

## **"At a Time Such as This"**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Charles Blustein Ortman**

**At the Unitarian Church of Montclair**

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My dear friends, I can tell you what I hope you might gain from this sermon today. I hope you might find yourself here in the process of healing. I hope you might gain a sense of comfort for the grief you have endured this past week. Whatever your loss, you did not deserve it, and now you must endure it. And I am sorry for your loss, and I wish you comfort even in the midst of it.

I hope you might gain a sense of confidence. We all used to be a bit more sure of things than we are just now. Maybe we were undeservedly sure. And so, if we have to learn how to live without knowing as much as we thought we did - I hope we can gain some confidence in that kind of uninformed living.

I hope this morning that you might gain a renewed sense of hope itself. The work we do here in this church, our shared ministry is based in hope. And mostly that hope is based in a vision of better lives, better communities, and a better world. Our vision of a better world has been shattered this week. I pray that we will find the hope that will allow us, once again, to imagine our way toward that better world. And then I hope we can find the faith to begin once again the work of building that world.

While I want to offer you these: healing, comfort, confidence, hope and faith, ... they are not really mine to give you. They are though, gifts of the universe that were given us at birth. And the best we can hope for today, is that by being together - through music, through words sung and spoken, and through our presence and our prayers - the best we can hope for is that we can remind each other of these gifts, and help one another to renew them.

This was to be a High Holy Day service, holding up the Jewish holidays of Rosh ha-Shona and Yom Kippur. I'm not so sure anymore that I want to hold up any single religious tradition today. I don't think there are any parochial answers to the questions we face in the aftermath of the worst terrorist attack in the history of our nation. It seems parochialism has already played far too large a role in this story.

Still, the basic themes of these particular holidays, Rosh ha-Shona and Yom Kipper, might help us to remember our tarnished gifts and perhaps help us to renew them. Rosh ha-Shona is the celebration of the New Year. Yom Kippur is an observance of atonement. In many ways, the world we once knew - no longer exists. Everything is different following this past Tuesday. We have entered a new year, a new age. Our future is being born. We can't know what that means yet. But we are not totally stuck waiting to find out either. If the future has been born, then we can help, we can participate in raising it.

That takes us to atonement. Atonement is not just being sorry for errors of omission and commission, errors of the past. Atonement is about assessing our responsibilities and our lapses

of responsibilities, so that in the future we can do things with greater attention and intention, so that we can do things better next time around.

But let's go back to the start. We have all been deeply touched and wounded by the events of the week. While we have had no fatalities in our congregation, we have had casualties.

I've talked with those of you who had to scramble through the debris of bodies and buildings to reach safety; to those who were hosed off with fire hoses upon reaching the New Jersey shore of the Hudson. I've talked with those of you who have friends and family members missing, and with those who've lost a whole floor full of people you knew and cared about.

I've talked to one Federal Prosecutor who told me, with tears in his eyes, that he was on his way to Jersey City to depose testimony from one of the suspected terrorists. "So many lives," was all he said. "So much responsibility."

I have talked with so many of you who have, like most of the nation, been overwhelmed by the magnitude of the loss of life and the destruction. And I have talked with some of you, whose hearts have been filled with anger, and whose thoughts have been of revenge. One young man said, "I must not really be a Unitarian Universalist."

I'd like to address that thought here for a moment because I have to imagine it might strike close to home for a number of us who are here, for a number of us who are indeed Unitarian Universalists. Even as the leaders of our nation prepare their response to the acts terrorism, it might be good to attempt to gain some kind of moral perspective of our own.

We have been hurt, badly, badly hurt. We have a right to be angry. We have a right to want to hurt back in response. Anger is just that. It is a response. It's not a value. Of even greater importance than our experience is what we make of the experience. It is our values that we rely upon to make meaning of our experience. We are here because we value the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We are here because we value the interconnectedness of all life. These are some of the values that guide our choices and our actions.

