The flood of reflection on the anniversary of 9/11 showed that more Americans are searching for a deeper understanding of the world than what is portrayed in newspaper headlines and in sound bites from politicians and pundits. There was a time, not too long ago, when ignorance of foreign languages and societies was considered the trademark of real Americans. Ignorance is a luxury we can no longer afford. For our own self-interest, we must become global citizens.

The changes that have shrunk the world in the last few decades are truly revolutionary. International travel can be cheaper than domestic travel. The Internet and inexpensive communications mean that businesses and individuals can extend their horizons beyond anything previous generations could have imagined. These changes create new risks as well as new opportunities. Should we hunker down and try to create a fortress America that will restrict the movements of ideas, goods and people? Or might there be strategies to respond positively to the new possibilities? This is not a simple, one-time decision to be made by a national leader, but rather thousands of choices that will be made by American individuals, families, organizations and governments over the coming decades.

History shows that the greatness and wealth of nations and empires can be fleeting. Success comes from the mastery of conditions at a point in time, but conditions change. It is rare to find people who are able to learn the new skills required to change with the times.

One of the most important changes required in the emerging global world is to understand people of different cultures, religions and backgrounds. There is a natural fear of the outsider -- those who look and sound different and who appear to have different motives. Indeed, many states were formed to keep outsiders on the other side of national boundaries. These views, however, are not conducive to productive relations with people throughout the globe who are our neighbors, whether we like it or not.

Governments will be slow to respond in creative ways to the new possibilities for international understanding. Almost by definition, governments value stability more than change, and respond to crises with methods that are inherited from the past. It is not too surprising that the U.S. government, with considerable popular support, sees almost all international conflicts as challenges to American security. This fear is a reasonable one, and prudent efforts to protect Americans, including military responses, are sometimes necessary.

Enhanced efforts at national security are, however, a short-term strategy to minimize the risks in a more interconnected world. The challenge remains how to think ahead to create a world of global citizens. This does not mean any lessening of our local and national identities, but rather a recognition that our future lives, and those of our children, will require a different view of the world than that of earlier generations of Americans.

In order to become global citizens, with the skills to work peacefully in an increasingly interdependent world, Americans need to learn, to volunteer and to befriend the stranger.

- Learn. In the old world, just a few decades ago, Americans learned all they needed to know in school. Except for an occasional course in history or geography in high school or perhaps an anthropology course in college, most students are not exposed to the histories, cultures and beliefs of other countries. The result is that we assume that people everywhere are exactly the same as Americans or the opposite -- that other people are so different that we have nothing in common with them. Either of these polar opposites is likely to lead to misunderstandings. Americans do share most core values with the rest of humanity (95 percent of the world's population does not live in the United States), but they are expressed in a variety of different ways.

Learning about other people should be an important part of the curriculum in high school and college, but much can also be learned from reading and the arts. Movies and plays can be a valuable source of continuing education; "South Pacific" offers an insightful portrayal of cross-cultural relationships. Travel can be another opportunity to learn about other people, but this requires real contact and communication beyond the usual tourist encounters.

- Volunteer. Human empathy -- identification with and concern for others -- is a learned skill. Perhaps there may be a natural predisposition for altruism, but practice in helping others develops an appreciation of how our happiness is intertwined with the fate of others. For many of us, it may be necessary to seek out opportunities to volunteer to help others. Helping others is perhaps the most fundamental and satisfying human experience.

Because American culture emphasizes the pursuit of possessions and power (which may also be natural human predispositions), it is necessary to be reminded that we live in communities whose welfare and happiness are intertwined with our own. The more difficult task is to broaden the definition of community to include people in other lands.
• Befriend the stranger. Humans have natural close feelings with family and friends with whom we feel a bond of kinship and community. These bonds are broadened to include new acquaintances who share a common history, religion or experiences. For people beyond these boundaries, we can be remarkably indifferent and callous.

One of the most moving experiences of life is when a stranger comes to our aid. It can be a little thing, such as being lost in a new city and someone stops to help. One never forgets the kindness of strangers when traveling in foreign countries.

One does not need to look far to find strangers, even close to home. International students are always thrilled to be invited to share Thanksgiving or any holiday with an American family. Many strangers have come to United States and become Americans themselves. One in every five Americans is an immigrant or the child of immigrants. Yet their social circles are often limited to people with a shared national origin. Religion, race and class segregate American society into separate neighborhoods, churches and associations. Reaching across these boundaries is not easy, but it is the first, and necessary, step if Americans are to develop the abilities to work effectively in this complex and interdependent world.

These three steps toward global citizenship -- continuing to learn, volunteering and befriending the stranger -- are within the reach of most Americans and may offer a means for us to provide moral leadership to the world community.

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