

Tragedy and the Gift of Compassion
By Rev. Dr. David Sammons
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No, our central resolve must be to go on being Americans. We should remain people who value our liberties and who never allow a small, mad group to push us into giving up the freedoms that make us who we are.

Sitting at my desk on Tuesday afternoon, still dazed, I wrote the following for my newsletter column:

The phone rang at 6 AM. One of my wife's colleagues called to tell us to turn on the TV. We saw a building in flames then the picture of a plane crashing into its twin. Later we saw the Pentagon in flames, finally the report of another plane explosion. The scenario depicted in all those films about terrorists hijacking airplanes had come true, only in a way more horrible than anything depicted. This time no hero came to the rescue. When I got to church I opened up the sanctuary, draped the alter in black, and put a sign on it saying: "We're so sorry." In the afternoon a group of clergy gathered to talk about how to respond.

How does one respond to something this terrible with something other than with incredible sadness? I tried to imagine the impossibility of the Universalist image of a God of love being combined with the fundamentalist notion of a God who can control what happens here on earth. Could a loving God cause something like this to happen? All I could imagine was God, if there is a God, crying again, having had to cry so many times before, because of the lack of human feeling so many seem to have.

What happens next - retribution? I suppose those who planned these attacks believed they were engaged in an act of retribution because of something done by Americans. But whom did they kill. Not soldiers, not policy-makers, not people who had anything to do with whatever it is that angered them. The people who died were people innocently working in offices, flying on airplanes, or trying to help those caught in the explosions. When will such hateful insanity come to an end? When will people stop trying to get back at those they think have hurt them - wherever it is, from a church member to a country? No God worthy of the name, from a God of Islam to a God of Judaism to a God of Christianity, could want this hatred and killing to go on. All I can pray God, is if you do control anything, stop it. And may we do all we can to stop it, too. No more retribution. Let there be an end to killing. A way must be found in this world to arrive at peace.

It was with enormous sadness that a group of clergy met here at our church not long after I wrote this. All of us were shocked by what had happened that morning as a result of the anger and hatred of those who see our country as an enemy - our country, meaning all of us, whether or not we have anything to do with our government's policies, and no matter what we feel about them. It was such a hatred that drove the men who hijacked the planes full of people and turned them into bombs. Human beings have a long history of being insensitively violent like this when it comes to those they think of as their enemies - or even those they don't like, or those who just get

in their way. And beginning with the carnage of our own Civil War the anger between groups of people increasingly hasn't just been act out by soldiers recruited to do battle. It's increasingly been waged against civilians, with the thought that if ordinary people have to suffer they will force their governments to stop doing what the attackers dislike - or at least get back at them for what they've done. So, children are spat on when they try to go to school in Northern Ireland; settlers and farmers, Arab and Israeli, are shot at by snipers or killed by missiles; workers and travelers, fireman and police, are killed by the acts of terrorists who are willing to die themselves committing them, believing that they do will be rewarded in heaven. What insanity. What awful theology. How wrong it is and no matter the motivation, how evil.

Please, God, stop it, we pray. But, deep down, we know that no matter how hard we pray God, if there is God, will not stop the carnage. It's human beings who engage in the awful acts like those of last Tuesday, human beings who give in to the hate that's within them.

Speaking to employees gathered for a service of prayer at Kaiser Hospital here in Walnut Creek on Wednesday I said that the worst thing we could do in response to the hatred displayed by those who caused Tuesday's deaths would be to be hateful in return. It can easy to do that, given the anger that goes with the grief after such a tragedy. Our President expressed that anger in his call to arms in response to what he calls a declaration of war. Our Secretary of State, a General used to metaphors of the military, has a theory that what's called for in situations like this is the "Powell Strategy." He believes the only way to stop such acts is to respond to them in a way that's even worse - what he calls "an overwhelming and disproportionate response."

Generals think that way. Maybe some of us do to. We received a bomb threat at the Peace Center from such a man on Friday. But when the group of religious leaders met last here last Tuesday, leaders representing Jewish, Islamic, and a wide variety of Christian denominations, we all agreed that though it was important for our government to find out who planned and carried out what happened, the worst possible response would be to do something that would inflict suffering on a whole new group of innocent people, like the hundreds of thousands of innocent women, children and men who were killed when we struck back at Iraq because of its invasion of Kuwait or died as a result of the economic boycott we imposed on the country.

I know we clergy tend to be idealistic. But we're realists, too - realists of the broadest kind. Many of us have seen what life is like beyond the safety of our affluent suburban communities. I've seen the poverty of Eastern Europe, Central America and Asia. And I've seen what life can be like when you remove the machinery we make use of to mediate disputes. When my wife and I were in New Guinea we experienced the fear of being strangers in the kind of society in which every wrong has to be matched by retaliation which is then matched by retaliation in return until enough blood has been shed to stop the warring for awhile. The norms of New Guinea society can be traced 40,000 years and enough blood hasn't been shed yet, to end the killing.

