

There is a Season
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First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia
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We come together on the first Sunday after a coordinated campaign of violence that has shocked the entire world. A terrorist attack of such magnitude that much of humanity is united in shock, in grief, and in anger.

We gather together because in times of social upheaval and tragedy we need one another. We come to be reassured that life goes on, that our life-affirming community is present for us, offering hope, and strength, and healing.

We are stunned. The mind stumbles; stutters, stops. We just cannot comprehend that thousands of human beings have been vaporized - leaving no trace - no bodily remains to which we might point and say, "my love." "This was my husband. This was my partner. This was my friend. This was the mother of our children." Just gone - instantly to dust; immediately to ashes.

Our hearts are with the legions refusing to mourn, tearfully walking the streets of New York with photographs of loved ones, holding on to the fading hope that they still live.

Our hearts are with the families of firefighters and police, who said their goodbyes every day, knowing that their loved ones were always at risk; that every goodbye might be the last; dreading the awful news that they have finally received.

Our hearts are with the families of Pentagon employees, working in the defense of our country.

And we think of all those passengers, on routine flights, like we've all flown, and the terror of their last moments. Our hearts are with their families and their loved ones.

It is a time to mourn. To cry. To pray. To light candles. To comfort one another; to reach out. To donate blood and other practical assistance.

We rejoice with those whose loved ones experienced near-misses - those who came to work late; those who made it out alive.

We share a newfound appreciation of the fragility and preciousness of life, reaffirmed in the midst of such profound pain and loss. We pledge ourselves anew to the beautiful, the true, and the good, reminded again that all we really have is this brief moment of life, and determined to make the most of it.

And we ask ourselves: How could this happen? Who could wish us such harm? Are we safe? Is it over? What does it mean? What will we do?

After Tuesday, September 11, our country will never be the same. The question I ask is: *how* will we change? What will we *become*?

The past few days have brought with them all kinds of opinions. In shock and grief, people often yield to their worst impulses. In the heat of the moment, our Senator Rick Santorum can perhaps be forgiven for venting on the Senate Floor that "this is a time - not for justice, but for vengeance." People on the street or those calling into talk shows saying "It's the foreigners. Kill them all and let God sort them out" are expressing grief and rage, not a suggesting a social policy we should take seriously.

Though we should take seriously threats and violence against Muslims, Arab Americans, even Sikhs and Indians and others in our communities who might look different. We must stand with them in solidarity. Next Sunday we'll host a second worship service at 5:00, with other Unitarian Universalists from the Greater Philadelphia area and people of all faiths to make a strong statement that we will not tolerate such violence.

The other day Holly and I stopped in at a Arab grocery store to express our support to the proprietors. The owner had not had any trouble, but he knew of people who had. "A few Americans do something crazy," he said, "are we supposed to think all Americans are crazy?" Why do they think all Saudis are crazy? I lost two very good friends in the Trade Center. I hate the people who did this as much as you do!"

It seems clear that the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked for their symbolic value. If the primary goal had been to cause loss of life, flying into nuclear power plants would have been more effective.

No, these targets, as well as what we believe were others - the Capitol building, the White House - were selected to humble us by creating images that would be seen the world over. They hit two great emblems of national pride: the World Trade Center and the Pentagon - symbols of our vast economic and military power.

The images are carved into our consciousness. The Pentagon, cleft, smoldering. The World Trade Center Towers, we have seen, over and over again, first the planes hitting, the fireballs, and then the implosions. The towers falling in upon themselves in billows of smoke and ash. That powerful, iconic image will remain with us always - indelibly etched in our souls.

In my soul, in my nightmares, the image of the implosion is linked to another: the image that haunted me and many of my generation in our childhood years. That was the image of the mushroom cloud; the atom bomb.

The explosion of the mushroom cloud was expansive, spreading out and engulfing the landscape. To some, it represented our optimism at mid-century. We had conquered nature; we were in control. We had harnessed tremendous power which we could use to provide cheap power for all. It also represented our ability to cause tremendous death and destruction. Which, I need not remind you, we used against others. To end a war

The *implosion*, on the other hand, is reductive. A great monument of our pride was attacked and the towers caved in on themselves. Something inside us has imploded as well. The image will

remain with us always. Representing the tremendous power that was used against us. To *start* a war.

Make no mistake - this is a war we cannot win if we insist on treating it as conventional warfare. We're not going to prevail with aircraft carriers and fighter planes and indiscriminate bombing. If we learned anything from Vietnam, it is that superior firepower cannot defeat people fighting for an idea.

We must repudiate such voices as William Safire's, who in an Op Ed piece in the New York Times told us that "collateral damage" is acceptable. His command of the language does not permit him to hide behind euphemisms. Collateral damage means indiscriminate killing. Responding to a slaughter of the innocent with another slaughter of the innocent will only turn us into the monsters we oppose. It will only sow seeds of hatred, planting a rich harvest for the armies of Bin Laden and the others.

What *will* we do?

On Wednesday, the day after the tragedy, Tom came over to do some work on our house. We were all teary-eyed. He said, "all this talk of retaliating; of bombing; of vengeance. What if - just what if - we sent an armada to the countries we think might be involved - an armada of food and medical supplies? I don't know," he said, "I'm just a carpenter."

I can think of another carpenter who would have approved.

A more sophisticated analysis came from an even more unlikely source. Interviewed on ABC news Thursday night was Retired General Chuck Horner, a commander in Desert Storm. A bulldog of a military man out of central casting, General Horner said we have to do three things:

1. Bring to justice or punish those responsible
2. Undertake an international effort to dismantle terrorist schools and networks; and
3. Initiate an international effort to alleviate the conditions that create the hopelessness that causes people to become terrorists.

Some have said that this was an attack on the American Way of Life. To an extent, it was. It was insanity, blind hatred, and religious fanaticism, but it was also an attack on our way of life. Too much of the world views America as a land that allows others to suffer while guarding our disproportionate share of the world's wealth and resources with force of arms.

What if - just what if - we used this tragedy to look within ourselves and who we are as a nation? What if we resolved that the price of poverty and oppression in the world is just too high? What if a great outpouring of humanity marshaled the resources to act? Would it cost more than a missile defense shield? Would it be more effective?

I don't know. I'm just a minister.

We've been hurt. Badly. May we resolve to heal by following the council of Micah: by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. AMEN