

Fragile Days, Fragile Nights  
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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, OH  
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### **Opening Words**

We are here  
*after a week of days we shall not forget,*

to do as we always do on Sundays,  
*gathering in this House of Life in peace,*

looking for hope in the midst of our laments,  
and for solace in the middle of our troubles.

With our strong and bold tradition as our stay,  
*we come so we might face the week ahead renewed.*

And thus  
(whole assembly): *may our reason and our passion keep us true to ourselves, true to each other,  
and true to those shared visions of what we can together become....*

### **Prayer Before the Silence**

And now that once again  
I have seen with my own eyes  
what humanity can do, this time in my own country,  
and now that I live in closer orbit  
'round the gravity of my fears,  
what can I do,  
fragile creature,  
broken so easily?  
Once again I have seen  
bodies torn, hearts torn, and lives torn  
swiftly, in the twinkling of an eye,  
and I am sick from it.

What can I do when I am angry,  
when I want to make a fist,  
when I want to shout with bitter, bitter irony  
"And what do you think all that murder and mayhem  
taught me? Do you think I am politically educated  
now? Punished for my sins?"

And then the bitterness of my own rant burns  
in my mouth, and I remember again  
how fragile I am  
and how making a fist hurts,  
and how my words are worse than worthless  
to bring back the dead, or my innocence,  
or the buildings, or the former meaning of peace.

And so I sit suspended in the present moment.  
the future forever changed, the ways of the world forever changed. Even the skyline of New  
York is forever changed. And I too am changed forever.  
I just do not know how yet.

And so I do what I must do. I shut up for a spell. I stop trying so hard to guess my future. I step  
aside from my fear for a moment. I just breathe in silence. Asking no questions. Awaiting no  
answers. Just being the fragile tangle that I am. Just being together with all these people I care  
about so much, and you, Nameless Truth, hiding behind every yes and every no, every up and  
every down, and every belief and every unbelief.

*silence*

On this day we lift up all those who died this week on that sad day, or whom we fear are dead,  
especially, Melissa Hughes Harrington, cousin by marriage to our member Stace Rierson. I lift  
up the Columbus-born airline attendant Alicia Titus, who was killed on one of the flights, a  
friend to the Blosser family. I lift up before you, o weeping Love, also Christian Maltby, cousin  
to my best friend, Richard, and all the Unitarian Universalists in New York and Washington who  
died because of those assaults. I lift up the aching hearts of their family and friends, the people  
searching for their remains, the people who were witnesses to the calamity and will never be the  
same. I lift up and would name if I could, all the people in the world affected by that day. May  
we join in naming all the others in our life whom we mourn, those with whom we struggle and  
those especially whose love has supported us to be exactly who we are.

*Naming*

Fragile creatures we are, fragile, as insubstantial  
as musical notes on a piece of thin paper. Yet when  
sounded with love in a chorus of peace...ah,  
the strength that hides in such fragility....

### **Readings**

*The First Reading is a pertinent excerpt from a much longer poem by Maxine Kumin, two  
decades old, called, appropriately enough "In the Absence of Bliss."*

The roasting alive of rabbis  
in the ardor of the Crusades  
went unremarked in (my class called) *Europe*

*From the Holy Roman Empire to 1918,*  
open without prerequisite  
when I was an undergraduate.  
Whole communities tortured and set aflame  
in Christ's name in full expectation  
that their souls would waft up the bosom  
of the Almighty.

Why? Why couldn't the rabbis recant,  
kiss the Cross, pretend?  
Is God so simple He can't sort out  
real from sham?

We live in an orderly universe  
of discoverable laws,  
writes an intelligent alumna  
in Harvard Magazine.

Bliss is belief,  
agnostics always say  
a little condescendingly,  
as befits mandarins who function  
on a higher moral plane.

Consider our contemporary Muslim kamikazes  
hurling their explosives-  
Isn't it all the same?  
They too die cherishing the fond  
certitude of a better life beyond.

But I ask myself, what would I die for  
and reciting what?  
Not for Yahweh, Allah, Christ,  
those patriarchal fists in the face.  
But would I die to save a child?  
Rescue my lover? Would I run into  
the fiery barn to release animals  
singed and panicked, from their stalls?

Bliss is belief, but where's  
the higher moral plane I roost on?  
This narrow plank given to splinters.  
No answers. Only questions.

*The Second Reading is from an edited collection of the gathered sermons of Muhammed, as translated by Maulana M Ubaidul Akbar, in his 1954 volume "The Orations of Muhammed." It*

*was preached ten years after the famous flight of Muhammed called the Hegira, after which all subsequent Muslim history is dated. It translates as 632 CE in the Gregorian Calendar.*

O People, listen to me, for I do not know whether I shall ever have an opportunity to meet you next year in this place.

