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It is good to be with you today. These are raw times, when our emotions and fears rise close to the surface of our being, and that is as it should be. Never let it be said that we are a people who have lost our hearts. Since Tuesday, we have found ourselves huddled together in front of our televisions and radios, watching the ceaseless coverage. We have gathered together in this sanctuary to lift our united voices in song, to give words and form to our grief. We have cried on the shoulders of friends and strangers alike, lit candles of memory, given blood, and raised flags of solidarity. We have tried to go about our normal routines, despite the surreal quality of these hours, all the while wondering, watching, and worrying. When will it fully sink in? What more will we have to face in the days to come? Will the horror ever end?

Tragedy has a way of putting things into perspective. This is the ironic opportunity of such devastating, soul-chilling moments. "All around us," David Bumbaugh reminds us, "the world cries out for redemption." Normally, however, we are able to distance ourselves from the cries, burrowing down into everyday routines, exercise schedules, family traditions and work demands, goals for personal fulfillment, and the ordinary, enjoyable tasks of a prosperous and stable society. But not today and perhaps not even tomorrow. Collectively, we have been shocked out of our safety zones. We have been called upon to ponder exactly what kind of world it is that we live in. We have been called upon to examine both our power and our helplessness in the face of this attack against not just our nation, but against humanity. We have been called upon to examine our faith to see how deeply we are committed to the welfare of this world.

Still, this does not change the fact that we would wish this all away, if we could. We would turn back the clock, restore all of those lives lost, and return to our innocence, if we had the power to play God. I was moved by the story of a friend's three year-old niece, who lives with her parents in upper Manhattan. Tuesday was to be her first day of school. On Wednesday morning, the family joined up with a friend, who worked across the street from the World Trade Center and was recovering from a sleepless night. They found themselves sitting in the neighborhood playground, beneath what would have been a cloudless sky, but for the white smoke drifting up from the towers' remains. For a brief moment life appeared quite normal, until little Ana saw a toy truck on the sidewalk and announced, "I want to go to Flint now." Honest words out of the mouths of babes, but the truth is that there is nowhere to go, Flint or Europe or anywhere, that has not been touched.

To save our souls or to save the world - what would we choose? I freely admit that up until now, I had seen those two impulses in tension. Religions of all different stripes seem to pull us toward

one extreme or the other, but now I am not so sure. Equally as haunting as the stories of tragedy which emerge daily are the stories of heroism, large and small. Ordinary people helped their coworkers to safety. Ordinary people leapt into the fires to save lives. Ordinary people decided to take on knife-wielding terrorists, to prevent further mass murder. Ordinary people are tending even now to the wounded and the grieving. Ordinary people are sifting even now through rubble and body parts in the hopes of rescue and for the comfort of the survivors. Ordinary people are flying in from around the country to offer their relief and expertise. Ordinary people are standing up for their neighbors, friends and co-workers of Islamic faith or Arab descent, to defend them from those who would take out more anger upon the innocent. What gives us such strength? Such generosity? What resources do we draw upon to learn to do the very things we had never imagined we could do? I suspect that it ultimately comes down to that elusive thing called the soul - the strength of that voice within which reminds us that in the end we are brother and sister to one another; that a good deed has worth without the promise of reward; that life is too precious not to defend it with all the spirit and courage that we have. To save our souls or to save the world - somehow, we must do both.

We cannot explain away evil. Nor do we seem to be able to banish it from our midst, despite centuries and millennia of struggle. But this does not mean that we are helpless or defeated. We can choose how we will face it. You will not hear me claim from this pulpit that this tragedy is God's punishment for our transgressions. Such an image of God is not worthy of our allegiance or time. You will not hear me cast blame upon anyone else, other than the specific terrorists who plotted and planned this unimaginable act, fully knowing how many would die. To do so is to allow hatred to breed more hatred, so that we become a part of the very evil we wish to fight. You will not hear me speculate upon who among the dead and murdered were guaranteed everlasting life - for it is my confident prayer that all are returned, whatever their faith or race or age or aspirations, to that Source of Life and Love which gave them birth and held them in its warm embrace for a while in their precious days upon this earth. We cannot explain away evil, but we can choose not to widen its victory.

