

"Facing The Unthinkable Together"

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All Souls Unitarian Church

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December 7, 1941. November 22, 1963. September 11, 2001. Every generation, it seems, has a date that is indelibly marked into consciousness, a day so momentous, a day so ominous, that nothing in the world will quite be the same after that day. Last Tuesday was that day for the latest generation, as well as for all of us who lived through the defining days of earlier years.

I have never felt shock so deeply as I felt it last Tuesday. All of us learned about it in different ways -- while driving to work or hearing through friends, or casually watching television that morning and being stunned. The visual horrors of the event are so appalling that verbal descriptions cannot come close to capturing its terror.

I have never felt so many emotions competing for my psyche all at once: fear, anger, sympathy, horror, disbelief, compassion, rage, heart-ache, dread, hopelessness, helplessness. The effect of all these powerful and conflicting emotions is a certain numbness -- not numbness of feeling, but more of an existential numbness. There is a denial of reality, a complete inability to accept that what we saw really happened. It is not simply that we don't want it to have happened, it is rather that what happened is beyond our ability to comprehend, beyond our ability to accept.

Four high-jacked commercial airplanes, filled with civilian innocents, are transformed into missiles that target the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, completely destroying the World Trade Center, and along with it, thousands and thousands of innocent people.

It would be one thing, I suppose, if we were mourning such great human loss due to an earthquake or a flood. But the carnage we witnessed that day was an act of human will. Someone, quite a few someones in fact, chose to do what they did. Perhaps what is most incredible is that any human being can be so evil as to consider such an action, much less carry it out. Never in my life, until now, have I even come close to being ashamed of being human, being ashamed of sharing the same species with creatures who could do something like that. This week, at moments, I have felt that way.

And yet, with equal amazement, this week we have witnessed the very best in people the world over. The most depraved behavior of our species has succeeded in bringing out the best behavior in our species. For every story of horror, there is also a story of selfless and generous human spirit. People willingly risk their own lives to save the lives of others. A generous spirit arises throughout humanity to lend support, material and emotional, to those who have suffered loss. Little things: a restaurant in New York closes its doors to business, but remains open for people who cannot return home. Big things: network television cancels commercials and comedy shows, and professional sports cancels games, in order to keep the nation focused 24 hours a day on the issues confronting us. Americans of all races, religions, and politics are more united, more connected -- more American! -- than has ever been the case. In a country where there have long

been serious divisions along lines of race and ethnicity, religion and ideology, these monstrous acts have succeeded in erasing such divisions and our country is now closer to the united society we always aspired to be. The spirit of goodwill is nearly everywhere, like never before. From store clerks to rush hour drivers, people seem far kinder and friendlier to one another, more ready to help out strangers in need, than I ever remember happening. The positive signs are all around, and in the face of such evil as we witnessed on Tuesday, I can also say there is plenty of reason for us to be, for me to be, proud of our humanity. (After all, any issue that can transform the United States Congress into a choir must be a worthy cause.)

Another great gift that has emerged from this sinister deed is the lesson of priorities. Each of us in our own lives, and all of us together as a society, have gained a new perspective on what is and what isn't important. So many problems that once consumed our energy and emotions now seem frivolous. The petty little issues that might have threatened our relationship with someone else, or the big but mistaken issues that divide us as a society along race or class or religion or sexual orientation, can now be put into better perspective. These things should make no difference in how we treat one another -- there are far more important concerns to be addressed.

Nancy and I led two services at the church this week, the first on Tuesday evening and the other on Friday. At these services we invited people to light candles in honor of something or someone, in memory of the victims, or in honor of the heroes, and those who wished to do so could say a few words. Let me mention one comment we heard on Friday that seemed to give perspective to things.

One child lit a candle in honor of the children who lost a parent that day. This wise girl invited us to imagine what it would have been like for these children to have kissed their mom or dad goodbye as the parent went off to work, not knowing that the mom or dad would never return. It was a powerful statement with a lesson that is even broader than the statement itself. Would we all treat a loved one or a friend more kindly than we do if we knew that this was the last time we'd see them? If the answer is "yes," then why aren't we treating them that way now? This picture puts our relationships in perspective better than anything I can imagine.

Throughout the week, all of us have discovered parts of life, that under different circumstances, might have seemed important, but now are put in proper perspective. Maybe we had planned an a huge social get together, or maybe some great anniversary trip. If someone cuts you off in traffic, do you really think that is worth getting upset about? I didn't hear any reports of people becoming irate because they were delayed a couple of days at the airport. After all, they could have been on the fated flight. After witnessing the impact of this week's events on so many lives, suddenly so many things are put into proper perspective; this week all of us have been given a deeper insight into what is most important in life.

Among the many questions that have loomed before us this week, there are two I wish to consider this morning. "How could this have happened?" is one question. "How can we respond to these events," is another.

I confess I don't have a better answer than anyone else to the question of how this could have happened. There are of course some technical and policy answers concerning intelligence services and foreign policy, but those are not the answers I'm looking for this morning.

"How could this have happened?" What could motivate, what could drive people toward so much hate, so much evil, so much cruelty, that they would violate every measure of human decency? How could this happen? And how especially, one is inclined to ask, can this have been done in the name of religion?