Be aware: No man committing a crime is responsible for it but himself. No child is responsible for his parents' crime, nor is a parent responsible for a child's crime.

O People, listen to my words and understand them. You should not oppress yourselves.

*The blood revenges of the Age of Ignorance are remitted.*

Do not oppress and you will not be oppressed.

Allah has so decreed.

### **Sermon: Fragile Days, Fragile Nights**

I am so grateful to our choral director, Les Kleen for taking the time to change the intended anthem this morning. He found Sting's anthem, which features the simple, perfect words: "How fragile we are."

How fragile indeed.

Fragile in body and in heart.

Fragile before the sheer power of an event  
that fractured us in a hundred ways  
I doubt anyone could ever be prepared for.

And as I prepared this service, I too was fragile.  
My feelings were all over the map.  
Anger, numbness, shock, despair, disbelief.  
Confusion. More numbness. And a marked inability  
to think of anything sensible to say.  
Some long distance calls from loving friends  
came and lifted me up for a few moments,  
but it was a hard week, and I felt fragile  
during every moment of it.

My colleague and friend Fred Wooden, with whom I served on the Hymnbook Commission, serves our church in Brooklyn, NY. The church parsonage is right on the river across from the Manhattan skyline.

Fred wrote me that he watched the New York portion of this event happen before his eyes, the yellow fireballs bursting out of pearly towers. He heard the loud noises of explosions and then the shouts and screams. Later, as he walked from parsonage to the church, acrid smoke scented his clothing with a bitter stench, and fragile bits of white ash rained down on his hair. His senses

were overwhelmed. His heart was overwhelmed and grew thin and fragile, transparent as parchment.

So did mine. And I do not live in New York.

It went like this. My friend Jimmie woke me up that morning by ringing the door-buzzer. I had lots of things weighing on my mind, so I had not been able to fall asleep until 4:00 AM and had foolishly hoped to sleep till 10:00 at least in order to be refreshed.

Jimmie roused me and asked me "Haven't you heard? They are blowing up New York."

"What?!" I cried, and I turned on the television only to see right off the first of the World Trade towers slide onto the streets below as it were no more than a precarious stack of cards built by a precocious child.

Strangely, it reminded me immediately of that memorable scene in the recent film *Independence Day*, when the Empire State Building suffers similar destruction at the hands of aliens from outer space.

Now please, this does not at all strike me as an inappropriate connection. After all, for most people I know, the whole idea of deliberate, premeditated terrorism is a literally an alien idea. The idea of coolly working with dozens of people for at least a whole year in order to commit suicide by ramming a plane full of fellow creatures into a building filled with fellow creatures is at the very least a strange and hard-to-understand pattern of behavior.

Such zeal makes little sense to most people I hang out with here in the States. True believers tend to scare us to death. The zeal glowing in the eyes of the Unibomber and Timothy McVeigh can no longer gaze at us. We protest against the KKK when they show up. We called even a Senator, Barry Goldwater, a fanatic when he called for extreme military measures.

It's hard for most moderns in the States to imagine a belief so strong we would gladly embrace death rather than give it up. We might even imagine, in the words of Kumin's poem, that we might "kiss the Cross" in a pretend way, to avoid that horrible roasting in the fire like those true-believing medieval rabbis she mentions. You and I saw people who jumped to their quick death from the towers to avoid that horrible death by fire; it is such a terrible way to go. The poet, meditating on such belief after watching a car bomb explode and take out a whole café full of people in Tel Aviv asks, "What would I die for, and reciting what? To save a child? Rescue my lover?" An animal trapped in a barn? What?

It is, I think, however gruesome, a good question to meditate on for those of us who tend toward agnosticism and restraint in all things. If nothing else, it might make us clearer about our own deepest values. And such, after all, is our true and spiritual worship.

Oh, yes, we do tend to keep our *clown* zealots around. When we hear the likes of the smirking Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell claiming, as they did openly and without shame this week, that you and I, because of our generally liberal attitudes, *are directly responsible for allowing this*

*horror to happen because we invite God's rage*, we simply roll our eyes and say, "These two are completely off their rockers." We don't take their point of view seriously and lock our doors in defense. We roll our eyes in simple disgust. The White House *itself* this week came out and disowned the ranting of both of these so-called preachers, thank God.

So it is that our "modern Muslim kamikazes" as mentioned by Kumin in her poem, startle us, startle we "agnostics," as she calls most modern Western people of whatever faith tradition. By the impossibly high standard of a suicide bomber, almost every United States-based Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian and Jew is a bona fide agnostic.

It must be a form of bliss, I've heard folks among us say, almost longingly, to have a crystal clear "faith," to be so certain about what you believe, to feel such unalloyed passion that you have no doubts about anything.

But apparently we are not so sure we want such bliss. Maybe we justly feel that such faith, whether religious or political, leads inevitably to mayhem.

