

Shattered:

The Reverend Whitney L. Herriage
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Binghamton
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This is far and away the most difficult worship service I have ever planned. The most emotionally and intellectually difficult sermon I have ever had to write. How can I stand up here, and attach words to the tragedy that has befallen us? Mere words? Irving Greenstein once said, "Say nothing of God and humanity that cannot be said in the presence of burning children." How can I speak to what is so painfully, undeniably unspeakable? My words are inadequate. Just as my actions, my understanding, my tears, even my prayers seem inadequate. And yet I must speak. I must act. I must seek to understand. I must weep. I must pray. This is what we know: that our loss is great, but despite our grief, we must go on, readying ourselves for the long task of rebuilding, and clinging, urgently, to hope wherever it may be found, and to love wherever it may be shared.

I think of a poem called "Quaker Funeral" by W.H. Matchett:

*While the cold hand traces the edges of empty hours,
And the light comes and goes,
Let us, in this meeting
In a room blessed with the echo of words many have spoken,
Discover our peace in the knowledge that life, though fleeting,
Leaves love unbroken.*

*Here, among friends, in sorrow,
Let the Living Love in the silence reveal the seed
Of strength, that we may share it in facing tomorrow,
The time of our need.
(adapted)*

Still the question remains: *what can I say here, today? How shall I speak?* And the thought occurs to me that perhaps the best I can do (the best any of us can do) is simply to assert my own humanity. To lift up, as authentically as I can, the truth of my experience, and thereby, hopefully, bring into the light the depths of all our pain, the *Living Love* here revealed, and the glimmering, ever-present, though heavy-burdened possibility of hope.

Tuesday morning, September 11, I began my day of rest, a typical day off. I sat at a large drafting table working on a piece of quilting, when I heard Brian scream at me from upstairs to turn on CNN. He rushed down the stairs as I fumbled for the remote control and wondered what could be so urgent. For the next dizzying moments, we sat together and watched as smoke billowed out of the side of the first World Trade Center Tower. We watched in shocked disbelief as a plane came out of nowhere and with near surgical precision sliced through the second tower. We had no words in those first, overwhelming moments. Then the phone began to ring. I learned of one among us whose son could have been lost -- thankfully we learned later that he got out

safely. As I scrambled to get ready to go be with her, we watched the buildings collapse. And the tears began to flow. The only response I could muster was, *all those people... all those people.*

I spent the day, and much of the next few days, like most of America, waiting and watching. And wondering, *are all of my loved ones safe? Are all of my congregants safe? How could they get the Pentagon? How could this happen? And would there be more?* As a minister, there was much to do. More phone calls to make in the space of several days than I would typically make in several weeks. Extra worship services, many pastoral calls and responses, and myriad plans to make. As a person, though, I felt paralyzed by the weight of this tragedy. Traumatized.

Victimized. My emotions ranged from fleeting moments of anger and moral outrage, to fear, to shock and disbelief. But ever present since Tuesday morning, has been an unyielding and profound sadness. A river of tears has flown through the last several days, mine and yours; the nation's and even the world's. I feel, as I presume many of you do, that I am crying the collective tears of all history, mourning the loss of something that has always been lost, grieving the deaths of all innocent lives, the death, perhaps of innocence itself. Or was it the illusion of innocence? Nevertheless, at the same time, I find a buoyant strength in the kindness and generosity of the human spirit that has emerged throughout these days, and despite it all I find just enough room to be thankful for that.

Still, my waking has been filled with tears, and my sleep has been tossed by nightmarish images and the darkest of fears. I want to share with you a few of the dreams I have had this week because I dare say I am not the only one having them. The first shocked me with the stark reality of my own fear. Fear I did not know I had. I dreamt that my next door neighbors were really terrorists, and they had taken Brian and me as hostages in their basement. We groped through the dark maze of hallways and dead ends, while our captors watched with hard, expressionless faces. Now if you knew my neighbors you would laugh at the thought of it. An elderly couple, who are among the sweetest and kindest people I know. Yet it was a terrifying dream that made me aware of the fear that had not, perhaps *could not*, surface during the day, but could only be faced dreaming. Sadly, I know that this fear is not unique to me. Many of you have spoken to me, tearfully, of your fear, your inescapable feelings of vulnerability, now that the myth of invulnerability has been shattered. There is fear of what will come, and not only what will come *upon us*, but also what will come *because of us*.

I had another dream too, in which a hijacked plane crashed in Binghamton, into some auditorium building. More fear I suppose. But something else as well. For you were all there, not as victims of the crash, but responding to it. We stood together, dousing the flames with water from what I believe were ordinary garden hoses! But they worked just the same. Despite waking up with fright, I felt the hope in this dream too. Hope, not for the eradication of evil, but for a sublimely human and generous response to it. Hope in the possibility of human community. Actually not just in its possibility, but in its assurance. Allow me to share with you the words of A. Powell Davies:

*The world we know is passing: all things grow strange;
all but the stout heart's courage;
all but the undiminished lustre of an ancient dream--
which we shall dream again as men have dreamed before us,*

*pilgrims forever of a world forever new.
And what we loved and lost
we lose to find how great a thing
is loving
and the power of it to make a dream come true.
For us, there is no haven of refuge;
for us, there is the wilderness, wild and trackless,
where we shall build a road and sing a song.
But after us there is the Promised Land,
strong from our sorrows and shining from our joys,
our gift to those who follow us
along the road we build
singing our song.*

It is difficult to find this kind of hope in the wake of so great a tragedy. When we have been shattered by so incomprehensible a loss. When we have no answers to questions of why, and when we ask, urgently, desperately, *what do we do now?*

In addition to the range of feelings provoked by this attack, there are also the more analytical and ideological issues, which tax our minds. There are theological questions of good and evil, and of human nature. There are debates about the ideal of freedom versus the need to assure the safety of our citizens. Can there be a balance, or must we sacrifice one for the sake of the other?