There are those who would say that these deeds are attributable to the religion of Islam. Those who would say that are utterly and thoroughly wrong, and they are wrong by either ignorance or by misunderstanding.

There is nothing in the Muslim religion, nothing in the Koran, that would justify these actions. This has nothing to do with the content or the teachings of Islam, or any other religion. It has everything to do with how religion, any religion, is held by certain factions within it. It is not Islam that can be blamed. It is, rather religious fundamentalism, religious fanaticism that gives rise to what we witnessed this week. The fact is that there has been almost universal condemnation of these actions by Muslims all over the world.

We cannot and we must not blame any specific religion itself for the actions of a relatively small group of fundamentalists. There is within Christianity, for example, a number of believers who are convinced that God approves of killing abortion doctors, and so they kill. Should we indict the entire Christian world for the fanaticism of a few? Of course not.

It is fundamentalism and fanaticism that are at the heart of this terror, not any specific religion. The fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell was quoted this week as saying that God allowed this terror to be reigned on America this week because -- well, because, he said, America deserves it. America deserves it, because our society mocks God.

Is Falwell's voice the voice of Christianity? I am sure the vast majority of Christians the world over would be ashamed to be associated with his point of view. His is not the voice of Christianity, his is the voice of fundamentalism. Osama Bin Laden's voice is not the voice of Islam, his is the voice of fundamentalism. It is fundamentalism of any kind that claims God is on my side, and those who disagree are on the side of the devil. It makes no difference whether the true-believer is a Christian or a Muslim, they share the same thinking. Timothy McVeigh was a political fundamentalist. What motivated him was the same kind of thinking.

How could this have happened? It happened because in certain parts of society principles of respect and tolerance have died. Respect and tolerance die when fundamentalists act on their beliefs in the name of God.

The second question I want to consider is "How can we respond?" to these events. There are, of course, many things that can be done -- giving of blood, monetary donations and so forth. But that's not quite what I mean by "respond." There is also the question of political and military

response. While this question weighs heavily over all of us, the decisions will not be up to us, and that is still not quite what I mean by "respond."

This morning I'm interested in considering a more personal sense of response. How can this experience change us, or change me, for the better? There is no question that what happened this week is going to change us, change each of our lives, and change how we look at life. I want to consider in what ways we might be able to make such changes more positive, how to grab some good out of the jaws of evil.

I have already made a few observations along these lines. We are all, for example, better able to see more clearly life's priorities and perspectives. We have also observed, I believe, a noticeable increase in general kindness and goodwill in everyday life. I don't know whether or how long this may last, but we can appreciate it now as a valuable gift when we need it.

We have discovered that this world has no shortage of genuine heroes, that there is an impressive number of people of courage and of generosity among us who can and will rise to the occasion when it is needed.

Our response, in terms of how this might affect us in the long-run, must be to identify all the positive values that this experience highlights and re-commit to those values. These values include so much that is expressed by the Unitarian Universalist principles we share:

Respect for the inherent worth and dignity each individual; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; Acceptance of one another, and encouragement to spiritual growth; A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process; The goal of world community with liberty, justice, and peace for all; And, respect for the interdependent web of existence, of which we are a part.

This week's experience, which has exposed the great evils to which human beings are capable, has also brought us back to the basic values that enhance human society. Our response to this experience must include the re-affirmation of such values.

One of my greatest fears for the future is that this experience might harden our hearts more than open our hearts. I am afraid that grief might too easily become translated into hatred. We have already seen some evidence of hurtful and ignorant stereotyping and harassing of Muslims in general and Arab Americans in particular. If this becomes the nature of our response, then we will have learned nothing through this experience.

The word "tragedy" been used frequently this week to describe what happened, and it surely was and is "tragic." I am reminded that there is a technical Shakesperian meaning to the word "tragedy" that differs from our common usage. We tend to think of "tragedy" as some calamity that befalls an innocent person. In the literary sense of the word, "tragedy" is more properly when the calamity that befalls us is of our own making. A "tragic hero" is one who unwittingly creates his own demise.

So far, this is a tragedy only in the first sense. We did nothing to warrant such violence and hatred. But if our response to this experience is to harden our hearts toward others, stereotype and discriminate and harass against innocent people based on race or religion, looking at the world through eyes of bigotry and hate -- in other words, if we respond to this evil by becoming more like our adversaries and by adopting their values, then this experience will become a tremendous tragedy of Shakespearian dimensions. It will become a disaster that is self-created rather than just one that is imposed on us.

We have been through the unthinkable this week. After the unthinkable happened, we can see in each other the need to do something, to reach out in some way, to share with people our feelings. There is something healing about recognizing in another person's eyes the same feelings of fear or sadness we ourselves have or hearing in another person's voice the same sadness that we are feeling. That is why spontaneous groups of support appeared all over the world. That is why so many of us gathered together this week in houses of worship.

That this experience is shared, that we are going through it together, is part of any healing. Another part, I believe, is recognizing, and taking note of, all the surprising evidence of goodness in human beings.

We have great tasks ahead of us. Those tasks vary in enormity and timeliness. But today is dedicated to healing -- healing together. If we can together identify and celebrate the values that are best among us, then we will be strengthened for the future, the future that needs to be strong, to have hope and to stay free. We are going to become better people, better friends, better children, better parents through this process of healing together.