

Blessed Assurance  
September 16, 2001  
The Rev. Mary Katherine Morn

Beloved Friends, old and new, I give thanks for your faces.  
In your eyes I see the pain of these days past.  
In your voices I hear a shaking faith.  
From your hands I feel the touch of love.

Beloved Friends, old and new, I give thanks for your presence here.  
May our coming together be a source of comfort.  
May we remember, in this blessed hour of communion, the faith that sustains.  
May we find strength and courage in the blessed assurance of eyes and voices and hands that do not lie.  
May we find strength and courage in the blessed assurance of eyes and voices and hands that love.

**Meditation** by W. H. Auden

from "September 1, 1939"

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade:  
Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.

...

Defenseless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.

**Benediction**

We have extinguished this flame, but not the Light of Life and Love. Beleaguered by negation and despair, may we show our affirming flame.

Go in Peace, Beloved Friends.

What a beautiful sight, all of you. Have you looked around to see these beloved friends gathered together for worship? This morning, I could just sit with you and soak this communion into my spirit. This blessed assurance. And these candles you have lighted are affirming flames that bring light to our dark and frightened world. I give thanks for you and for them.

I have seen the memory of this light during the week even while I was away from you. I have heard it in your voices. In the midst of everything else, I felt your concern for my family and me this week. My mother is doing well after her surgery. It was difficult, but the prospect of good recovery looks very promising. Your thoughts and prayers were help to her and to all of my family. Thank you.

When I got home on Thursday evening after being with my parents, everything had changed. You know what I mean, don't you? I got home from my drive in time to see my son Caleb before bedtime. He looked different. He felt different. My husband John did too. And as I suspected, you look different. Then there's the skyline of New York City. Our experience of air travel. Our carefree (and privileged) assumptions about our own safety. Our assumptions about the future. About our children's future. About the future of the world. All these things have changed.

Then on Friday I woke and made breakfast. I walked Caleb to school. He talked excitedly about one of the classes he would attend that day. I came to work. There was a lot of catching up to do. I even went to the gym. I made pasta and roasted vegetables for dinner. John and Caleb and I went for a walk after dinner. It was a beautiful evening. Caleb and I read "The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig." It's a "cute" little book we've read many times about the three wolves and how they discover that despite their increasing vigilance concerning the security of their abode, the big bad pig "isn't called big and bad for nothing." He used a sledgehammer on their brick house. He used a pneumatic drill on their concrete house. When the wolves build with barbed wire, a few iron bars, armor plates, and some heavy metal padlocks, the big bad pig uses dynamite. So the wolves decide they need to take a different approach. They see a kangaroo selling flowers and decide their next house will be made only of flowers. When the big bad pig comes along to huff and puff, the breath he takes just before he would blow is fragrant enough to transform his heart. They lived happily ever after and Caleb got right to sleep.

Had everything really changed? The dailyness of living made possible moments of grace and beauty, even joy. The dailyness of living brought the healing power of love into common moments. The three little wolves and their journey to respond to terrorist threats did take on new meaning. The luxury of sitting down to a warm supper in our own kitchen did as well. Throughout that day, and oddly even the not so ordinary day I spent in the hospital waiting room, it felt in some ways like any other day and in some ways like no other day I've ever experienced or ever dreamed I would. I feel certain you know what I mean.

It behooves us to remember what has changed for so many others. Those who were killed. Those who lost someone they loved. Those who continue the effort to clean up from the terror. Those whose skin color or accent or religion makes them a target for angry, thoughtless attack, for more hate. Surviving pilots, flight attendants, fire fighters, and investment bankers. Military personnel and their families. People in any number of industries who have lost or will lose their jobs. It behooves us as well to remember that terror has been a way of life for so many for so long in other parts of the world.

For all of these, and for all of us, so much has changed. So much is lost. So much is lost. Forrester Church, minister of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Manhattan reminds us that not only were innocents lost to us on Tuesday. Innocence was lost as well.

With so much lost, what do we do now? How can we, as the poet suggests, show an affirming flame? What can we do to help? Very simply we can give blood. We can share our material resources to help the effort for recovery. (Following my reflections, in the silence, we will take a special collection for the New York Humanitarian Fund set up by the UUA and the UUSC.) We can speak with moderation and denounce talk and action that perpetuates the hate. We can reach out to those in our own community who is especially afraid because of their ethnicity. Some individuals in our congregation have already done this. We will do this as well as a community. There are things we can do to help. Things that will bring ironic points of light as we exchange messages of justice. Things that show an affirming flame of faith.

I believe the most important thing we can do, to help, to show an affirming flame, to live in response to this tragedy, is to remember those things that haven't changed. The things that cannot be lost. The things that have always been the heart of our faith. The things we know in our deepest hearts.

We cannot know what this day will bring (we never could); but we can live this day with gratitude and hope. We cannot promise our children they will never be hurt (we never could); but we can promise them we will always love them. We cannot explain the existence of evil in the world (we never could); but we can demonstrate the existence of good.

These things have not changed. Perhaps we know them more fully. Perhaps if we grow more perplexed by the presence of evil in the world, then we will grow more determined to bring to the world the good we can. If, indeed, we know more deeply that we cannot promise our children they will never be hurt, then perhaps we will grow more able to love all the children of earth. And as we come to know, in ways we never imagined the uncertainty of life; then perhaps we can grow to truly understand and appreciate the gift of each moment we are given.

Let us be changed then, by this inexplicable violence. Let it bring us to the kind of faithful living that seeks always the "more love" somewhere. Let it help us give voice to the call for a just and compassionate response to terrorism. (I do not pretend to know what that response should be—only that it must come from an affirming flame, from a hope for justice, not revenge.)

So much has been lost. And yet, there is much to be found. May we look to each other and may we look to the source of our faith (whether we call it God or Light of Life or Allah). May we find

there the blessed assurance of love that cannot be conquered by hate, of life that has meaning, despite everything we know. And may this blessed assurance give us the strength and the courage to live our lives well and fully and faithfully, bringing our affirming light to a frightened and grieving world.