

Crossing the Threshold
The Reverend Susan Veronica Rak
Unitarian Church of Greater Bridgeport, CT
Sermon - 16 September 2001

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
perversely, with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.
-Adrienne Rich

This has been a week we won't soon forget. On Tuesday, it felt like my world was turned upside down. We all have our stories of where we were and what we felt as the news unfolded. We have harbored feelings of every kind in these days.

I have read numerous pages on how to cope with trauma and how to handle the news, and we are making some of them available to you today, if you need them. We are seeking ways to reach out and do something to alleviate the pain of these events - Practical gestures that may help in some way in the efforts to get through the days and weeks. So many others have already responded to these requests that already they have more than enough bottles of water and clothing. Such is our desire, as human beings to reach out, and to do something positive. I've received e-mail exhortations fly the American flag or light candles or send notes. Maybe these things would help - I don't know.

We are inundated with news and now have more details about how the attacks came to be and who might have been behind them. We struggle to understand how this could happen. Not so much the logistical "how"... we can see how that has unfolded in its amazing smoothness and completeness. But how it could be that so much hate harbors in a person's mind or heart? We feel helpless in the face of such loss, such inhumanity, cruelty, such apparent hatred and disregard for life.

The physical reality of the altered New York City skyline and the searing gash in the Pentagon are symbolic of the unfathomable loss and grief these actions have wrought. The kind of death these people experienced, we hope swift even as it was senseless, is compounded by the inconceivable task ahead.

There seem to me to be two major categories for the thoughts and feelings and fears these events have engendered: the personal and the political.

Let me first speak about the latter. Many of my colleagues on our "Minister's Chat" on line expressed a fear that their sermons for today were going to end up sounding like a New York Times Editorial. I run that risk here, but please bear with me. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have an ideological grounding and are aimed at a political entity, and the reactions and responses of our government affect us all. Much has been written about how this will shape our way of life, the liberties we have enjoyed in these years of [for all intents and

purposes] peace and plenty.

Does the safety of all permit the restriction of civil liberty for some? Will we be content to do with less freedom? Can we afford to give up the convenience of speedy air travel or inexpensive fuel for our cars?

I am not sure what comes next... there will be decisions made and actions taken on our behalf by those in power. There will be many questions with which we will undoubtedly have to wrestle and difficulties we will have to overcome. Yes, the world is different now. And most especially, our country is changed and changing.

What shape this change will take depends much on our individual actions in the weeks, months and years to come. Responses to this attack are being threatened and crafted by our leaders... declarations of war, promises of fierce retaliation and threatening language flow from the lips of this country's leaders, and not only persons in politics but people of religion as well.

Some of us are very comfortable with them and others of us are not.

I find myself more able to face the horror of the destruction and the grief felt for over 5,000 lost - not one of whom I know personally - by framing these events as a calamity akin to an earthquake: a random event that is visited upon an area by "natural" forces. It is sometimes the only way that I can accept that this all really happened. But it is real, and there is nothing "natural" about it.

So I struggle with holding these two unwelcome pieces of knowledge in tandem:

This event is real, it did happen, and thousands of lives were lost and thousands more have been brought to the brink of despair or grief. This event is real and will affect our country's very being. It will mold a new generation of citizens. And this event was no accident - it was brought about by the careful planning and orchestration of a band of people - fellow human beings - who harbor ideas and feelings I can hardly imagine. Other human beings acted out of hatred and struck out against us.

How will we go on? Many of us have family and friends who live or work in the two areas attacked. My friends in NYC have made it through this week. But I think of them as the weeks ahead unfold and the city begins to return to its usual rhythms. Everything will, at some point, appear to be "back to normal", yet it won't be. A sound, a smell, a photograph will bring it all back. It will be the same for those of us living far removed from the epicenter of these events.

This is where it is personal. We are dealing with grief and loss. Whether or not someone in our immediate circle has died in this attack, we - as individuals and as a community - are grief-struck. I know - I can see the signs in myself... overwhelming sadness coupled with a desire to get on with life and have everything back the way it was before Tuesday morning. As Fred Wooden, minister of our congregation in Brooklyn NY said about the days and weeks to come: "... this is when the misery will begin to eat away. Even now, I feel my stress coming out as impatience and impertinence. Maybe I am different, but it seems others are short tempered as well. How much of this is rage turned inward, helpless flailing about, fear with no place to put it?"

