Innocence Lost

Rev. Lisa Presley
Paint Creek Unitarian Universalist Congregation
September 16, 2001

As a teller of tales, a preacher of truth and a teacher of our tradition, I'm supposed to have the words to explain almost anything. It is my job to explain what Unitarian Universalism is, and how it works in the world, and how to look at what is happening around us. It is my calling to speak the truth in love, and to help you wrestle with the deep questions of living.

Well, there are some times when the words seem to fail, when there seems to be no explanation, and when we're not sure where to go, or what to do. And this, my friends, is one of those times.

No one I know ever imagined, even in their worst nightmares, the tragedies that befell our nation on Tuesday morning. Even the most cynical, the most pessimistic never, ever imagined the kind of destruction that occurred. Two planes, deliberately flown into the World Trade Center towers. Another one flown into the Pentagon, maybe because they couldn't find the White House. A fourth, crashing into the countryside in Pennsylvania, thanks, it appears, to some brave souls who chose to lose their lives to save others. Over five thousand lives lost, at least three hundred of them firefighters, another seventy or so police officers who came to help. Countless lives thrown into total chaos. Countless hearts ripped asunder. Countless bedtime stories never read. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, one of the most eloquent spokespersons this week, put it right. When asked how many people were killed, he simply stated, "more than anyone can bear."

More than anyone can bear. That has been one of the predominant feelings during this week—more than anyone can bear. Shock, disbelief, numbness, anger, grief beyond description, disillusionment, hatred, sheer incomprehensibleness. Wednesday morning, my first thought, my very first thought, was, "it's real, isn't it." Hours and hours and hours of media coverage—all without a single commercial interruption, and many reporters with tears streaming down their faces. Some of us glued to the screen, to the radio, others of us needing to get away because the scope of it is just so much more than any of us can imagine. More than any one of us can bear.

And each of us has heard more than we can bear, even as we struggle to here more. And each of us has shared, in one way or another, the depth of our feelings, the enormity of our loss. Yet even though we've had chances to do that, we have not come together as a religious community to wrestle with the entirety of our grief, our shock, our loss, our anger, our sense of the world not being quite right anymore.

And so this morning, even though I know the words will be imperfect, I want to start with you to find a way to put words, and thoughts, and feelings into our hearts and minds. It will take days, weeks, months, years at the least to understand this week's disasters in totality. If we ever do.

So where do we begin? Perhaps with the whole question of even what to call this weeks events. Disasters? Yet that is usually reserved for natural disasters, natural occurrences, and we know that what happened this week was human caused and human created. Attacks—yes, that's accurate, but does it cover a wide enough scope? Acts of war? There is a part of me that shies

away from such words, for the last thing that I want is another war, whether it be a quick military action, or the start of a third World War. And yet, it is more than disaster or attacks—isn't there some word somewhere in between? Tragedy? Evil? Unbearable? Even our language is not easy, not clear.

So it is even harder to wrestle with the bigger questions. Like how is it possible that people—people—can do this to each other. Especially if it turns out that the people who did this are religious people, people who believe in god.

From where we sit in the world, in a place of incredible personal and religious freedoms, it is hard to imagine a religious tradition that not only does not believe in the sanctity of individual human life, but that also justifies the taking of lives for religious principles. It is hard to imagine religious traditions that are so intolerant of other people of faith, or even those of no faith. How can anyone know for such certainty that what their god is telling them is the right thing, not only for them but for the world? I can't imagine being that right, for even in my believing and my doubting, I know that everything I think I believe in could turn out to be wrong, in the long run.

And our religious traditions—the ones that we celebrate here in the western world—they teach us about the sanctity of life. The Hebrew Bible, in Leviticus, that rule book to beat all rulebooks: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." And the Christian, from Luke: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And again from the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy, and this week's Torah portion: "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

Islam, building as it does upon both Judaism and Christianity, also holds to the sacredness of life. Not only from the Jewish and Christian Bibles, but also in the Qur'an and the Hadith, or sayings of Mohammed. We must treat each other well, the scriptures all say. Let us not, as too often has been done, paint all of Islam with the actions of the thankfully small group of religious fanatics who are believed to be behind the hijackings this week. As one commentator put it, defining Islam by the actions of these few would be like defining all of Christianity by the actions of Christian white supremacists. We know that there is much good in Christianity, and so we must also realize that most of Islam, and most Muslims, are life-loving people. So how is it that a small group of religious extremists can turn from such wonderful, life affirming sentiments to an interpretation that allows them to kill others who do not view the world from their particular point of view? It is hard to understand.

And yet, when we look at the history of Christianity—the root of our religious tradition—we also see signs and symbols of that same sort of narrowness of vision. How else can you describe the Crusades, the Inquisition, or even the decimation of the native peoples on this continent, and others, in the name of the Christian God? Were these not the same kind of action? In each instance, the good people, the Christians, knew that they were doing what God required of them. They were choosing life—for themselves and for others. The cost of "rightness" may be high—convert or die—but there is something in our human make-up that so wants to be right. And so wants "our side" to be the "good side," even now. There are tinges of this certainty in the rhetoric of our politicians and military leaders as this becomes a battle of good against evil. They may be

right, but sometimes the dividing lines become too fuzzy and imprecise. Good or evil—who gets the power to name?

Even within our own Unitarian Universalist tradition, there are examples of zealous over-righteousness. John Haynes Holmes was minister of Community Church in New York during the Second World War. Holmes was an ardent pacifist, and believed that the US involvement in the War was wrong. He refused to preach sermons exhorting young men to enlist, and refused to be involved in the raising of war bonds, or the like. For his heartfelt opposition to the war, Holmes was shunned by his Unitarian colleagues. He was chastised; no one would exchange pulpits with him. It wasn't until decades later than his colleagues apologized for their actions, and for failing to realize that people of conscience and good will can strongly disagree.

