mountains during the Spanish Civil War. At one point he spots a nationalist soldier on horseback from a distance and kills him. He then raids the cavalryman's purse, and inside finds personal mementos, a photograph of the soldier's wife, some intimate letters, and items indicating the soldier's intense personal faith. Suddenly the cold act of war is revealed for what it was, and a feeling of revulsion creeps over the reader. This is no longer an ideological struggle; it is the ghastly abrupt shattering of a beautiful set of relationships and loves.

The suicide bomber, is someone who's got themselves into a state of mind where they can only see from a distance: the sort of distance from which you can't see anyone face to face, meet another person's eyes, hear another person's story, begin to conceive of who and what they might love. They have blocked out of their imaginations the myriad host of narratives that today beg to be remembered. All violence works with that sort of distance; it depends on not seeing, not hearing, not sensing certain things. No one would ever have been able to carry on as a soldier in earlier days without the training not to see or think about an enemy in personal terms. Sometimes what made soldiers break down in an environment like the trenches of the First World War was some moment when they became aware of the humanity of a particular enemy.

One of the disturbing things about religious faith is that it tells us that God never sees at a distance, never sees things only in general. There are no lives that are superfluous, no lives you can forget about. September 11 starkly contrasts the cold calculation of terror, the calculation of distance, that cannot see, cannot hear, cannot feel, lest it be revolted and turn from its murderous purpose, with the counter-narrative of intimate complexity, those anguished cell phone messages, those desperate acknowledgements of what most mattered in lives about to end, those extraordinary sacrifices of firefighters and strangers and honest bystanders.

The life of the university is textured by precise detail, by careful evaluation and by dispute over minor differences. It is life close up, and in that sense it imitates the life of God, close up and giving full attention to the world's intimate detail. This is how we respond to the memory of September 11. Let us remember particular people, let us commemorate particular times, let us honor particular stories. Let us, as a university, renew our commitment in loving attention to details that matter. And so let us defy those who harden their hearts to bring about savage destruction through seeing merely from a distance.