

**The Possibility in Vulnerability**  
**September 16, 2001**  
**Reverend Kathleen Hepler,**  
**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Mounmouth County,**  
**Lincroft, New Jersey**

**Reading:**

*Cure at Troy*

Seamus Heaney's translation of "The Philoctetes" by Sophocles

Human beings suffer,  
They torture one another,  
They get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
Can fully right a wrong  
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in goals  
Beat on their bars together  
A hunger-striker's father  
Stands in the graveyard dumb.  
The police widow in veils  
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that further shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracle  
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing:  
The utter, self-revealing  
Double-take of feeling.  
If there's fire in the mountain  
Or lightning and storm  
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
The outcry and the birth-cry  
Of new life at its term.

### **Sermon:**

I'm listening for birth-cries. I am aware that positive change of entrenched systems and of the human heart can be the result of great tragedy. I do not wish tragedy for the sake of change. But here we are. "Human beings suffer. They torture one another. They get hurt and get hard." I'm listening for the birth-cry of a new way. I am trying to figure out what wolf to feed in myself. I'm trying to figure out how to be the change. I'm struggling.

I could take a stand and rail against Jerry Falwell for blaming the liberals for what happened on September 11. His god has decided to punish America for the wrongs of liberals. I would find comfort in being self-righteous about his views. It would give me an anger focus, just as his venting against pro-choice people and homosexuals and feminists does for him. He has a face for the enemy, and it's not him. I could comfortably have him as a face for my enemy. I'm trying to figure out how to be the change away from that well-worn path. I'm trying to resist the urge to point fingers without deep reflection.

Does the birth-cry of the needed paradigm shift reflect the pain involved in not going the easy way? I'm trying to resist that...yet the way is not clear and it is so enticing to fall into the rut of pretending I know what the problems are and of course, their solutions. Save me from the quick fix. Save us all from the quick solution to September 11th.

I could do a nice handy, self-righteous piece on the moral shallowness of those who blame all Muslims for what possibly...for we don't know yet...a few did. They have found the face of the enemy and it is any Muslim anywhere. They have found the enemy and it is not them. I could comfortably have those who generate such fear, as a face for my enemy. I don't think there is a person in this room who does not think ill of that kind of stereotyping and want to speak against it. And, so many of us are and will, must and should. They will say the Muslims are wrong. I will say they are wrong. There is a familiar loneliness in this discourse. It is this discourse that often fuels our public life.

Aren't we yearning to go beyond, deeper into human discourse? Don't we have to go within first and recognize the need to have an enemy as common to many of us? I'm with Israel's foreign minister who notes, "this is not a clash of civilizations...the Muslim world versus the Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish worlds. The real clash today is actually not between civilizations, but within them....between those Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews with a modern and progressive outlook and those with a medieval one." It is a clash between fundamentalism and something more flexible that sees the whole world as a web.

It would be very easy for me to speak the next decade away about the way in which our President has responded.....I do not like it. I find the phrase "they will pay" pandering to the lower brain of our common humanity....but I cannot say I am immune to those feelings.

Somehow it is too easy to go there. It is too obviously part of the same mentality of those who committed the crime. ( And, by the way, I do not see this as war declared by another country. We do not yet know for sure who did it....if it is a small group....it then, in my mind is a crime, not a war) Our President reflects a role many want him to play...aggressive and sure when this time, if it will have lasting positive heritage, calls for something far different.

There is something waiting for us beyond such simple dichotomies of right and wrong. That's where I could go. Something else beckons us. There is an opening, a wound, a space...with what will we fill it? We will see the World Trade Center implode over and over again on our split-screen TVs. We well might see the economy take an upward turn. Something in this painful space is asking us to disconnect militaristic cures and economic abundance. Let us breathe into this painful moment and discover a new creation.

The easiest place for me to go to assign blame is to the economic and social and foreign policies of the United States. I am very practiced at this. I have many critiques of our policies...more and more so as the bottom line of profit goes global. Easy for me to assign the hate which motivated these attackers as emanating from how the U.S. has treated people , cavalierly, and with so much lack of humility. It is so easy for me to go there that I have to struggle very hard not to do it. Is there a new way of thinking and being that awaits in the space of this halting of life as usual?

In this time of feeling so vulnerable, something is calling us to go another way. Do you feel it? Hoping for a "sea-change on the other side of revenge." On the other side of blame that makes hated "others" out of human beings. I don't know how. I'm trying to stay out of my well-worn ways of thinking and acting. How can I live my unity with terrorists and those on the religious right? I don't even like the question. Yet it waits there as a struggle that just might have the key to non-violence in it. There is an opening here, however violently rendered. Systems, organizations, families, people can change profoundly as a result of crisis.

I don't seem to be able to go to patriotism. It feels as if it is being used as a hammer, a sword, a way to stay entrenched in pride that does not go into the creative, the new, the other-than- "we are the best, we will always be the best, and we will get those who in anyway say otherwise..."

I have resonated with those who reflect on the lack of humility in statements that reflect disbelief about this happening to "our way of life". What "way of life" is that to which they refer? We are not immune from outside threat. Many, many people in the world live with constant threat of attack and terrorism. Could the opening of our consciousness have to do with realizing our solidarity with them?

Is there a depth dimension to our questions of ourselves as a nation that is not happening in a public way...conversations far more complex and helpful than a simple kind of flag-waving patriotism? I want my patriotism to go deeper. I want to wave the flag for all of the wonderful things that America has been, is and will be. I want to wave the flag for an America that has the courage to be self-reflective at such a painful time as this. I want to be part of discontinuing a self-image that requires morally suspect uses of power.

How can I help that happen? How can I do it without joining one well-worn camp or the other? How can I do it without scoffing at the patriotic and distancing myself from them. What bridge do I need to take toward those who I see as the enemy?

What has happened this week is a human tragedy. There will always be human tragedies and god-concepts to explain the most ungodly acts. "History says, don't hope on this side of the grave."

There is a great disturbance in the world psyche this week. The pain and woe and grief and fear have carved a deep wound. May we all not forsake the beautiful human face of woe and grief and fear and despair too quickly. It is our lifeline to an awareness of the other and how we are related to her, to him. It is the lack of that ability to know how we are related that has caused this profound disaster, no matter what the description of why or what side of whatever fence from which the description is spoken.

Some of us in the undoing racism group met on Thursday and watched a video about a project called "Compassionate Listening". American Jews and Palestinians in Israel embarking upon an experiment where they meet to listen only. There is no debate about issues, just listening to the pain and hope of others. They are finding it to be a very transformative experience, a way to connect with the vulnerability of another and replace the face of an enemy with the face of a friend.

As "business as usual" seeks to reassert itself...may we look for the cracks in the walls of that which divides religion from religion and nation from nation, person from person. As we seek to rebuild, may it be a construction of another kind. I do not know how to describe it yet. But, in the opening that great pain brings, we all can sense it and shift a bit.

The foundation of this new creation will be the respect for differences and the common belief that unity is desirable and possible. Its frame will be deep listening and trust beyond all fear. Its purpose will be the creation of a more hopeful and peaceful world. The bottom-line profit will be tenderness toward the pain of others and delight in their joy... joy which can only arise out of equanimity of resources and power.

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We have a long, long way to go. So let us hasten along the road, the roads of human tenderness and generosity. Yet, before we set out may we pause in this horrible space and reflect on our direction. Groping we may find one another's hands in the dark and take steps on a new path.