So it is not all that hard, in a way, to see that some religious people—albeit and thankfully a very small minority—would think that it was their duty to sacrifice themselves for the betterment of the world. We can trace "man's inhumanity to man" back through the ages, and through most religious traditions.

Yet this does not make it right, by any stretch of the imagination. For it is not right for any minority to so cruelly rule the lives of others. It was not right during the Holocaust, it was not right in South Africa during apartheid, it was not right during slavery, it was not right when we interred Japanese Americans, it was not right when we confined Native Americans to reservations, and it was undoubtedly not right on Tuesday when the hijackers destroyed so many lives. And even when we can trace this through history, it does not make it easier to comprehend, easier to accept that some people could so easily and readily create such a loss of life, and attempt to destroy the way of life that we hold so dear and sacred.

And this is where the rubber hits the road—where the real heart of the questions lies for us Unitarian Universalists. How do we make sense of this—a religious impulse, a human impulse to destroy others in search of right—how do we reconcile this with one of our most sacred UU principles—the inherent worth and dignity of every person? How do we, in the midst of this all, covenant to affirm and promote this worth and dignity? For if we are the religious people we say we want to be, we either have to stretch this principle to include the hijackers and all who aided them, or we must admit that our principles are relative, and do not fit the totality of life.

It may be that we opt for this latter—that our compassionate hearts and reasonable minds cannot open far enough to admit to the constellation of the worthy and those with dignity any who would cause such violence. Are we bad people if we cannot admit all to this constellation? No, we are not. We are human people, who can only approximate goodness, who can only approximate consistency in our lives. And it may be that there are people who choose to draw themselves outside the circle of our care. There is no shame in not granting people the full weight of worth and dignity, as long as we are conscious that we are choosing to do this. And then, we must be humble in our recitations of our religious beliefs. We must own up to ourselves that we feel too deeply the losses of this week—our loss of innocence, in a way—to be open enough to encompass all in our world. We must acknowledge our principles are relative, at best.

Or it may be that we opt for the belief that anyone who would do this must not be in their right mind, and therefore excuse them on the basis of mental illness. But to me, to do so is to opt for an easy road that we no longer have the luxury to afford. For decades, perhaps even centuries, Unitarians and Universalists believed too easily in the premise of human nature, and human goodness, going onward and upward forever. We believed too long in the perfectibility of humankind, too long in the unfettered goodness of man. We believed too long, and with too much evidence to the contrary, that there is no such thing as evil, or if there is something, that it must reside somewhere outside of the hearts and minds of well-meaning people.

It is time for us to give up this luxury—that of not wrestling with evil, of not wrestling with the angels of god. It is time for us to give up this unexamined optimism about human nature. It is time for us to give up this untrammeled belief in the goodness of humankind. For this week, the thing we lost along with the unbearable number of lives, was our innocence and our privilege to think that we, somehow, were different, were better, were above it all. No longer can we hide our heads in the sand and think that we are somehow exempt from the horrors that plague so many other peoples and nations. No longer can we believe that the superiority of these United States will keep us safe. No longer are we allowed an optimism borne of privilege and contempt for others. We have been touched more fully by the depth of life.

Yet this does not mean that we must give up on life, or give up our first principle, or that we should give up on optimism. What we must give up is an unguarded, unconscious assumption of optimism, and instead reach deeper for the optimism that comes only out of struggle, only out of adversity. For it means nothing to say that we believe in humankind if we have only seen human goodness. It is only when we have been to the brink of despair, and we can find a way to move forward, that our optimism, our faith in humanity, can mean much at all. We must wrestle with evil, know it inside and out, know what we are capable of, before we can move on.

For this is the truth of deep religious impulse—the knowledge, borne of adversity, that love is still stronger than either hate or death. How can we know this? By looking at what has transpired around our nation, and around the world. The countless numbers of people who have flooded New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C., with offers of help, with shipments of goods, with donations of money. By seeing the way that other people, in nations not directly touched by this crisis, have come to our aid, offering their hope, their love, their prayers, their compassion. By seeing the way that people, strangers to each other moments before, hold on to each other in grief and support and caring. By hearing about the men who gave it all to prevent the Pennsylvania plane from wrecking more havoc than necessary. Everywhere we look, we see in this crisis the signs of love, of compassion, of commitment, of the possible. Even the driving has been gentler this week.

And here, here, my dear friends, is the secret irony of it all. That by trying to destroy, the hijackers have reaped something far greater, and far different, than what they had sown. For it is not hatred that is blooming, but rather a new spirit of love, compassion, caring, commitment to one another that is born again in this incredible nation of ours. It is love, and hope, that is rising Phoenix-like from the ashes. What they sought to destroy, they cannot, unless we give them the power. For they cannot destroy the hope, the love, the caring that resides in human hearts.

I ask you, my friends, to come forward now. To light one of these candles, in remembrance, caring and commitment, and to speak a few words, if you like. Words of hope, words of love, words of your hearts. Or maybe you have no words; yet still I invite you forward. Let us begin, here and now, to recapture what is good in our world, and point each other the way, once again, to hope.

(candle lighting)

Let me end this time of sharing together with these words of Anne Frank. Even after years of hiding, even after knowing the abuses of the Nazi regime, even knowing she would soon die, she still had the courage, the strength, the insight to write these words that move us still today: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I see the world gradually turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us, too, I can feel the suffering of millions, and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think it will all come out right, that this cruelty will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

May it always be so. Amen.

Benediction:

I share with you as benediction today these words from my friend and colleague, Wayne Arnason.

Take courage friends.
The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high.
Take courage.
For deep down, there is another truth:
You are not alone. Amen.