

Reweaving the Cloth of Assurance

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READINGS:

"An Offering of our Hearts and Minds" - Rev. Edward Frost.

May this service be an offering of our hearts and minds; an offering of the turning of thought and reason to the cause of peace, an offering of the vital spirit within us to all that wills life and resists evil. We are thankful that, in this time of worship, and in all gatherings of people of faith, we find the clarity and strength of will to set ourselves against the evil that would deny the preciousness of life. In differing beliefs, we are united in the common faith that the Spirit, which is Life and wills Life, will prevail. We dedicate ourselves in accord with the will to be, and to preserve this world, our home. We have chosen Life, the ultimate faith, the one holy cause.

"This is My Song" #159 from *Singing the Living Tradition*.

This is my song, O God of all the nations, / a song of peace for lands a far and mine. / This is my home, the country where my heart is; / here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine; / but other hearts in other lands are beating / with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine. My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, / and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine; / but other lands have sunlight too, and clover, / and skies are everywhere as blue as mine. / O hear my song, thou God of all the nations, / a song of peace for their land and for mine.

MEDITATION

"All One People" The horror of this week has reminded us that we are connected to others, that we are all one people. We are connected to those thousands who have lost their lives. They were of our nation, our land, our economy, and our people. Their deaths are our loss. And we are connected to all those who lost loved ones, friends and family in the crumbling of buildings, and the fiery crash of airliners. The threads of loss and grief tug at us, affect the very community in which we live. Their loss is ours because they are our people. And we realize that we are now connected, through conflicts that have raged across the seas, to those whose nerves have been jolted time and time again, by terrorist bombings and distant battles. And, as difficult as it is to admit, for better or worse we are now tied to those who have claimed us as enemies. They have reminded us that we are all one people, though it comes through conflict and division, yet our connection remains. And in this realization let us not forget that we are connected to the web of all life. Not only to the life that we eat, but to the ant that carries on its steady work, and to the heron wading in the river, and to the million leaves, turning sunlight to green life and autumn color, little by little, whether we remember or not. May we realize that no branch is ever severed from the tree of life, that all are connected, that we all share the fate of this planet. In this awareness may we be restored to wholeness and to the fact that we are all one people."

SERMON

I do not know where I first heard the phrase "The Cloth of Assurance" but I have used it numerous times in sermons and ceremonies. It refers to the interwoven experiences and relationships that give us security, confidence, comfort, and peace of mind. There are a thousand little events that convince us that that the fabric of society is sustainable, enduring and trustworthy. The cloth can be thought of as a web that upholds us and on which we move. It can be thought of as the "Net of Indra" where each jeweled knot is a sentient being, inescapably tied to all the others and reflecting the harmonious beauty of a universal integrity. It can be woven of the tough threads of everyday experience, or it can be, like William Butler Yeats' vision of "heaven's embroidered cloths, / Enwrought with gold and silver light." At times the cloth of assurance seems as smooth as silk, or tough as canvas. But on this last Tuesday, September 11, the cloth was torn. Now a great gaping hole with ragged edges threatens all of us. Our confidence has been shaken, and we wonder if the cloth can be restored.

There are many words and images that evoke this rending and tearing of the cloth. The most prominent for me is the word "WAR". Within twenty-four hours of the terrorist attacks political leaders began speaking of war. Since then our president explicitly declared our nation at war against our attackers. It is war, even if a rather strange kind of war. One commentator on National Public Radio noted that it is not since the time of Thomas Jefferson, when we declared war against the Barbary Pirates, that our nation has faced an enemy that was not identifiable as a nation state or particular people. As we enter into this time of war I would like to hold up a few thoughts about the nature of this war and of war in general. I will speak about reweaving the fabric of assurance.

The first point that needs to be made about this war is that it is in no way a religious war. It is not called to defend a religion; it is not inspired or started by any one religion. Terrorists can only be thought of as perverters of whatever religion they use to justify their terrible and criminal actions. Terrorists seek political ends through drastic means. The people who bomb embassies, who steal planes and use them to murder thousands of people can not be thought of as Muslims, any more than those who bomb abortion clinics and shoot medical doctors can be thought of as Christians. They are nothing more than an insult to the faith they ultimately abuse. I was inspired and deeply encouraged by the words of European leaders who said this was not an attack upon the U.S. but an attack upon civilization itself. This was an attack upon the network of people and communication and commerce that binds us all into the fabric assurance.

Secondly, I must point out that there are two types of patriotism that can arise in times of war. The first is embodied in this sentiment, "My country against its enemies, right or wrong." This is the sort of misguided patriotism that has caused Americans to commit crimes of hate against other American citizens because they somehow became marked as "the enemy." The other patriotism is one that says "This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine" but is not hateful or exclusive in its affirmation. Such a patriot supports this nation primarily because it embodies certain ideals and truths. Only this second type of patriotism can allow for eventual peace and restored assurance. It is good to stand by for our free and democratic nation, but it is my understanding that as Unitarian Universalists, our deeper loyalty is to the principles and purposes that we find embodied in this land.

