

**Responding to the Violence of September 11th**  
**Davidson Loehr**  
**First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas**  
**September 16, 2001**

Where do we begin? For me, it began in anger – in fury. When I heard of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and a section of the Pentagon on Tuesday, I wanted loud, bloody revenge. I thought "Kill the bastards!" I didn't know just who the bastards were, but I wanted them dead.

Now, five days later, I see that bloody and angry theme is on the verge of becoming our country's battle cry, as we masses are being cranked up for a long and costly war against an invisible enemy – an enemy defined not by a country but by an ideology.

I can sympathize with the bloody anger because I felt it too. These mass murders were reprehensible by any moral code. Civilized Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and all the rest condemn these actions as contemptible and against all of our highest values.

It is hard to know what to do, though it is suddenly very clear what we will not do:

- We will not react as Mother Teresa did when officials from Union Carbide flew her – after making a donation to her charities – to Bhopal, India following the deaths of 2,000 from Union Carbide's escaped chemicals. Met at the airport by the media, Mother Teresa was asked what message she brought to the suffering people, and she replied "Just forgive, forgive." To forgive in these extreme cases is to condone, and we will not condone these murders.
- Nor will we follow the Christian teaching of "turn the other cheek." I haven't heard any ministers suggesting this, and can't imagine it. Turning the other cheek would be a cowardly acquiescence to terrorism, and we won't do it.
- We might follow the even older teaching of "an eye for an eye," a tooth for a tooth, a body for a body, carnage for carnage. I hope not, but our leaders and media pundits are trying to herd us in that direction and they may succeed.

The wisest teaching I know of that still applies to these murders comes from Confucius. 2500 years ago, he said we should repay good with kindness, but repay evil with justice. That seems the noblest and most humane goal here. We should strive to repay these deeds not with vengeance, but with justice.

But what is justice here? Last week I asked what is truth, which suddenly seems like a shallow question compared with the quest for justice following the mass murders of Tuesday, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

With truth, I said the kind we're after in religion gives more life, connects us with more people and a bigger world, builds bridges rather than bulwarks. Justice might be defined as truth plus compassion plus power. And while it does not require that we love our enemy – a teaching for calmer situations that would be vulgar here – the quest for justice does require that we try to

understand these people who threw away their lives, and more than 5,000 American lives with them.

But to try and understand requires that we back off, and it may feel too soon to back off from the raw feelings of anger here. In some ways it feels too soon to me. So please forgive me if it seems that I am backing off too far and too soon from an attack without precedent in our country's history.

The hardest part of trying to understand these attackers is in understanding that they didn't see this attack the way we do, just as they don't see us as we do.

The first thing we must understand is that this was *not* an attack on freedom or on democracy! The attackers made it crystal clear through their choice of targets what they were attacking. This was an attack arising from a deep hatred of our country's military and economic actions and policies, which they see as selfish, bloody and evil.

To us, the Pentagon is the symbol of America's military strength, which we like to believe is used in the service of freedom, honor, and decency the world over.

But there are many people in the world who don't see it that way. To them, the Pentagon is the symbol of a military might which is selfish, bloody and evil.

We point to our more than five thousand freshly dead brothers and sisters and say "This is barbaric. How could you have done it?" We're right: it was barbaric, and no decent person should have done it.

But they point to other lists of military actions that they also believe to be the work of terrorists.

They point to Iraq and the nearly complete sham of the Gulf War. We destroyed the water purification facilities ten years ago, and since then have carefully controlled through rationing and embargoes how much chlorine and other chemicals needed to control water-borne diseases are permitted into Iraq. As a result of these continuing actions, an estimated one million Iraqis have died during that time, including over 500,000 children. "Where," they ask, "are your tears for these men, women and children you have killed?"

They point to our invasion of Panama – an invasion made in violation of all international law. They remind us that we shelled a poor ghetto area of Panama City for several hours, shouting instructions to surrender over the bullhorn – in English, not Spanish – and then bulldozed the bodies of about 4,000 people, mostly civilians, into an unmarked mass grave. "Decent people cry for all the world's innocents. Where were your tears for these?" they wonder. What would we have felt if this had happened in one of our cities?

They point to our continued uncritical support for Israel, again in opposition to the consensus of world opinion. Most nations, they point out, agree that Israel's occupation of the West Bank is illegal, and that there should be a Palestinian state.

It looks to many people in the world like we only appeal to international law and a consensus of the world's people when it suits our own selfish purposes. When it doesn't we break the laws and flout the world's consensus like drunk, gun-toting bullies. We send three billion dollars a year in military aid to Israel: the guns and bombs that are killing their Muslim or Arab relatives were made in the USA. What about our complicity in these acts of murder and terror, they ask?