We are angry because we've been hurt. So, let us give our hurt time to heal before we make choices and take actions. Let us give ourselves time to come back to ourselves, to come back to our senses, to come back to our values before we act in ways that might destroy our own vision of a better world. God, grant us patient healing.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying the perpetrators of this madness should go free. What they have done is unfathomably unconscionable and heinous. Left on their own, they would do it again and again and again. They must be stopped, and stopped now. But we can't blow up a whole corner of the planet to stop them. If we do that, we've already lost the whole thing.

There does not have to be a war. There does have to be a decisive action to stop these murderers from murdering ever again.

While it is devastatingly true that we have all been touched and wounded this week, it is also true that we have been touched and uplifted by other events of the week. While we have never experienced this magnitude of destruction from a foreign source ever before, we have also never seen this magnitude of a response of kindness from within-offers of help, of selflessness, of heroism, and of support and of caring.

I can tell you that even here at the church, the outpourings of offers to help are incredible. I understand that we are all experiencing an almost overwhelming need to help. We'd all like to fix what has been broken, but we can't. And so we want to help, however we can. And I know that many of us feel frustrated because there are so few opportunities to help.

I'd like to address this for a moment, too.

Please, don't let your frustration give way to apathy. There are not enough immediate opportunities for most of us to help. Keep that feeling alive! The opportunities are coming. We may need to be very alert to recognize them. But if we keep our vigils lights lit, we will see untold numbers of opportunities to help in the days and weeks and months to come.

Another thing, the magnitude of our loss might be eased by the magnitude of our united efforts to help make things better. Over 5,000 lives have been lost. If 500 or 5,000 or 5 million or 500 million of us are committed to a sustained effort at helping to make things better - we can do untold good...at a magnitude never before witnessed.

I want to tell you about an experience-an event-that has been most helpful in my own healing process this week. The idea for this event originated at a meeting held here in the church on Thursday evening. The meeting was held in order to explore ideas of promoting a sane and hopeful national response to the terrorism. A follow up to that gathering will occur here tonight from 7:00-8:30 pm and everyone is invited. But the event itself...

Friday afternoon a delegation from our congregation, a group that would eventually number about a dozen, went to the Islamic Center Mosque over in Patterson. Failed attempts at contacting the Center ahead of time meant that we would arrive unannounced. When we got there members of the Mosque were busily engaged in a blood drive for the victims of the attack in New York. A huge sign floating over the entrance to the facility proclaimed that the Arab-American community and that the Nation of Islam denounced the terrorist attacks on the United States.

We were greeted warmly, with open arms and invited into the office of the Imam, Mohammad Qatanani. We gathered there with the Imam and several members of the his congregation. I can't begin to tell you how graciously we were received. We were honored guests and our hosts were clearly honored to have us. It was a humbling experience, I think, for everyone in the room. The Imam talked about how the terrorists had sought to divide us. "But look," he said. "The opposite has happened. Look at us here together."

We spoke together of our need for solidarity and mutual support. We spoke of the one-ness of humanity and the need for religion to promote our one-ness. We spoke of losses in our respective

communities and we grieved together. We spoke of opportunities for working together in the future, and we spoke of hope. We held one another in our arms; we shook hands; we laughed together and we cried (at least I did).

Sitting in the Imam's office, I sensed a new revelation, or perhaps a new layer of a revelation... that we are indeed all one.

Those of us who had gone there, went to offer support in this trying time for the Moslem community. In the end, their gift to us was hope. We connected with one another and something very special was born there, in that time, in that room.

At a time such as this, we should be so fortunate as to have such an experience as that. I share it with you because it is your experience, too. I was there on your time; we were there on your behalf.

It will continue to be difficult; we will face many difficulties in the time to come. We're not out of this, not by a very long ways. But we do have one another, we have this wonderful community, where we can share music and thoughts and prayers and good work. We have opportunities all around us for new beginnings in new relationships, as yet, unexplored.

This is a moment in history for new beginnings, for doing things better than we've done them ever before. The history of our world is plagued with a past of escalating retaliations. We can create a future that is different. We can believe in the inherent worth and dignity of humankind. We can believe that we are held in the interdependent web of being. We know that we are all one. In a time such as this, we can move through our grief to promote our one-ness.

In the time to come, I wish you healing and comfort, confidence and hope. In the time to come, I bid you, keep the faith. A new world is coming and it will need our faith.