This week at the National Cathedral the Rev. Billy Graham evoked this larger loyalty with the image of the foundation. He noted that as the fire melted the support structures of the two towers, and though many tons of concrete, metal and glass came falling down, yet the foundation of each building, down in the earth remained untouched and unchanged. Though our nation may suffer great disasters, still its foundation on the rights of all people remains untouched. In each of our lives we can endure great suffering if we live with constant awareness of our deepest foundation and source. To be sure Billy Graham's understanding of the foundation of good human living and mine are somewhat different, but that does not matter. The point is that in order to reweave the fabric of assurance we must rediscover its basic structure and materials, to mix metaphors we must uncover the foundation and rebuild our community upon it.

The third point I want to make today is that war is one form of a whole range of possibilities in human conflict. Some people, like Speed Leas of the Alban Institute, describe human conflict in terms of several layers. Sometimes these levels are depicted as a pyramid to emphasize that each builds upon the others, and that the higher are smaller in terms of how often they occur, and that one can climb down from the higher to the lower levels. In fact it is only at the bottom of the pyramid, upon the foundation of the good earth, that the fabric of assurance can be rewoven.

At the highest level are those intractable conflicts where the only common ground between the persons or groups involved is that they see the other as an enemy that is so threatening that it must be completely destroyed. The only way to move out of these conflicts is by rule of force. As in our current conflict with terrorist leaders, it may be that only pure military force will allow us to move down the pyramid toward peace. It may be necessary to rely upon the vast military might of the United States at this time. Weapons of war may be essential tools, but in order to reweave assurance we must use other tools, seek other means to move down to where the threads of community can be picked up again and the fabric of assurance rewoven. Second from the top are fights that can be managed only by rule of law. The opponents in these fights see no common ground other than laws that are enforced by a force larger than they are. Negotiation and the law might stop people from fighting at this level, but alone they can't end the desire to hurt one's enemies and the values they represent, because the opponents see the other as a threat to what is most valued in their world.

The third level is similar to the one just above it, because laws and rules are needed to resolve the conflict. The difference is that there is some degree of connection between the parties, some shared values and identity. Their conflict is over some ultimate principles, but not all. At this level the desire of participants is only to defeat, but not necessarily to hurt or destroy, their enemy. The next level contains those disagreements about what a people's common goals are. The people in these disagreements may be somewhat defensive but, with dialogue and an emphasis on shared values, these disagreements can be resolved, or at least moved down to the last level of conflict which is over practical problems and how to solve them. If managed poorly these problems can become heightened disagreements or worse, but if handled with clarity of purpose and calmness of spirit they will resolve back into the foundation, the place of conversation and community, or into the good earth that sustains it all. If one is to move down these levels of conflict one must begin thinking about the lower layers before leaving the higher ones. The ideals and sources of our congregation proclaim that it is not only possible to climb down the pyramid of conflict, it is our purpose to help people do so. I reject the notion that to

win we must be as ruthless as our enemies. In any conflict we must always be seeking peace, moving always to where the fabric is rewoven.

My fourth point today is to remind you that, in the process of restoring peace, forgiveness is different from reconciliation. Forgiveness is a willingness to forget a past debt; it is a gift that is given, as the word implies. But reconciliation requires trust, and trust must be earned, it should only be granted to those who have worked to develop it over time. And in order to allow trust to be renewed we must live by its spirit. In this congregation we draw our inspiration to live well from many different sources. In my personal life, for the past few years, I have drawn heavily upon the Buddhist tradition. In order to restore the fabric of assurance I believe the words of the Buddha, as recorded in the Dhammapada: "Never does hatred cease by hating in return; only through love can hatred come to an end. Victory breeds hatred; the conquered dwell in sorrow and resentment; thus they who give up all thought of victory or defeat, may be calm and live happily at peace. Let us overcome violence by gentleness. Let us overcome evil with good. Let us overcome selfishness with generosity. Let us overcome the liar with truth."

Finally, the threads of assurance are not all about ending conflict. They are about discovering all the sources of security, health and blessing. Laughter is a great aid in dark times. Find little things to laugh about. I know that some people are concerned what this conflict will do to the economy. Thus I enjoyed the cartoon on the comic pages this morning. Two slugs are in the garden reading a newspaper. One says to the other, "Finally, some good news" and the headline announces "Economy turns sluggish." It is essential to be with people we love and those we admire or trust. It is good to be together in this congregation with others who seek comfort, hope, and peace. I think of the women in our quilting circle, who sit, sewing patches of cloth, and in their shared work, the fabric of communion and connection is also being patched together. Also, it is always good to seek places of beauty, even in war the sun shines with gold and silver light and the birds swirl in excited circles. In the novel "Cold Mountain" there is a point where the soldier who is returning to his home after years of war sees birds feeding on berries upon some sunlit branches and he is struck to think that such tokens of nature's rhythms and health have endured through all that time that he saw nothing but death and ruin.

In this time of fear and anxiety, in this time of war, let us seek continually to reweave the fabric of assurance, to form community, to seek what is called "Shalom" and "Salaam" and the Great Peace.