Evanier: I agree with Roger Kimball, among his many insightful comments, that suffering can make us wiser. That awareness has always come to me, even in my youth. In my reading of Russian literature, which in my estimation is the greatest of all literature, beginning with Dostoyevsky. I cannot rationally explain this, but it has always seemed to me to possess a singular depth of understanding and compassion that arises out of deep levels of suffering. And yet of course, I agree that suffering can also make us harder. Paradoxically, Dostoyevsky’s own vicious anti-Semitism, as expressed in "A Writer’s Diary" but not, as I recall, in his fiction, may be an example of this.

But at the risk of being redundant, I have to return to my essential feeling that the depth of the world’s suffering has still made it impossible for me to embrace a God or belief in a moral universe or to deduce any real meaning from suffering. Like Judah Pearl, I went to the Keren Malki website. I wept at Malki’s pictures. I believe the images of Malki and Danny Pearl, and the awareness of their hideous torturers and murderers that their fates evoke, hover over this entire symposium, and, for me at least, render any belief but disbelief impossible.

As a writer, I can only be guided by my experience, by what I see before me. "Respect life," Dostoyevsky said in describing his writing credo. And what I have seen, in the participants of this symposium and in every chapter of my life thus far, are numerous examples of human kindness, courage and nobility. When I was a very young student in Boston, I saw Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak at Boston University. I remember walking out afterwards onto Commonwealth Avenue with a
feeling of having been moved and inspired--and more precisely, exalted by Dr. King’s moral and human presence. This was, I realized, what human beings were capable of. It has been enough for me. And I have had that experience again and again in my life with mentors, friends, and strangers.

On 9/11 I met a Holocaust survivor I write of in "The Great Kisser" who told me of his experiences in a Riga concentration camp. He and his brother would crack the lice on each other’s bodies for hours at night. His mother was in an adjoining area, and he would sneak a piece of bread to her through the barbed wire. Instead of eating it, she would smuggle back two pieces to him. In my experience with him, he was only slightly living in the present. His experience had been too horrendous to ever overcome or forget. He and his brother, who were both still young and strong, had opportunities to escape the camp, but they would not abandon their mother. Miraculously, they all survived together.

Such examples tell me that I can still believe in mankind, if not a higher being.