

Across the town: Services Held at All Souls Church Unitarian, New York, NY - Sept. 12, 2001

"Hope will answer helplessness if, and only if, from the sacrament of this shared sacrifice of innocence and the innocent, we become for one another channels through which our faith may flow, and wells of love from which to draw much needed comfort and new strength."

- The Rev. F. Forrester Church

Introduction:

At the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City Wednesday night, about 800 people overflowed the sanctuary into the vestibule and out into Lexington Avenue during a service for victims of the terrorist attack.

After a sermon by the Rev. Forrest Church, senior minister of the 1,385-member congregation, all were invited to process to the front of the sanctuary and light a candle for a loved one, friend or acquaintance who was dead or missing. For 15 minutes, the organist and a flutist played for a solemn procession down the three aisles; in the end, 400 candles had been lit. The Rev. Church estimated that half the people in attendance were members of All Souls, and half were visitors from its East Side neighborhood.

"Never has there been an occasion when we needed one another more," Church said. "It was the most moving worship service I've ever participated in. The depth of shared grief and mutual love was overwhelming." Church described the service as stately, with full choir, four hymns, and readings, as well as Church's homily.

Words by Forrest Church delivered at a Candle Lighting and Prayer Service For the Victims of the Day of Terror All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City, September 12, 2001

How precious life is and how fragile. We know this as we rarely have before, deep within our bones we do. I am not certain how much more we know right now. Our minds imprinted with templates of horror, our hearts bereft with truly unimaginable loss, we face a newly uncertain future. The signposts have all been blown away.

I am so grateful to see you, each and every one. How profoundly we need one another, especially now, but more than just now. We are not human because we think. We are human because we care. All true meaning is shared meaning. The only thing that can never be taken from us is the love we give away.

So let me begin simply by saying "I love you." I love your tears and the depths from which they spring. I love how much you want to do something, anything, to make this all better. We all feel helpless right now; I know that. At times like these and today uniquely so, in the midst of our daily stroll through life reality leaps out from behind the bushes and mugs us. How I ache for those of you who have lost dear friends and loved ones to this senseless and barbaric act of

terror. How I ache for all of us, who awakened this morning to a new skyline, not only here in New York, but all across America.

The future as we know it is dead. Long after the smoke clears from Lower Manhattan and the banks of the Potomac, our vision will be altered by the horror of September 11th. No longer can we measure human accomplishment by technological mastery or by our standard of living. Henceforth, for years at least, we shall be remembered by two things above all others, one conveniently ignored, the other too often forgotten over decades devoted to material progress. Unmistakably and forever inoculated against innocence by this full-scale outbreak of terrorism's virus on our own shores, as a nation we shall be known by the steadiness of our resolve in leading the war against the perpetrators and sponsors of terrorism all around the globe. And as individuals, truly now members of one embattled body, we shall be known no longer by the symbols of abundance and prosperity, but by how well we learn to recognize our own tears in one another's eyes. Hope will answer helplessness if, and only if, from the sacrament of this shared sacrifice of innocence and the innocent, we become for one another channels through which our faith may flow, and wells of love from which to draw much needed comfort and new strength.

At first these visions of a future rebuilt upon yesterday's ashes may seem to contradict each another. Justice and mercy. Retribution and compassion. War and love. Yet they will only be at odds should we choose one vision in place of the other. On the one hand, if hatred and vengeance spur our lust for retribution, rather than the greater quest for peace, we will but add to the world's terror even as we seek to end it. On the other, if we pray only for peace, we shall surely abet the spread of terrorism. Our hands will end up far bloodier than those that lift up arms against it.

History supports each of these statements. In the first instance, we must recall history's most ironic lesson: Choose your enemies carefully, for you will become like them. Terrorism is powered by hatred. If we answer the hatred of others with hatred of our own, we and our enemies will soon be indistinguishable. It is hard, I know, to curb the passion for vengeance. When we see Palestinian children dancing in the street to celebrate the slaughter of our neighbors and loved ones, how can we help but feel a surge of disgust and anger, the very emotions that precipitate hatred. But the Palestinians are not our enemy. Nor are the Muslims. This is not, as some historians would have it, a war between civilizations. It is a war between civilization and anarchy, a war of God-demented nihilists against the very fabric of world order. I hope you will all go out of your way in the days ahead to practice the second great commandment and love your Arab neighbors as yourself. Few outside the circle of those who lost loved ones in yesterday's tragedy are more surely its victims than are the millions of innocent Muslims whose God's name has been taken so savagely in vain.

