

THE SHAKING OF THE FOUNDATIONS

by Galen Guengerich

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We've seen so much sorrow this week. The first fruits of hate have been bitter indeed. Some of you lived through the attack in person; the rest of us witnessed it on television. All of us smelled the smoke. Together, we've listened to the silence of subways shut down, the scream of fighter jets overhead, the lament of the sixteen-year-old still searching for both of his parents, and the woman desperately looking for her son and her daughter. Then there are the images: the fireball, people jumping, firefighters sobbing, hordes of people walking north along the Avenues, Times Square deserted, and ashes falling like snow. The financial district looks more like Baghdad or Beirut than the Capital of the World. Then there are the numbers: hundreds known dead, many thousands still missing, thousands more injured. Everything is more serious now.

We've also witnessed acts of unbelievable bravery. As one commentator said yesterday, "New Yorkers may be the most cynical of people, but their heroism this week has been one for the history books." Even with their comrades dead by the battalion, our police and firefighters have risen to their mottos: New York's Finest, and New York's Bravest. Our mayor has been tireless, compassionate, effective and ever present. There were heroes in the towers, heroes on the ground, and even heroes on the planes-- especially United Flight 93, the one headed for Washington that crashed in Pennsylvania. Thomas Burnett and Jeremy Glick, the two men who apparently led the mutiny against the hijackers, have been cited for possible posthumous Medals of Freedom. What incredible heroes.

Our city and our nation have been shaken to their very foundations. The images and sounds of the week recall to mind a passage from the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah:

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void,
And to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
And all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no one,
And all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
And all its cities were laid in ruin (*Jeremiah 4:23-26*).

During the late 1940s, the theologian Paul Tillich invoked this biblical text in a sermon about the terrors of the Second World War. It is also an apt description of the onset of what many are now calling World War III. The term is not an overstatement. As the historian Richard Reeves said, when asked by CNN Senior Analyst Jeff Greenfield to put the attack in historical context, "Your generation has been misled. This has been building since the Crusades. It was inevitable that East would eventually meet West."

Benjamin Barber's 1996 book *Jihad vs. McWorld* explores the radical difference between these two worlds, yet demonstrates their paradoxical interdependence. Anyone who reads the daily papers carefully, Barber says, knows that the world is caught between two eternities, Jihad and McWorld. Jihad reflects the tribal past, and McWorld anticipates the cosmopolitan future. They operate with equal strength in opposite directions, one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalizing markets. Jihad forges communities of blood rooted in exclusion and hatred, while McWorld forges global markets rooted in consumption and profit.

In this sense, fundamentalism is not a religion. It is a worldview that requires the annihilation of all contrary convictions. Six years ago, Osama bin Laden declared war on the evil empire of the West, and thus on the United States as its leading exemplar. His mission is clear and his disciples are unwavering. Our enemy is not a coward, nor is the violence inflicted on our nation senseless, at least not on their terms. Osama bin Laden's form of fundamentalism will be fiendishly difficult to stamp out. It will certainly take years--a long commitment in the same direction. The battle will shake our nation and our world to its very foundations. Indeed, it already has.

What we need is something that remains firm when all else is crumbling. In the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust, Paul Tillich described his experience of discovering strength in life that emerged despite the fire of trials and tribulations. "There is something immovable and unshakable which becomes manifest in the crumbling of our world. On the boundaries of the finite, the infinite becomes visible. This is why the prophets were able to face the shaking of the foundations. It is the only way to look at the shaking without recoiling from it." In other words, when everything comes tumbling down, it's a good time to look around and see what doesn't.

This strength that rises from the source of life has many names. The Hebrew prophets understandably called it God; any power that can withstand the shaking of the foundations is surely divine. But the New Testament is more specific about the nature of the strength that endures. In a familiar passage from the first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle explains that almost everything will eventually pass away, except three things: faith, and hope, and love. These will always hold us steady when trouble comes. Faith lifts us up, hope keeps us going, and love holds us together.

If we are to persevere in the days ahead, we need faith: faith in our leaders, faith in ourselves. After a slow start, President Bush has done a laudable job in the past few days of balancing his dual roles of Mourner in Chief and Commander in Chief. We need to rally around him and trust that he will be President for all of us. His stern censure of Jerry Falwell's hate-filled words--did you hear that Falwell blames homosexuals, feminists, and abortionists, among others, for Tuesday's attack on America?--is surely a sign of his commitment to lead in a way that unites rather than divides.

We also need faith in ourselves. Doubts about our national character have been raised repeatedly in recent days. Many people wonder whether the children of prosperity have the stomach and the attention span to make the sacrifices necessary to uphold our ideals. But not everyone wonders. On Friday afternoon, a New York City police officer appeared unannounced at the door of my office. He had attended the candle lighting service here on Wednesday night and wanted to say thank you. He also told me that as a child he had lived across the street from the church, and had attended church school here. But mostly he talked about the events of the previous three days, and his time down at the scene: the horrific carnage, the dogged determination of the searchers, and the anguish of the victims' friends and relatives. He talked about how upsetting the smell was, but even more the swirling shreds of paper in the streets: torn photos, charred calendar pages, partial memos, unreadable degrees, incomplete lists.

But he also said that he has never felt better about being a cop. "The people have been wonderful to us and to each other," he said. Everyone offers to help and applauds what we do. If I could go to work every day and feel like I do now, I wouldn't worry how the contract negotiations were going. The city could keep the extra money. Today, everyone is concerned about the right things and angry about the right things and happy about the right things. I just want it to last after the crisis is past."

We need faith that we too can be heroes by acting in ways that make a difference. We need to keep the foundations strong. We also need hope, which is grounded in a sense of that to which we as a nation have been called. One of the most powerful photos I have seen in the past few days shows the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center, with the Statue of Liberty in the foreground. The statue represents the best of who we are. She is...

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand
Glowed worldwide welcome
Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door! (*Emma Lazarus*)

Our mission as a nation is not to amass wealth or exert power or exact revenge. It is to be Mother of Exiles, a golden door for all who yearn to breathe free. When we go to war, we fight in

freedom's name for all whom fundamentalism and tyranny have enslaved. We need to keep the foundations strong.

We also need love--for our country, for each other, and even for our enemies. We have done something extraordinary over the past five days. We have paid attention to each other in ways we usually never do. We have listened and cried and phoned and given and hugged as though it really mattered. And it did matter. I want that same spirit to continue. As your minister, I give you permission to grieve what we have lost. Stress, fear, anger, uncertainty and grief are entirely normal reactions to what we have endured. Working through these feelings will take time. Don't try to go it alone. Reach out. Call me, or Forrest, or Jan, or anyone close to you who can help.

Also, I give you permission to care about ordinary things. Even though the World Trade Center has been destroyed and thousands of people have died, you need to care about ordinary things that aren't ultimately important but that help keep your foundations strong. Life persists, and most of what bears it along is perfectly ordinary and mundane. Care about ordinary things again. Have a picnic in the park. Buy a new book. Buy some stock--tomorrow morning. We need to keep the foundations strong.

We've seen much sorrow this week, and many acts of courage and bravery. We must mourn our dead and celebrate the heroes among us. And have faith, keep hope, and give love. That's what will keep the foundations strong.