

Discussions With Students Regarding the Death of bin Laden

Reasons we can celebrate:

- BinLaden masterminded a terrible event that cost thousands of lives on 9/11.
- He had planned many terrorist attacks before that as well, including the detonation of a bomb in one of the towers in 1993, the bombing of embassies overseas and other such attacks.
- He has continued to foment anti-American sentiments among people of many countries.
- He was a very charismatic leader and was the leader of this movement.
- He has been on our “most wanted” list for many years.
- For families that lost loved ones on 9/11, this may bring, to varying degrees, a sense of justice for them; certainly something for which they can be grateful, but not closure for their loss.
- This was a remarkably difficult maneuver and required very courageous actions on the part of those in our military who carried out this attack.
- For all of the other reasons we’re seeing on the news! Terrific celebration.

Reasons for caution in our responses:

- It is very easy at times like this for us to say things that are stereotypical and include Muslims in general in our statements, or paint a picture that Middle Eastern people are violent or are, as a group, anti-American.
- Times like this the backlash internationally can be significant, so there may well be acts of revenge taken against embassies, agencies providing aid to the Middle East or other places, and tourists.
- At times like this, the backlash in our own country also can be hateful, can be stereotypical, can be directed at innocent Americans who have come to our country with the very same values as the best of us – to be part of a free country that allows people to create lives they may not be able to in their countries of origin.
- We need to be cautious in our assumptions that this will bring a sense of closure or justice for individuals who lost loved ones in the attacks on 9/11. Some will find much greater relief or closure than others. So, while this does provide a measure of closure – for some people a great measure – we have to remember that these family members will still wake up tomorrow with that huge hole in their hearts for those they lost. We must remember that family members will each have their own reactions. In some cases, this also may bring up the memories of 9/11 so vividly that, instead of relief, they may have a re-emergence of symptoms similar to those they had almost ten years ago. Instead of exclaiming, “This is so great for you and your family,” we might instead open with, “I’ve thought so much about you... how is this for you?” In other words, ask rather than making assumptions.
- Although he was the leader, this movement is characterized by organization of “cells” or small groups of followers who also have, within them, the capacity to wreak havoc as well. This is not the end of a movement or of the danger of al Qaeda.

As we can see already on the tweets coming into news websites, this has provided an opportunity for people to spew hate and venom that can easily become generalized. None of us has the right to minimize someone else’s sense of raging injustice about what this man did, but too, we only foment more dissension if we allow this to become a basis for stereotypical blame. **We all do need to be responsible for our words and our actions, including recognizing whether our words or reactions further foment aggression** of the very sort we actually detest – actions of targeting innocents in the name of a cause. This characterizes the attacks on 9/11, and would also characterize any actions against innocent people of particular cultural or ethnic groups here and abroad.

A great opportunity that we have right now is to reinforce to students that this is a moment when we can choose to be our best selves from the standpoint of being very careful about who all we include in our statements and in our blame. This is, indeed, a time to be most generous in our actions toward those from Middle Eastern heritage who have come to our country with every good intent.