Our own history is packed with it after all, the Crusades, the pogroms, the genocide of the Albigensians and a thousand charred heretics at blackened stakes, many of whom were our own ancestors. We have come to figure over time that true belief so often equals murder. Indeed, our own Unitarian Universalist history grew as a result of our stance *against* any final, once-and-for-all universal belief binding on every individual.

So we continue to hedge our bets, encourage our doubts, and retain a rather uncommitted attitude toward things by comparison to a militant of whatever religion. Some of us even go so far as to say we don't have any real faith, but I would argue against that. A living, changing faith is no less a faith than a fixed faith; just different, that's all.

But our common world is filled with folks who are not as agnostic as we are about so many things. And some of the belief found around the world is built not on cool philosophy, argument or even scripture, but on hard, bloody reality. The fact is, the terrorism we witnessed this week has been running rampant over the globe for generations. And it's not just sponsored by individuals hidden away in Afghanistan. Wasn't Tiananman Square a form of state terrorism? Didn't our own CIA claim without embarrassment to interfere in Chilean elections, getting Allende killed and establishing the undeniably murderous Pinochet? Even the Kent State event here in Ohio, although not planned for years behind closed doors, is often regarded as a more spontaneous form of State terrorism. The policies of many nations terrorize. As Bob Graffagnino, a board member of our church, writes, "Are these terrorists truly forces of evil, who simply hate freedom and the American way of life? Or are they not victims themselves, whose leaders and fathers and brothers have been fighting for a cause in which they have been swallowed up, defending a homeland they fear is being stolen unjustly by forces and governments over which they have no control? And what would we do when faced with such hopelessness and despair? And rage? Have we learned nothing in Sarajevo, in Jerusalem, in Belfast? When will it end? How much more suffering and horror and inhumanity can the human race inflict upon itself?"

So many want to strike back hard. I think I can understand. When my friend Stewart was killed by a drunk driver, a drunk driver who had been arrested seven other times and let go, a drunk driver who leapt the curb and killed Stewart, age 25, as he stood waiting for a light, do you think for a minute that I didn't want to find this man and strangle him with my bare hands? Do you think I didn't want to punch out every single court that let this man keep his license?

If you imagine I was not shaken to the core by the waste of this man's life, you are mistaken. I spoke at dozens of rallies of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. I wrote letters to the editor that singed the ink off the pages. I shouted at drunks. I honked at swaying cars.

But my anger was hot, you may say, not cool, like the terrorists behind this week's outrage. You have to be very cool and patiently determined to take flight school instructions in Florida, and attend engineering school in Hamburg, and socialize at cafés all the while preparing to hijack planes in order to destroy two choice pieces of New York and Washington and five thousand human lives at the precise time, 9:00 AM, when most of them would be at work. Of course. Of course.

That's why I brought up the movie *Independence Day*. Some of this cold zeal is simply *alien* to most Westerners, because despite our brave talk about diversity and difference, I don't think most of us have the slightest inkling of how different cultures and values can be on the global scale. We still read the world as if all other cultures were just variants of our own. This is one of our failings, I believe.

Also, there are many factors in this present event that I believe cannot be reduced to simple Middle Eastern politics. The hatred we experience of our whole way of life is beyond politics. There is simply a whole hell of a lot that most of us do not know about the full depth of the cultural motivations. Again, in the immortal words of our thoughtful poet, Maxine Kumin, "no answers, only questions."

The Empire State Building is a symbol of New York.

The World Trade Towers are a symbol instead of our whole Western way of life, towers symbolizing our inordinate economic sway round the globe. It may be, as my friend Richard says, that there is something here that we have to take at face value. Of course you could just say, I suppose, they were big targets, the largest buildings in New York, as the Pentagon is the largest building in Washington. But personally, I think the symbolism of the two buildings counted for more than their size.

But getting back to an angry response. Many people this week were horrified to see videos of Palestinian children cheering when they heard about the events in the States. The anti-Muslim prejudice, based on ignorance, of many North Americans suddenly came to the fore when they saw that, and this despite the fact that many Arabs, like the Palestinians for example, are Catholic or Druze, not Muslim. And, despite Muhammed's brilliant message in his final sermon, "Each man's crime is his own. No one else is responsible," many Americans held *every* Muslim responsible. And stupidly, every Arab, even though half the Arabs in this country are Christian.

Furthermore, when I think about my own upbringing, maybe this video with the children is not such an alien thing as it appears on the surface. Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Premier of my childhood, died in 1971. I was in college, but I was tutoring in a school in the afternoons. When his death was announced, some of the children applauded. Why? Because they had been taught that the Soviet Union was an evil place, its leaders Satanic. When I was a child, my friend Gaither and I used to sing little anti-Soviet songs and ditties that we as children made up without any apparent prompting from adults. How is this different from what was shown on television?