Today we stand upon a threshold. This, in and of itself, is nothing new. We stand upon a threshold each and every day of our lives, though we are rarely so poignantly aware of it. There will be choices up ahead. Choices of war and retaliation involving the lives of soldiers and civilians. Choices of negotiations and peace affecting the relationship among nations. Choices of individual rights and collective safety which cut to the very heart of our identity as a free country and a free people. And this may be only the beginning. A new era may indeed be at hand. But in the midst of all this uncertainty, I am reminded of the words of Joanna Macy, who observed: "The heart that breaks open can contain the whole world. Trust your heart. Keep breathing."

In this past week, our hearts have broken open, while still maintaining their steady, determined rhythm through a gift of grace. What does our religion have to offer us in the face of this pain? Would we wish our hearts healed to the point where Tuesday's events seemed like a distant, nightmarish dream? Or would we wish our hearts hardened to the point where we could meet our

enemy with the same deadly and inhumane steel? Neither will be a source of our salvation or of our healing, for neither seek to serve a larger vision of humanity. Salvation is nothing less than our quest for wholeness, our efforts to pick up the broken pieces of lives and hearts and to weave them back together into the fabric of meaning. It is both a personal and collective quest, in the words of A. Powell Davies' prayer: "Lust for power... callousness.... Deceitfulness... hypocrisy... what of any of these evils is there in a nation that there is not in a man?.... Teach us, O Thou, who are in us to save us, that we have no strength to win the conflicts in the world until we have won the conflicts that are undecided in ourselves." David Bumbaugh may be right in reminding us that we cannot wait for some future moment of spiritual fulfillment to take the time to care for our world. Yet, it is the spiritual work that we do, in finding the courage to act nobly out of our pain, that brings us back into the world at all. To reclaim the vision of humanity that rose out of the ashes of destruction this week, to begin to seek our shared salvation, our hope lies in listening to what our broken hearts have learned.

Out of the midst of chaos, our first hope for salvation is found in the words of the Rev. Forrester Church of the All Souls congregation of New York at their Wednesday evening prayer service: "We are not human because we think. We are human because we care." At that service over 400 candles were lit by people in hope for their friends and loved ones who are missing. A Unitarian Universalist colleague raced to the sight of the crash in Pennsylvania to be with the devastated site workers and stunned townspeople in any way that they might need her. Members of our Lincroft, N. J.. congregation went to assist in meeting the ferries in Atlantic Highlands as they arrived carrying the survivors to safety. Members of the Belmont, MA, congregation held a vigil in memory of one of their members who was lost. Throughout the day on Friday, members, friends, and complete strangers walked into the open doors of this sanctuary to light a candle for the dead and to say their prayers. In such moments, we are no different from our neighbors - we long to give whatever is ours to give, however small or insignificant our offerings might seem. Yet, what we so often fail to remember is that no act of compassion or kindness is ever small, ever significant. Indeed it is exactly these, act by act, person by person, that redeem the day from indifference and oppression. They remind us that there is another way.

It need not always take a national catastrophe to recall us to our best and most humane selves. This week a friend of our congregation faced the death of her father. A member received the awful news of good friend's inoperable cancer. Another received the joyful news of a possible match for adoption. I spoke with a young couple planning their wedding and future with great promise. Each person spoke about the need for community and of the gift of support that they were receiving from family and friends. Hope and disappointment. Joy and sorrow. Death and life. They stand side by side, just like the Chinese ideogram for crisis which juxtaposes danger and opportunity. By standing together, and never alone, through crises large and small, we can help one another to tip the balance. "We are not human because we think. We are human because we care."

