

Thoughts on the Destruction

A homily given to the congregation at West Redding, CT

on September 16, 2001

The Rev. Daniel Simer O'Connell

"We gather this morning to remind ourselves that despite terrorism and violence in our world, we bring each other compassion, courage, and love," writes colleague Duane Fickeisen.

Someone else wrote: Small griefs make us talkative, Great ones strike us dumb.

Now, 5 days after the destruction of the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon, we gather to reflect, as best we can- given the immensity of loss, and recency of the shock- we gather to reflect on where we are now. And we are grateful to be in community.

I have some observations, and after a musical interlude, I would invite you to [come forward and] speak from the heart.

Some Lost their Life, Others Gave their Life.

When the destruction hit, people ran away to try and escape with their lives, to escape trouble & danger. Those that didn't make it lost their lives. Their lives were taken from them. Stolen. Not only the pain of death, but robbed of whatever future was available to them.

When the destruction hit, other people ran toward the crashing, burning, smoking, destruction. They ran toward trouble & danger. These were the firemen, police, doctors, nurses, other uniformed people. People whose job it is to march carefully into the gaping maw of hell, in order to try and see if they could save one or two, or drag someone out. And some of those gave their life in this pursuit. This they did willingly. For complete and total strangers. What impulse moved them?

TV Reveals, TV Conceals.

We get drips & drabs. We get here and there. We get announcements about future announcements. We get details about the ping noises echoing around in the rubble. The ping noise is from an airplane black box. Maybe if we get the black box, we'll know more about HOW it happened. We get lots of HOW it happened. Names, dates, how it worked. Where the terrorists lived and went to flight school.

TV tells us this. It gives us a few facts, a commercial break, comes back, and tells us the same information again, while in the background, the smoke and dust and plane-into-the building video plays over & over & over again, as if it will gain more reality if we just keep seeing it again.

But TV conceals too. TV doesn't tell us much about WHY these suicide bombers did what they did.

No one claims responsibility. That's how we know it is cowardice.

TV can't tell us much about the WHY because they don't know. No one seems to know or care. Instead, over & over again, the focus is on the slow motion crash, the officials at the microphones looking solemn, people talking about what other people are talking about.

And while no one seems to know much of consequence or to be saying anything new, they can't take their eyes off the destruction.

Helpless, Hopeful

A TV reporter is interviewing someone who saw what happened. In the middle of a discussion, a woman interrupts! She has an 8 ½ x 11 piece of paper. On the piece of paper is written in large letters, a man's name, and underneath, a posed picture of a family. She is looking for her brother. She speaks clearly, slowly, and with fear. It is as if she knows her brother- an accountant on the 74th floor- is buried underneath all that rubble somewhere, but she is doing her best to pretend he might still be alive and walking around, and- has anyone seen him?

And another woman gently pushes through to come forward- perhaps a psychologist, ready to take the first woman by the arm, and gently lead her to a bench or chair where she may speak and cry. But no, this woman too, has a picture. An 8 ½ x 11 piece of white paper. With a name handwritten on top, and a family portrait taped on to the paper. And she says much the same thing, and with much the same feeling as the first woman.

It is as if by saying their relative's names out loud and on camera and to the small crowd gathered around, it is as if by speaking out, they keep their relatives alive or at least they are bearing witness to the fact that it was real people in that building, and on that plane.

And as the camera pulls away, so the reporter can wax metaphysical- we can see in the background another woman, a man, a couple- come forward to the small crowd of strangers who are too polite, too in shock, to move away. And they each have 8 ½ x 11 pieces of paper with names in pen, pencil, crayon, and family pictures underneath. And they speak slowly and clearly, and no one- but no one- interrupts.

We stop, We don't stop.

We stop. From 3,000 planes in the air, to none. The stock markets closed, major league baseball didn't suit up, the national football league cancelled their games. Some schools let out early. Lower Manhattan was closed off- no getting in or out. Many of us stopped what we were doing, laid down whatever was in our hands, and found the chair or couch in front of the TV. To watch and to listen.

We stop. 4 airplanes, one corner of the pentagon; hundreds officially killed, thousands missing and presumed dead. Two towers at first, now 5 more buildings gone. 4,000 businesses- gone. \$40 billion dollars unanimously moved from one ledger column to another.

We don't stop. If we stop our normal way of life, we will let the terrorists know they have won, said Madeline Albright, former secretary of state. Today, our airline flights are at 1/4 capacity and moving steadily up. The stock market should re-open Monday. Sports will once again be on

TV, schools will be in session, we will go back to work. We will lower our voices when we speak of this.

We stop. On Friday, the World stood still. At noon, in Paris, in London, in Helsinki, in Brussels, in Lockerbie, Scotland. In the most heavily traveled street intersections, cars simply stopped where they were. In banks, on trading floors, in airports, everyone stopped for a moment. Strangers held hands. Someone spoke a few words. There were moments of silence.

We don't stop. The news will carry this story for a long time. We will see pictures of people we never knew, and hear some of their stories. Somewhere, sometime, a monument will be built. Books will be written, a movie will be made. That future is not in sight yet.

We should stop- our old way of thinking, we have been told. The tragedy changes history forever. The role of the United States in the world has changed. Our president says we must stop thinking about our military and our security in the same way as we did before. And he says our new job is to "rid the world of evil."

Perhaps, a Holy War.

The Jihad, or holy war, in Islam, means to fight against what causes imbalance. I do not understand the motives or whatever perverse logic drove the terrorists to do what they did. I am clueless as to what they hoped to accomplish and why they would think their actions would bring about some desired result and what that result would be and why anyone would desire it. What impulse moved them?

But I tell you this. I plan on learning about that. I want to know what those 20+ suicide bombers were betting their lives on. I want to know what their thinking was that this terrorism would somehow move the world to more "balance."

Will the United States and its allies now respond in a holy war of our own? It may be that the perpetrators of this terrorism have a medieval understanding of justice, or maybe even Old Testament biblical understanding. And it may be that our leaders will want to pursue a "scorched earth" policy of revenge and retribution.

This would mean going in and wiping out their military. Completely. And not only that, but the civilian men. All the men, every last one of them. Like they tried to do in Bosnia. And not only the men would we go after, but the women, pregnant women, and children, and babies, and in fact- all human life. In the area we draw a circle around and call evil, we would kill every single person.

And not only all the humans but all the livestock, all the pets, in fact- all the animals, and plant life too. And then we would burn everything, we would scorch the earth. And then we would radiate or poison the ground so that no one could live off it or live on it for generations to come. You can read about this in the bible.

We could do it again. We could vanquish and then utterly annihilate our enemy.

And I have to wonder. Would this stop terrorism?
And I have to wonder. What *would* stop terrorism?

Let us pause to consider.