

Fourth Universalist Society in NY reaches out to the unchurched Sunday, September 17, 2001

The Fourth Universalist Society in New York City is an old congregation - founded in 1838 - it dates back to the time when Universalist orators inspired the faithful to hold on to the saving message that all are chosen for salvation. Located at 160 Central Park West, the congregation in more recent years has seen hard times - declining membership, dwindling involvement of young families - and the church has survived by renting out its space to civic groups and preschools in the area.

Into that congregation came its new minister, the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, who moved with her family into the parsonage, enrolled her children in new schools, and held the first gathering of the fall church year on Sunday, Sept. 10 with the 104 voting members of the Society. It would have been a nice calm start-up for a new ministry, McNatt reflected, if events hadn't taken a very unexpected and tragic turn on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

When the explosions that ripped through the World Trade Center occurred on that day, McNatt found herself heading out onto the street with the church's administrator and custodian. They set up a table, six chairs, for people who were fleeing the lower east side to rest at. They got all the bottled water in the church, all the ice, and cups, and began passing out water as people came by in droves. McNatt, who had retrieved her children from their schools, got the children involved as well, and then, as other church members arrived to help, started counseling those who flooded through the doors of the church, now wide open, to light candles, pray, talk to the minister.

In between, she planned services, made flyers with the staff who then joined members in spreading them through the neighborhood, announcing a vigil on Friday night. 175 people attended the vigil, and the Swami of the neighborhood's Vedanta Society came for the service too. Those gathered prayed, lit candles, shared food in the parish hall. A labyrinth had been offered to the church and was set up that night as well. As another meditative tool, many chose to walk it in silence. The earth-centered spirituality group had also scheduled a ritual of the moon; all these practices drew participants and the thanks and interest of the neighborhood.

"No one in the congregation is untouched [by this tragedy]," said McNatt. Not directly affected, perhaps, but everyone knew someone who had suffered a loss. McNatt, a member of the crisis intervention team at her children's school, went to the school to help counsel.

One of the teachers lost her fiancé (a worker at the investment firm of Morgan Stanley). McNatt said, "I try to reassure [the children] ... my five-year-old asked this morning, 'are they going to bomb our house too?' You have to speak age appropriately, different things to the eight-year-old than the five-year-old. I want to be honest with them without scaring them. I can say to my kids, 'there are all kinds of people all over the world working hard to make sure that this doesn't happen again.' What they want to know is that you love them and that you will be with them."

But reassurance is not easy in light of such terror. "The thing that freaked me out," McNatt said, "[was that] there were at least five parents in the school who are alive today because they were in the second tower and ignored the reassurances that everything was fine. That's the kind of stuff

that makes you want to fall apart... the sense of trying to minister to people who feel a sense of doom, and the complete shaking of their foundation, literally and figuratively, while you deal with your own sense of that..."

But ministry calls, and reaching out to people is what Rosemary Bray McNatt has done all week. On Sunday, Sept. 17, Fourth Universalist was filled with 240 people - at least half, McNatt believes, had never been to church before. Here is the sermon they heard on Sunday:

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Turning Around

"We need to turn away from vengeance, from the cries for carpet bombing and the demonization of entire groups of people. We need to turn toward the support and protection of human beings whose only crime this morning is having been born in the Middle East, and who are being threatened, chased, harassed and tormented."

-- The Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt

It has been a week unlike any other.

Ever since crazed terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center, along with thousands of lives, ever since our television screens and radio airwaves have been filled with the unspeakable images of twisted steel and pulverized marble, ever since we were introduced vicariously to the all-too-brief lives of men and women and children who left their homes never to return, we have lived as witnesses to a nightmare. Who could have imagined waking to a day as beautiful as Sept. 11 and ending the day with the world in shock? Even now, five days later, I consider the facts, that a landmark is crumbled into the lower Manhattan streets, that 5,000 people who were alive this time last week lay buried there this week, and I cannot wrap my mind around it. I look at the replays of the second airplane piercing the shell of the South Tower, and I cannot grasp it. In any other country on earth, this destruction would automatically qualify as an act of war. Indeed, the drumbeats of war, of more destruction, of more death, have already begun with a fierceness that frightens me. If you doubt me, let me share these words, excerpted from page three of The New York Post, written for the edition of Thursday, Sept. 13.

"America bleeds. This is war...The men behind the men who rained havoc on New York and Washington need to be called to account. The heavens need to fall on their heads. They need to bleed. Not next month. Not next week. Now. Who are they? Who cares? Locate them. Pinpoint them. Bomb them. And then bomb their smoldering rubble-one more time! America has the means. All that's missing is the call to arms. The weight of America's military might-just short of nuclear oblivion-needs to be visited on those who planned and executed Tuesday's attacks. America's enemies believe that they are on a fast track to heaven. Which is fine. Dispatch enough of them on the journey with no return, and this war will end quickly enough. Bombs away."