The list of military meddling could be extended by adding more countries from South America, from Africa, some little islands, Bosnia, Guatemala, Vietnam and more. But these are a few of the reasons that many people in the world hate us and believe our military power is a symbol of selfishness and of evil.

### **It's the economy, stupid!**

The bigger targets and the bigger symbol, though, were the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. This attack wasn't about freedom or democracy or religion. It was about economics. And these murdering fanatics represent a large number of people who are neither murderers nor fanatics, who see our country's economic behaviors and policies as greedy, destructive and evil.

None of this is new. People from all over the world have been picketing and protesting the World Trade Organization and the World Bank for twenty years – though such protests don't get much space or time in our media.

But these people see us as a country whose economic plan is to reduce the economies of all countries to the two-tiered structure of third-world economies, where a rich few have complete power over the desperate many. They see this plan as so obvious they wonder why we don't see it too.

We learned a few years ago that the Nike company had paid Michael Jordan a promotional fee -- \$25 million – that was more than twice the combined annual wages of all Asian workers in all companies making our tennis shoes. Many people around the world wonder why that didn't bother us, why we didn't see it as a clear example of America's economic plan for the world, dividing it into only two classes, separated by a bigger gulf than at any time since at least the Middle Ages, if not any time in history.

They wonder why we don't see the same plan working in our own country. NAFTA opened the borders for corporations to shop the work out to the cheapest workers in the world. This has made American workers give up pay raises and benefits in order to keep their jobs. Every time workers are laid off, they remind us, stock prices soar and CEO bonuses increase. They wonder if we think this is a coincidence. They see it as the economic plan of the corporations that have begun to control the US government, and wonder why we don't see it too.

Our workers make less in real dollars than they did thirty years ago, while Bill Gates' personal fortune exceeds that of the bottom 40% of Americans combined. Our workers have fewer benefits, fewer unions, and less job security than they have in decades. In the meantime, the pay

of top executives has skyrocketed. This, say our critics, is the plan of America's economy. It is greedy and destructive, and our armies serve the interests of those at the top of our economy.

They might remind us that Chapter 11 of NAFTA gives corporations the right to sue state and national governments whose actions cut into their profits – by, for example, prohibiting toxic or dangerous products. Under Chapter 11, corporations have already sued both state and national governments, and have won. National sovereignty has been subordinated to corporate profits without even firing a gun.

These are among the reasons why the twin towers of the World Trade Center are seen as symbols of greed and evil, and why citizens and children in Egypt and elsewhere could be seen cheering their fall. Not because they are barbarians who hate our freedom, but because they are workers who hate our greedy and destructive economic plan and the military meddling that is its servant.

These people know full well that they can't match our military power. But they also know they don't have to. They learned, from watching us in Vietnam, that we do not know how to fight against guerillas or terrorists, that we have no defense against individuals serving a powerful ideology who are willing to sacrifice their lives by becoming suicide bombers.

### **What should we do?**

So what should we do? How should we respond? Several options are already presenting themselves.

We could just "bomb Afghanistan back into the Stone Age," as some have suggested, and as our President seems eager to do. It could be very showy, and might some great TV moments that the media toadies would put on tape loops to play all day. The problem with bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age is that the Russians already did it a few years ago. Afghanistan is a desolated country with no economy, few schools or hospitals, no infrastructure, and a population of hungry, powerless, desperate people.

One Afghani has circulated an e-mail essay I read yesterday. I don't know if it is all correct, but I suspect it is close. He said the way to think correctly of the situation there is to see Osama bin Laden as a Hitler, the Talibad as the Nazis, and the Afghani people as the Jews in the prisoner of war camps. The Afghanis aren't our enemies. They were just earlier victims of the others. Still, our leaders, aided by the rabble-rousing abilities of the media, seem poised to bomb Afghanistan until even the struggling life it has left is gone.

Another tactic that we're hearing is that of turning this into a battle of Caucasians against Arabs, and Christians against Muslims. This is a tactic that has worked well in our drug war by making white people fear black crack addicts – though most drug money is made by white people. It is a "misdirection" tactic to divert us from the more vital events and schemes, but it too is gaining strength.

And a third tactic – likely to be used in combination with the first two – is a long and costly large-scale military campaign. This too seems to be in the works. Perhaps it will all come to pass.

But I want to back off from these imminent war plans and look at them quite differently than we are being trained to see them. I want to assume, with our critics, that this is primarily about economics, not anything of nobler virtue. And the fact that this is driven by corporations' concern for profits has dramatic and terrifying implications for the coming wars.