I want to see those who are still alive and were among those who planned what happened on Tuesday caught so that they will not be free to do something like it again. There is a price to pay for what they have done. But I pray to God, and I mean it, that the price doesn't include the death of more even innocent people than have already died. One of the rabbis at our meeting said the Torah teaches that vengeance is God's not ours. But, as I said, I'm a realist, so I can't imagine our

President, and even most Americans, not feeling angry and wanting to inflict punishment on whoever supports those who attacked us. "Nuke 'em," read a sign on a garage door in Pleasant Hill and the man who called the Peace Center, after reading a statement made by one of its members in the newspaper, said: "I tell you what I'm going to do, you f...ers. I'm going to get a bomb and bomb you f...ing liberals all to s..t!"

One of the dangers that follows in the wake of something like what's happened this past week is that a country can become badly divided between those who want to hate and those who don't. But no matter how we feel, it's not individuals like us who will be making our government's decisions. Its policy makers will do whatever they believe is best. But God help us if, as individuals, we behave like the man who made the threat. What happened on Tuesday should be proof enough that we should not allow our lives to be driven by hatred. There is nothing we can do to restore the lives of those who have died, but there is much we can do to help the lives of others who need us. They include not only our loved ones and families, but all those in the world who don't have what we do - all the people who don't have the things we're being told we're supposed to want, if we read the pages of something like Esquire magazine.

The only way hope can emerge from what has happened is for us and for people like us not to give in to hate. As individuals we represent just a tiny piece of existence, but what we do with our lives matters. What we do with our lives affects the rest of existence. So we should make use of whatever talents, skills and compassion that is within us to do what we can to make ours a better world, rather than a world made worse because of us. We should try, as best we can, to be the kind of good people we talked about last week. If we can do this then perhaps the circle of goodness and compassion in the world will increase, and by its increasing will shrink the circle of hate.

In response to what happened on Tuesday the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee sent out a prayer. Here is my response to it:

O Most Sacred Ground of Life out of which we come, we are sad to see how hatefully have behaved some parts of our human family.

Each time this happens we know weep along with us as we grieve and struggle to find a way to recover the hope we so badly need to move on with our lives.

We know that the only way our faith can survive in the face of the destruction we inflict on each other is to not let sorrow and sadness immobilize us or turn us toward hatred.

We know that in giving us life you have also given us freedom, freedom to do good as well as freedom to engage in violence of the most heartless kind.

One might wonder why you have risked giving us such freedom, knowing how badly we can use it. And how, after a tragedy such as this, can you not despair over the evolution of creatures like us.

Perhaps it is because, after all these years of our evolving life will still seem also able to display creativity and compassion and the love in human hearts can, at times, overcome the challenges of hatred.

I believe you have hope for us, yet, but it is a hope that only be made real if we human beings are willing to what we can to heal our wounded earth and its people.

May we leave this place knowing that how the scales of human life will tip between compassion

and hatred is, at least in part, up to us. My hope is that the energy we add to life will be on the side peace and love.

I'm not alone. As E.J. Dionne put it in an article in the *Chronicle* this week: "Terror means that you walk down the street and always wonder if the car parked just ahead will blow up. It means you question whether you should fly on a plane or, especially if you work in a government building, go into your office. It means you wonder even more than usual where your kids are, and what's happened in the part of town where they might be."

Terror is designed to paralyze. It's aimed at getting the target country to reconsider its way of life, its values, its normal means of doing business. Terror succeeds when a country loses confidence in itself - when it gives up on the values it cherishes most.

"The resolve of this great nation is being tested," President Bush declared. "We will show the world that we will pass this test."

Dionne continues:

Our resolve shouldn't be just to catch and punish the terrorists - and punish those who harbor or trained them. Our resolve must not be limited, either, to the tasks of preventing horrors of this sort and discovering whether we should have known this was coming.

No, our central resolve must be to go on being Americans. We should remain people who value our liberties and who never allow a small, mad group to push us into giving up the freedoms that make us who we are.

"Yes," Dionne says, "some things must change. How can we not rethink the issue of airline security? Still," he concludes:... we cannot forget that this terror is, as British Prime Minister Tony Blair put it, "perpetuated by fanatics who are utterly indifferent to the sanctity of life." That means they are not typical, and that this is not a typical war. Americans should never allow fanatics to create a climate of mistrust in our country so deep that we forget who we are, what we value, and how we should live.

Emily Dickinson wrote a poem many years ago that has been set to music. It's in our hymnbook, #292. I invite you to rise now and join in singing it I think it would help if we sang it a couple of times through.