At the same time that elements in our city and our country call for mass destruction of an enemy we cannot see, we have seen here in New York an unquenchable spirit, a hunger toward life and love and community that has warmed the heart of the world. Whatever small thing there is to do

in the wake of this disaster, we New Yorkers have pledged our hands and hearts to the task. The tireless work of men and women at ground zero continuing to search for what may no longer exist -- survivors. The generous spirit of ordinary men and women giving all they have and all they can carry to shelters, firehouses and police stations. The churches and synagogues and mosques and temples filled with people who cry not for vengeance, not for peace at any price, but for justice and accountability. In the face of almost unimaginable death, person after person here chooses life.

How bittersweet an irony that we stand amid these horrific events just before the start of the Days of Awe, the most important of all Jewish holidays, holidays unique because they are not tied to historical events for the Jewish people. These ten days that begin at sundown tomorrow encompass both Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is a period in which Jews throughout the world focus on their lives, take inventory of their behavior during the previous year, ask forgiveness for those they have wronged and for sins against God, and repent.

In his book, "The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays," Rabbi Irving Greenberg writes of this time: "The tone of the Days of Awe is basically hopeful, even joyful. This period seeks nothing less than the removal of sin and the renewal of love. Those who confront their own guilt and failure in human and divine relationships-in the context of community oneness and divine forgiveness-can correct errors, develop new patterns, renew life."

What is most touching, most moving about this holiday for me is the centrality of the concept of repentance. That is a word that makes many of us cringe, in part because of the way it has always been used in traditional Christian culture. We hear the word and think of debasement, of unworthiness, of depravity. Many of us here first found our way to Unitarian Universalist congregations like this one so that we could stop feeling tortured by the faiths of our childhood, faiths that used repentance like a weapon against our very souls.

Yet the true meaning of repentance is not death dealing, but life-giving. To repent is to turn, to change direction. And as Rabbi Greenberg writes, "To turn is to be reborn. The power of sin--and of bad patterns--is that it convinces people that change is impossible. People despair of their ability to change and give up the capacity to grow or renew. The promise of repentance challenges this hopelessness," the rabbi continues. "There is a process of rebirth, but it needs attention, effort and help."

In these past few days, our lives have materially changed. We have had our sense of safety destroyed, our confidence in life shaken, our peace of mind shattered. Joy has given way to fear, or resignation, or despair, or panic, or all of the above. Day after day, we found ourselves turning toward death, not only the tragic and senseless deaths of those buried under twisted steel, but the death watch being kept by our leaders as they plant the seeds meant to prepare us for the devastation they believe lies just ahead.

We are told to prepare for a long struggle; we are told that someone will pay; we are told that we will have to give up some of our freedoms so that we might protect our safety. On every newscast and every interview, images of destruction, words of fear, pronouncements of a

permanently altered world rise up to meet us. And the most pervasive sense amid it all is that what is to come is inevitable, that we have no choices, that we face either humiliating invasion and mass destruction, or that we cause the mass destruction of others.

We need to turn. First, we can turn toward the precious gift life is. Hardest to bear in all the news accounts were the stories of the last-minute phone calls and emails from doomed men and women whose last thoughts were of those things and people that make our lives worth living: the love of friends and family, the connections between us that celebrate life. We can turn toward life and embrace those who have joined their lives with ours. We can refuse to take them for granted for a single moment.

We need to turn. We need to turn away from vengeance, from the cries for carpet bombing and the demonization of entire groups of people. We need to turn toward the support and protection of human beings whose only crime this morning is having been born in the Middle East, and who are being threatened, chased, harassed and tormented. We need to turn away from the idea that there is some country somewhere that we should be turning into a parking lot. We need to turn toward the possibility that the governments and the peoples of this earth can bring wrongdoers to justice and accountability. We need to turn away from solutions to the threat of terror that will reawaken the terror within our own borders, and that risk bringing us dangerously closer to the people we oppose. We need to turn toward the reality that we face years of sacrifice and uncertainty as we work to defeat this threat to human life and safety and dignity.

Most difficult of all, we need to turn toward our enemy, whoever that group or groups is found to be. There will be a time when we will identify the people who have done this terrible, terrible thing. And we will be faced with choices about what to do next. Most of us will be incapable of forgiving any group of people who could cause such sorrow and loss. But we are, I believe, capable of deciding whether hate and anger will control our lives and our future as a nation. We are capable of deciding whether we continue to cry out for the swift satisfaction of revenge, or whether we are willing to settle for the more complex reality of justice. I believe that we can turn some day, turn even to that.

As a people, we are nowhere close to that day. Repentance of such magnitude is a process, not an event. The gaping wound to our nation's heart is too deep and too new. We will never forget this day, or the weeks that follow it. We will never be able to put these horrible events behind us and move on. None of us have ever walked this road before, and so we cannot yet know where it may lead us. But we do know this: There are those in this world who, in the face of terrible wrongs done to them, and terrible losses endured by them, have turned their backs on the psychic death that might easily have claimed them. In spite of everything, they chose life.

In this week of sorrow for the whole world, may these remarkable and blessed people, with the capacity for such abundant life, be our guides this hour. In spite of our angry hearts, in spite of our bitter tears, may we accept this challenge to repent, to turn toward this precious life. Amen.