This said, to pray only for peace right now is unwittingly to pray for a war more unimaginable than awakening to the World Trade Center smoldering in ashes. After a day's worth of breathless repetition, we may be tiring of the Pearl Harbor metaphor, even finding it dangerous. Yet, if anything, the comparison is too comforting. After simmering for decades, yesterday World War III commenced in earnest, against an enemy more illusive and more dangerous than any we have ever known before. Good people here in American and around the world must join in a common crusade against a common enemy. From this day forward, any state that sequesters terrorists as a

secret part of their arsenal must be held directly accountable. The only way the world as we know it will not end in a chaos of nuclear terror is if, first, we take every appropriate measure to destroy the terrorist henchmen themselves; and if, then, we make any cowardly nation state that finances and protects terrorists so manifestly answerable for this crime that they will never commit it again. Both challenges are daunting. I am not in the least confident that success in either or both will prove possible. And I know that the effort to curb terrorism will shed more innocent blood, claiming the precious and fragile lives of children and parents, lovers and friends, falling from windows, crushed under buildings. But the future as we knew it ended yesterday. Even as Churchill not Chamberlain answered the threat of Hitler, we must unite to respond to this new threat with force not appeasement.

With the war to be fought one between civilization and anarchy, our only hope lies in the balance we strike as we enter this uncertain and forbidding future. It rests in how well we balance justice and mercy, retribution and compassion, the might of weapons and the power of love. Our hope hinges on how effectively we unite a riven world against a common enemy. But it also requires that, singly and together, we answer to the challenge of maturity that will arise so quickly from the ashes of our shattered innocence. To do this we must not only gird our minds; we must also prepare our hearts. Above all else, this is a spiritual challenge, one that each one of us must meet. If before we could seemingly afford the luxury of relegating our spiritual lives to the occasional Sunday, today, facing a transfigured future, we must redirect our energies and spirits. In times like these, measured against the preparation of our souls, all lesser priorities lose their urgency.

The Chinese ideogram for crisis juxtaposes two word-pictures: danger and opportunity. Even as our grief today can be measured by our love, the danger we now face suggests a commensurate opportunity. In the theater, a crisis is not something that happens, thenceforth driving the events of the play. In Greek the word, crisis, means "decision." In the wake of this tragedy, it is the decisions we make that will shape our character and (to a degree) drive the plot our lives will follow.

If religion is our human response to being alive and having to die, the purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. Over the past two days, all of us have lived with a heightened sense of life's preciousness and fragility. We know how easily it could have been us right now for whom some dear one was about to light a candle. Blessedly, the same thing that makes us more attentive to death can also bring us to life. This saving opportunity matches the danger we have witnessed and now feel. And we are just entering the period of crisis.

The survivors in this city, every one of us, has been changed and will continue to be changed by the decisions we make. We can decide to be angry, vengeful, hateful, becoming like our enemies and poisoning the one well. We can also decide that we can't do anything-that the world is hopeless-and go back to our trivial pursuits as if tomorrow were no different than the day before yesterday. Or we can rise to the challenge and pledge our hearts to a higher calling. We can answer to the better angels of our nature and join in a shared struggle, not only against our foes-who are the world's foes-but also on behalf of our friends and neighbors. We can listen more attentively for the voice of God within us than ever before. We can heed its urgings with acts of kindness and deeds of love.

This is already happening. It is happening here this evening. It has been happening on every street corner of this great and newly compassionate city, from sacraments of self-forgetting valor to the redemptive mingling of tears. Though our minds have been singed forever by imprints of horror, our hearts join in deep admiration for the ordinary courage and simple goodness of our neighbors, made one in shared suffering, reminding each other of how splendid we can truly be.

Never forget this. Never forget the e-mail sent by a doomed employee in the World Trade Center, who, just before his life was over, wrote the words, "Thank you for being such a great friend." Never forget the man and woman holding hands as they leapt together to their death. Pay close attention to these and every other note of almost unbearable poignancy as it rings amidst the cacophony. Pay attention and then commit them to the memory of your heart. For though the future as we knew it is no longer, we now know that the very worst of which human beings are capable can bring out the very best. From this day forward, it becomes our common mission to be mindful of both aspects of our nature: to counter the former while aspiring to the latter; to face the darkness and yet redeem the day.

One final word, a personal one, to each of you present this evening. Don't suffer alone. Call me or any of the ministers here. Just drop in, anytime. We want to hear your story too, that we may know it by heart. In this church there are no easy answers. But after yesterday, easy answers too are a part of the past as well. What our future holds is uncertain, but of this I am sure. What brings us together can hold us together. If together we live in such a way that our deaths, and those whose deaths have changed us, prove worth dying for, we shall (if God exists) have answered God's prayers.