

A Day Beyond Understanding
The Rev. Edward Frost
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Sept. 11, 2001

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My dear friends,

I was standing in a New Jersey supermarket, transfixed by a television screen, sobbing along with most around me as the second of the two Trade Center towers went down. I thought of the near-hysterical cry of a newscaster years ago as the Hindenberg dirigible burst into flames and settled into an inferno on the ground, "O the humanity! The humanity!"

Like most people, I find this tragedy beyond understanding, beyond the capacity of ordinary feeling--my feelings are far too inadequate for the enormity of what has taken place.

When I returned to my daughter's house, I went out to the garden carrying my John Adams biography. For a long time, I simply stood and stared, across the soy field, out to the grazing of horses, the image of collapsing buildings carrying thousands of lives brutally imposed on all that beauty. I finally sat, picked up the book, and turned to the inscription page which holds only these few lines by John Adams, written in 1774 to his wife, Abigail,

"We live, my dear soul, in an age of trial. What will be the consequence, I know not."

Is ours a "faith for all seasons?" A faith for such a time as this? What is our faith? Certainly not that God authored this horror to get our attention and teach us a lesson or that, if not the author of it, one who will somehow make it all turn out alright to his greater glory. God, in my intimation of God grieves this day to the full depth my own soul's descent could not reach. Our faith is grounded in hope--hope that is faith precisely because in this, even this, we continue to find glory in the human spirit--if for no other reason than we continue to look for it.

At the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, I wrote a piece for our Sunday Service (which was somehow picked up by Jane Pauley and read by her on the evening news. I was deeply moved that so many people across the country found some solace--and maybe some sense--in it. I thought of that piece today and share it with you again (unedited).

I very much regret not being with you in this tragic time. Suzanne convinces me to stay put and being this close to New York City, it's not likely I could get away anyway.

I began by saying the event is beyond all understanding. I leave you with these words from a Benediction I often use at the close of a Memorial Service--"May the Peace which passes all understanding be with you."

OKLAHOMA CITY, by The Rev. Edward Frost
Friday, April 21, 1995

A member of First Unitarian church in Oklahoma City writes on the Internet, "I've always been an existentialist and believed that all we had to protect us against the cold, existentialist winds of the universe was the campfire and our fellows around it. Today I feel as if someone in that circle poured water on the fire. I feel lost, as if everything I believe holy and true is nonsense, illusions. I'll be o.k. But I'll never be the same."

It is being said that America will never be the same, that the nation has been struck at its heart. The President of the United States himself used the word: "Evil." The Main Street U.S.A. ideal, the myth of invulnerability, the sense that we are too good to be mortally wounded, must now submit to the reality of evil. It is the end of the age of a nation's innocence. I was a little boy, five or six years old, living in England when my city was still being bombed. I never knew innocence. I assumed being bombed, losing my friends and relatives, gutted buildings and smoking ruins-- I assumed this was the nature of existence. They say Americans will never feel safe again. I have never felt safe, not in fifty years have I assumed that there is a place of safety.

The children of Oklahoma City-- the children of America and our children here today have come into a world being called, now, insane. I can offer this--as can millions of survivors of battles, bombings, concentration camps and all manner of human and natural terrors-- that if the world is not innocent as Eden, purely good and safe, nor is it an evil place. There is evil, which--who really knows why-- some people come to embody and inflict upon the innocent. But there is also good, which I truly believe is embodied by the vast majority of humankind. For every insane bomber, there are tens of millions of people who will crawl into the smoking ruins toward the voice of a crying child, who will sit and cry for the suffering of people they never knew, who will--in the face of such evil as this-- remind us over and over again of what is good.

The world is not a safe place. No one ever said it is. We teach our children that the stove is hot, that the street is dangerous, that the woodpile is not safe. We also teach our children to hear the music, to sing the songs, to honor the creatures and the earth we share together. We teach our children not to talk to strangers. We also teach them, by our example, by the tears we shed for the children of Bosnia, and Sarejevo--and now of Oklahoma City-- that life is so good, so worth risking, that our hearts ache when a single life is lost. It may be that someone around our campfire will do us harm. Still, the circle of humankind around the light and warmth is what we have. It would be far worse for us if, in our fear, we doused the fire and ran, alone, into the dark.

I light this chalice as a prayer for comfort for those who grieve the dead and dying of Oklahoma City. I light it as a tribute to all those whose humanity called them into the fallen place to save who they could or simply to be within their hearing. And I light this chalice as a symbol of that fire --truth, goodness, hope, love-- around which we gather for comfort and for courage.