But what about responses to this event?

Well, as long ago as the prophet Muhammed, there is a clear signal in the spiritual texts. In his last sermon, he states with great clarity "The blood-revenges of the Days of Ignorance are remitted." Muhammed was speaking of the constant family vendettas that plagued the land before he delivered the poetry of the Quran to the tribes of his land. One clan member would kill a member of the other clan, and then the other clan would declare a vendetta against that first clan. On and on it went, an eternal circle of violence that had no final end, generation after generation.

The historical Muhammed "remitted," that is, preached against that sort of endless circle of violence. I agree with Muhammed, myself. Just as I wanted to kill Stewart's killer, so would his family, had I succeeded, surely want me to be killed, if not by their own hands, then at least by the State.

Bob Graffagnino puts it this way: "We can build up a few defenses, we can raid and bomb a few terrorist training camps, and in our own rage and self-righteousness, we can crucify and create martyrs of a few self-destructive souls. But in doing so, we fan the flames of hatred and despair, and give strength and resolve to those who align themselves against us and our way of life. We are only guaranteeing the perpetuation of our own suffering and despair."

In short, "Do not oppress," as Muhammed says, "and you will not be oppressed."

This is a hard lesson, but when I look into my own raging heart, I think I understand why so many religious teachers taught such things, *and* why so many of their followers *ignore* those teachings.

For when I am attacked I want to attack back. Plain and simple. But yet when I attack back, the other guy wants to get back at me, and I perpetuate the circle of violence. It cannot be any other way.

Am I saying I am against the whole idea of the military? No, of course not. There will always be ravenous lions in this world that need to be caged, for the sake of the greater good. Admitting that reality is part of growing up. I may not like that it is so, but I am foolish if I think that what I like is the same thing as reality.

But I for one agree with Bob Graffagnino. I do not see how it is possible to root out such terrorism with old fashioned methods. He writes, "If we are attempting to rid the world of terrorism by simply waging war against a few of its perpetrators, then we have already lost."

I think that this is a powerful assertion, one worthy of long meditation.

In the end, I have to have hope. The sheer horror of this event has so many asking so many questions about underlying causes, realities and yes, our interdependence, that I have some cause to think that we might move up a notch or two in the area of global community.

"What life have you if you have not life together?" asks the poet T.S. Eliot. "There is no life," he says, "that is not in community." Then he adds that there is "Much to cast down, much to build, much to restore. When the stranger says, 'What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you love each other?'" What will we answer?

Our lives will be different perhaps, now, but they will resemble more the lives of those who have been our brothers and sisters around the world for decades. Maybe this new awareness of our mutual fragility, our fragility by day, our fragility by night, will help to shape a new awareness of what self-questioning we need to begin so that we can find ways to *stop* not terrorism, but the reasons for terrorism, *alien and frightening as they may seem to us now*.

If our mighty buildings can fall like stacks of cards, so can we.

Therefore I pray that, with this new consciousness wed to our grief, our despair and our hope, we might, 30 years from now, look back on these days and know that the dark red rose of peace can grow even on so cruel and muddy a ruin as we saw created this week. I am sad, but I will not remain sad forever. I cannot feed on tears alone, rage alone, forever, and frankly, the numbness slows me down to a stop. In the end I am convinced I must return to hope. I can't tell you now exactly how I'll get there, but I suspect you and I will have to take hands and go there together. I don't think I can do it all by myself. I don't have a map, and my compass seems to have got broken this week. I think I'll be able to fix it.

But I assure you, I will get there. I'll still be fragile when I get there, too, I suppose, but fragile with hope is a lot better than fragile with despair. Give me all the encouragement you've got, and I'll give you mine. We all have a long journey ahead, and a whole hell of a lot of growing up to do. That's right, a lot of growing up. For with our poet Kumin, I don't know what all the answers are, and there sure is no question about that.

### **Prayer from Terma Collective in the Tibetan Style**

May our eyes remain open  
even in the face of tragedy.  
May we not become disenheartened.  
May we find in the dissolution of our denial  
the cup of the broken heart.

May we discover the fire burning  
in the inner chamber of our being-  
burning great and bright enough  
to transform poison.

May we offer the power of our sorrow  
to the service of something greater than ourselves.

May our own guilt not rise up  
to build another defensive wall.

May the suffering purify us, not paralyze us.

May we endure; may sorrow bond us  
and not separate us.

May we realize the greatness of our sorrow,  
and not run from its touch.

May clarity be our ally and support.

May our wrath be cleansing, cutting through  
our denials.

May we not be afraid to see or speak our truth.

May the bleakness of the wasteland be dispelled.

May we be forgiven what we have forgotten,  
and be blessed with the remembrance  
of who we really are. Amen.