I resonant with his sentiments. Many of us are not sure what to do with the anger and pain we fell. So we come together, here and in other arenas, to feel the warmth of community and know that others share our pain and grief. And this is good... this what we are about. And we affirm life.

Yesterday I had the privilege of officiating at a wedding ceremony. Like so many others who have such celebratory events scheduled this week, the couple thought long and hard about moving forward with the ceremony. But their decision to go on with it was grounded in the need to bring family and friends together and celebrate life.

It was made all the more meaningful by the fact that the bride's birth father, who is deceased, was a part of this congregation, was dedicated here and his memorial service was held in this room over twenty years ago. After the rehearsal, the bride, Michele, shared with me that she had just found out the sculpture that graces one corner of our entry-way - the graceful pair of hands by Auguste Rodin, called the Cathedral, was given to this church as a memorial to her father, Michael Macedonia. The circle of family and memory draws us all closer. And in the face of great sorrow and fear, we continue to say "yes" to life.

This is why we are here... This sanctuary shelters us, yes. The walls of this building cover us, yet rise up to the sky in hope and expectation. This community reminds us of what we might yet be. The events of Tuesday, and the events that will yet unfold, challenge us and our principles. As much as this community, this congregation, offers us solace and comfort in our grief, it also offers us hope and courage as we face a great challenge.

How do we go on from her? What will our lives be like? What will the world be like for our children and grandchildren as they grow into adulthood?
How can we wage peace, and seek justice, and build a better world?

These days ask us to reach further than many of us have ever reached before, to grow into the people we are meant to be. We are a people of hope and compassion. This is not just platitudes and kind deeds... For Unitarian Universalists, our hope is realistic and not pinned on some outside source beyond our understanding. We are a people who, while living in the present, strive for a vision of tomorrow.

Now it is of the utmost importance that we not lose sight of that vision, that world of peace, justice and equity. I am not so concerned, at the moment, that we say how that will happen, or vote on resolutions or make a list of goals and objectives. Rather, this vision begins deep inside each of us, in our own personal commitment to living our values. The events of this past week have made all of us more aware of the importance of kinship, of having those around us whom we love and care for... to be within reach of them physically or by phone or e-mail. We are assured by their presence. Remembering the tears that have brought us together, we can let those tears nurture our sense of connection to one another.

We can find the strength to begin again, in love, and move through the days ahead.
We are crossing a threshold, and are entering a new way of living that as yet remains a mystery.

But we, as Unitarian Universalists, as a people of faith and courage and hope, can move across this threshold knowing we are not alone, knowing that love is stronger than death, knowing that we are part of a larger whole in which hatred has no part.

In closing, let me share the words of Howard Thurman, minister, philosopher and educator whose vitality and vision touched the lives of people of all races, faiths and cultures

A prayer

FOR A TIME OF SORROW

I share with you the agony of your grief,
The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.
I know I cannot enter all you feel
Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;
I can but offer what my love does give:
The strength of caring,
The warmth of one who seeks to understand
The silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss.
This I do in quiet ways,
That on your lonely path
You may not walk alone.

Amen. Shalom. Saleem Alechim. Blessed Be. Peace.

Candle lighting

We light this first candle to invoke the spirit of compassion. We extend our sympathies to all those who grieve the loss of loved ones. The nation and the world are so full of sorrow. We honor and embrace the pain caused to all of us by thousands of injuries and deaths We invoke the spirit of compassion. [pause for lighting]

We light this second candle to invoke the spirit of wisdom and discernment. We send our wishes to those who serve the nation in the halls of government. We call on you to keep faith with our country's values of freedom, fairness, and justice. We invoke the spirit of wisdom and discernment. [pause]

We light this third candle to invoke the spirit of gratitude and courage. We send our thanks to the firefighters, the rescue and search workers, the police officers, those who tend the wounds of the injured, those who care for the dying. We stand in awe of your strength. and we live in gratitude of your testament to human caring. We invoke the spirit of gratitude and courage. [pause]

We light this fourth candle to invoke the spirit of reason and love. We remind ourselves of the danger of rushing to judgment and the sins of scape-goating, prejudice, and racism. We remind ourselves to be gentle with one another in the days and months to come. Let us be open to the pain in our hearts, and in others' hearts. Let us call forth the healing which comes from listening

and from the touch of human hands. Let us call forth the best which lives in the human soul. We invoke the spirit of reason and love. [pause]