And most of us have great concerns over the actions that we, as a nation, will take. I have heard a range of opinions -- some willing to take down those responsible for this massacre even if it requires the use of military force, and others urging nothing short of a total pacifist approach. As for me, I feel the tension between these two responses, wanting desperately to see an end to the violence and to believe there could be peaceful resolution, but honestly, having little faith that this will prove possible.

I have heard accusations of the United States and the willingness to admit our own culpability even in Tuesday's despicable acts. Occasionally I hear echoes of cynicism in these remarks, but cynicism, to me is nothing more than the protection of ourselves from feeling the pain of our existence. Cynicism is the abandonment of our humanity, the deadening of our souls. And to this, I bring a word of caution.

There also has been much discussion of patriotism and allegiance to the flag. For the first time in my life, I have wanted to own an American flag and let it fly in front of my house. And yet, knowing the injustice that has been perpetrated by us around the globe, I ask myself, *what does it mean to be a patriot?* I suspect that many other Unitarian Universalists, used to being fairly on the fringe politically and socially, will share my question. I am torn between simple devotion to my country as we cling to one another and to the values upon which our nation was built, and the recognition, however reluctant, of our often discriminatory and unjust presence in the world, a reality which no doubt lies somewhere beneath these terrorist attacks. Can these be reconciled, I ask myself, when what I value more than my flag is justice? But as my sister put it to me in a conversation yesterday, real patriotism is founded on the love of justice. Real patriotism is, or

should be now at least, the seeking of greater justice in our nation's actions. And I believe she is right, for what is the flag if not a symbol of our search for justice and freedom?

I raise these ideological and intellectual issues today, not because I have made sense of them or come to any lasting conclusions. Rather, I raise them only to give them voice. For I think our immediate task, yours and mine, is not to solve these puzzles or to let them overshadow our grief. I believe our task now requires less thinking and debating and more holding of hands and sharing of sorrow and hope. Questions have surely been raised and must eventually be answered, though I hope with slow deliberation. But first and foremost, a tragedy has befallen us, and we as a nation, and especially we as a religious community, first, we must grieve. As in the words of Paul Carnes:

Inevitably our anguish frames the question "Why?" if not on our lips, in our hearts. There is no answer that removes this question -- no answer that can bridge the chasm of irreparable separation. Life will never be the same, and this is as it should be, for our loved ones are not expendable.

We can meet such loss only with our grief, that uncontrived mixture of courage, affirmation, and inconsolable desolation. Grief is enough; for, in our grief we live an answer, as in the depths love and selfishness conjoin until, if we allow it, love asserts its dominance, and we become more aware of the community of living of which life makes us a part.

Our task, then, is to grieve openly and freely. To go on being together, and finding new ways to be together. There will be a time for solving puzzles and for debating (though I do hope with mutual acceptance and love). But for now, let us first experience this tragedy with open hearts and outstretched hands. For opinions and ideas and most certainly actions are worse than nothing if they do not first confront, however sorrowfully or joyfully, the experience of our humanity.

And let us remember, in these difficult days what is good in us. Like many of you, I have been struck, though not surprised, by the outpouring of love and help that have come in so many forms. People standing in line for hours to give blood; children making ribbons and taking donations; people going to airports where travelers were stranded just to offer blankets or even to open their homes; contributions of dog boots for the search and rescue dogs to avoid injury; millions of dollars raised to assist in relief efforts; and many, many other acts of generosity and support. Yesterday, my ten-year old niece declared that she wanted to give all her savings, plus every nickel and dime she found lying around the house to the Red Cross. She didn't understand why her mother didn't want her to give all her savings, and proclaimed, "But Mom, there are so many people who need this money more than I do." There is goodness in us, and we must not forget it, nor undervalue it. And let us pledge ourselves to that goodness, to that which is best in us, however we understand it. Let us remember too, that good people will surely disagree. For the weeks and months ahead will require much patience and understanding as each of us struggles to make sense of what has happened and to mourn what was lost on Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

Finally, the words of Nelson Mandela:

*The time for healing of the wounds has come.
The time to build is upon us...
We pledge ourselves to liberate all people
from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation,
suffering, gender and other discrimination...
There is no easy road to freedom...
None of us acting alone can achieve success.
We must therefore act together as a united people,
for reconciliation, for nation building,
for the birth of a new world.*

Today our words seem inadequate. Just as our actions, our understanding, our tears, even our prayers seem inadequate. And yet we must speak. We must act. We must seek to understand. We must weep. We must pray. This is what we know: that our loss is great, but despite our grief, we must go on, readying ourselves for the long task of rebuilding, and clinging, urgently, to hope wherever it may be found, and to love wherever it may be shared. Amen. And peace upon us.