When (or, perhaps, if) we begin the massive, years-long War To End All Evil, it will be the greatest boon to the economic plan to convert us into a two-tiered economy of a powerful few giving orders to the desperate many imaginable:

- Individual rights and democratic freedoms will be curtailed "due to extreme circumstances" and "for reasons of national security." A culture of obedience will be established without effort, in a top-down hierarchical form that is the dream of every fascist.
- Religion will be subsumed under nationalism, and repressive religions will have the government's sanction. The Falwell and Robertson clones will become our own version of the Taliban – weaker, but still frightening.
- The hundreds of billions of dollars needed for the war efforts will take all surplus from our economy for years to come, so that there can not be money available for education, health insurance, unemployment, or any of the other government expenditures that give the lower classes a glimmer of hope or a step up.
- The Social Security funds will be drained completely, all under the guise of military necessity.

After the war, the economy of the United States will have been restructured into a two-tier economy where, by then, people are simply used to having few choices and fewer individual rights. As a part of the Economic Plan, a long-lasting all-out war against Everything is an absolutely brilliant scheme.

This scenario is as cynical as it is ingenious (or at least fortuitous) for those working to complete the structural changes in our economy. If history and the nature of greed and power are any indications, it is what lies ahead for us.

### **A slim hope**

There is another option. It wouldn't cost much, it could empower not only our people but nearly all people of the world, and it seems possible. At least, it is already being done. It's a lesson we can learn from the Irish.

Ireland has dealt with terrorism as a fact of life for decades. But in 1998, the vision and will of the people suddenly changed, and it has made all the difference. That was the year of the Omagh bombing, when a car bomb exploded in a crowded market, killing dozens of innocent shoppers. During the following week, as memorial services took place all over the island, a lot of people began saying Enough. Enough terrorism, enough violence. Some of the more psychopathic terrorists on both sides tried frightening the Irish back into the deadly status quo, but – so far, at least – they have not succeeded.

The Irish were not just saying Enough to the violence perpetrated against them. They were saying Enough to all violence. They refused to harbor or cover for any terrorists, including those working for their side. It wasn't a decree against the ideological enemy; it was a decree against all violence from all sources. Terrorism and violence were no longer accepted as methods they would tolerate.

It has been just three years, but so far it is still working there.

Could the American people be awakened and stirred enough to say Enough? It couldn't mean just Enough violence from Muslim terrorists. It would also have to mean Enough violence from the US government. It would be a public refusal to allow the kind of arrogant militarism in the service of economic greed that has marked us for decades. It would mean refusing to be the Good Germans who know, but ignore, their own country's violence against others. Enough would simply mean Enough!

Such a move, a move with the courage the Irish are now showing, could empower the majority of people throughout the world, and raise Americans to a role of leadership future generations would remember and adore. Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, you name it. The vast majority of people on earth hate this violence, are disgusted by terrorist activities from all directions. And that vast majority – like the Good Germans of the Nazi era, again – have mostly said and done very little.

If we began, if we found that vision compelling enough to be converted to an insistence on peaceful and respectful means, we could have the power to short-circuit our government's greedy and bloody plans – plans that will be written in our blood, not theirs, after all. It could change the face and the course of history, and avoid the bloody and insane chapter we are just being taught to begin.

There is a Buddhist story with some wisdom to offer here, one from the Samurai tradition. The Samurai warriors were known for two things: skill with a sword, and a high, uncompromising moral code.

This Samurai warrior had tracked down an evil man whose deeds called for death. Finally cornering his foe, the warrior closed in to kill him. Suddenly the man stepped forward and spit in the Samurai's face. The warrior flushed, sheathed his sword, and left. His culture called for him to kill for only the highest reasons. When the man spit in his face, he realized that if he were to kill him now, it would be out of personal rage, not noble ideals.

Please understand, I'm not suggesting that what happened to us this past Tuesday was in any way like merely having someone spit in our face! It was not. It was a bloody, cowardly, vile mass murder. But it has moved us to the point where we can be whipped up by our leaders and the media into murdering many others out of our rage, rather than from any higher or nobler motives.

If we do that, we will not only demean ourselves and our nation, but will also flood the earth with rivers of blood – almost all from innocents. It is fine to wave the American flag – I'm proud

of this country too, when it lives up to its highest callings. But to wave the flag over vengeance from low motives is not to honor our history, but to dishonor it.

And so it seems a way out is offered, at least if we are truly people of noble character. Will we take it? Will we find the collective courage and resolve to say, and mean, Enough? I don't know. I'm not a prophet. I'm only a preacher. All I have right now are prayers, and this is my prayer.

---

*Rev. Davidson Loehr, Ph.D., is a liberal preacher now serving as minister of the First UU Church of Austin, TX*