Our second hope for salvation comes with the realization that the unity and peace that so many of us crave is not a reward or a place of rest, but rather a possibility that we create day by day. I heard one New Yorker repeat the phrase, "Everything is different now. Everything has changed." But he followed it up by saying, "now I say 'hello' to everyone I pass in the street." On a more disturbing note, we have already heard reports of personal attacks on Arabs, Sikhs, and Muslims in our nation. The Flint Journal even carried a story of a young Hispanic girl who was taunted at school because of the color of her skin and told to "go back where she came from." Vigilance against further terrorism is not the only attentiveness that we are called to uphold. Blind rage and fear are never to be trusted, no matter how noble our cause. Our humanity will be tested once more.

I was proud to note that on Wednesday, the newly elected President of our Association, Bill Sinkford, sent out a letter to all congregations urging them to offer support to their Arab and Muslim neighbors, and then personally went to visit the offices of the American Muslim Council in Washington, D.C. The Executive Director issued this statement later that day: "We appreciate greatly the meeting with the president of the UUA and also his letter of support for American Muslims. We are all saddened by the loss of life, and we feel compassion for the victims and families. In this time of crisis it is important for faith communities to come together. We look forward to rebuilding our nation together." Many of you have called me to ask what we can do for our neighbors here in Flint. I have left messages with each of the Islamic communities, expressing our concern and offering our support with anything they might need. I promise to keep you updated. For it is up to us to create peace and unity, day by day.

Our third hope for salvation comes with accepting the fact that we cannot live in this place of horror and pain forever. Even the most shattered heart will one day begin to mend. What does this mean for us? Is it wise to lose the unforgiving clarity of these days? I was struck by the reflection of the Rev. Fred Wooden of Brooklyn in an open letter of thanks for the support which has been offered to him and his congregation: "Life is on hold, like a holiday, but I sense a restlessness to resume life as well. There is a certain captivity we are beginning to feel: physical to be sure, unable to leave; but also emotional, as these events have overwhelmed everything and taken our lives out of their patterns and rhythms; we shall be glad when we can plan the day again.... People say that this reminds you of what is really important, and it does. But should not everyone have the luxury of worrying about their own lives? To be boring and pedestrian may be the greatest gift we enjoy. So enjoy it, and have another boring day on us. The sun is warm and the wind is sweet. The playground, with a view of lower Manhattan and its smoldering sad skyline, was full of children yesterday. They played and they laughed."

We stand upon a threshold. Called remember the precious gift of life and the injustice of its loss, and yet not to be defeated by despair, either. This may seem like an impossible task. For a brief few days, our hearts have broken open and the world has revealed a vision of both danger and possibility. We have witnessed the very worst and best of our humanity, and very little has felt mundane. "Trust your heart." Joanna Macy reminds us, "Keep breathing."

The horror and the pain may fade, but that does not mean that the vision must fade with them. For a time, it rose clear out of the white dust and ashes of Tuesday's devastation - a vision of a humanity united against evil, united across their differences, united for peace. For a time, we were willing to come together in a common cause, beyond our selfish needs or desires, to piece together the fragments of our broken hearts into one whole. For a time, we heard Life's call, in all of its fragile beauty, courage and strength, and remembered not to take it in vain. This vision is what we must hold on to in the days ahead. It may retreat from the obsession of our minds to the more inward insights of the soul, but we must hold on to it and lift it up, again and again, in the face of inhumanity and darkness, of indifference and ignorance. Choose life. Choose compassion. Choose the salvation that asks us to use the courage and strength of our souls, so often born of our trials, to save both ourselves and the world and make us whole once more.

At noon on Friday, Peggy and I went outside to ring the church bell. Neither of us had ever done it before. It took all of our strength to get the first sound, but then they kept coming, in slow and steady song. We rang the bell for the over five thousand dead, then rang it some more for their grieving families and friends. But before we stopped, we rang it one last time, for all of the people who had gathered in the sidewalks all over Manhattan on Tuesday morning and without knowing why, just held up their hands as the towers came down. They reached for the sky as if to do the impossible - to help to hold the towers up or to catch the falling bodies or to reach the attention of the heavens. They held up their hands in a silent prayer of protest and unity that is still ours to hear and to pray. May their prayer and the memories of those lost not be in vain.