

**Growing a Soul, Changing the World**  
**A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Diane Teichert**  
**First Parish Unitarian Universalist-Canton, MA**  
**September 16, 2001**

At times such as these, we need one another. At times such as these, we are drawn to be together. At times such as these, we need religion--for the roots of the word "religion" merely mean "to bind together."

But, what kind of religion is it that we need?

Usually my sermons in September are designed to be somehow introductory, for the benefit of newcomers after our summer's hiatus. So it was for today. The short sermon description that appeared in our monthly newsletter for today's service said, "Unitarian Universalism offers a vision of love and justice that is both personal and public--good news the world needs to hear. Please bring your friends and neighbors who you think would like to know who we are and what we believe."

Today, as I looked out at the fuller than usual pews at the start of the service before our young people and their teachers left, I saw that some of you did bring your friends and neighbors, and that other newcomers are here today as well, plus many regulars and numerous sometime-attenders.

Somehow, I doubt you were drawn here by my teaser in the newsletter!

At times such as these, we need each other. At times such as these, we need to be reminded of, and be deeply and personally bound together by, our Unitarian Universalist good news of love and justice. We need to shine its light on our personal, and our public, responses to the events on Tuesday and since.

We need our religion now, some of us--many of us--just to get by. These past days haven't been easy. There have been times of intense emotion of incredible range and even times of disassociation with the whole event as if we had no feelings at all. It's been a crazed emotional roller coaster; we've been dazed by repeated frightening images and constant commentary.. There's been sorrow, fear, anger, helplessness, solidarity, outrage, compassion, worry, desire for revenge, regret, vulnerability, energy, despondency, and probably more.

For some of you and thousands of others, there is terrible grief for loved ones and acquaintances who are known to have perished or, what may be even worse, are feared to have perished. The anguish of the unknown has been so hard for so many. For the thousands of witnesses and survivors, there is more than terrible grief for the co-workers who they left behind--there is also terror in their awful memories of falling and crushed bodies, flying debris, and collapsing buildings.

For some of us here and thousands of others, there is tremendous relief that the ones we know who work in Lower Manhattan or at the Pentagon are safe, and that the friend or relation that was supposed to take that fateful flight or show up at work that morning didn't.

In some deep and profound sense, though, both the terrible grief and that tremendous relief seem to resonate inside us on the same chord. And, so, we are bound together, deeply connected to each other by this tragedy whether it is grief or relief that we feel.

Even those of us who have no personal connection through grief or relief, feel such sorrow for the victims and their friends and families. This public mourning may reverberate with your own past sorrows-loved ones who have died, painful endings, depressions-so that the depth of your sorrow may take you by surprise. Its as though this public mourning we experience today is amply magnified by the unrelated previous personal sorrows we've known.

But, most of us have known grief and sorrow before, and we can bear it now. With a little help from those who love us, we are learning again this week that love is stronger than death and outlives it. Love lasts. It outlives grief, sorrow and even death.

More difficult than grief and sorrow are the feelings of fearful new vulnerability and unfamiliar outrage that many Americans have been feeling. How do we go on with daily life, how do we help our children go on, when we fear for our personal safety and theirs? What do we peaceful people do with our anger and outrage?

First, I believe we must accept these difficult feelings as facts. What we feel is real, and suppressing feelings does not banish them. It helps to use words-in prayer and meditation, or with adult friends or family, or your minister (who was this past week, as always, deeply honored by your trust). Please, don't suffer alone.

Second, feelings of fear and anger need not command our will. Our feelings may give energy to our actions, but let reason set their direction.

Our new-found fear should energize us-as a nation and as individuals-to take reasonable and ever-improving protective actions in our airports and elsewhere, but beyond that let us choose hope over fear. Let us choose to trust in the good hearts of most people rather than be immobilized by fear of the few. Let not our fear diminish our capacity for love. Let us be sure to especially love as ourselves our Muslim and Arab neighbors, or anyone who could be confused with them. Can we even open our hearts to the Palestinians who danced in the streets when they heard the terrible news of our dead and injured? How did we come to be so hated?

Likewise, our new-found anger should energize us-as a nation and as individuals-to take action toward justice. I believe the events of the past week call for two kinds of justice, a two-sided sword of justice: both retribution and re-distribution.

On the one hand, I believe our country should seek retribution, taking reasonable and decisive action against what appears to be a network of terrorists both here and abroad determined to undermine our security as a means to their larger aims. This side of the sword, I believe, is about

targeted strikes, arrests and trials of individuals based on intelligent information; it is not about imminent military attacks against entire communities or countries. Done well, it will be a long process, making slow progress. It will require the services of our best minds and sacrifices from Americans financially and in our personal freedoms and conveniences. Done poorly, it will be a quick flash, producing even more hate in response, and possibly nuclear chaos.

And, on the other hand, I believe we must seek another kind of justice: a re-distribution of the goods and benefits of civilization that Americans have enjoyed far in excess to what we really need, to the great detriment of impoverished people in the Middle East and elsewhere who lack even the minimum food, shelter, health and education. This side of the sword, I believe, is about democratic and economic empowerment, not foreign aid and loans to corrupt governments. Done well, it will be a long process, making slow progress. It will require the services of our best minds and sacrifices from Americans accustomed to material gain and abundance. Done poorly, it will be a quick fix, producing even more corruption in response, and increased terrorism.

These are the ways in which reason directs my fear and anger as I come up out of the shock and sorrow of the past week: Reasonable self-protection as individuals and as a nation. Love of our neighbors. Retributive justice for those who supported the attacks and/or plan others. More equitable re-distribution of the world's resources.

I acknowledge that reason may be directing your fear and anger in other directions. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, this is a free pulpit and yours is a free pew; we may from time to time not see eye to eye. But, given that we share the same religious tradition, I feel confident that reason has been your guide. Reason is, after all, one of the three hallmarks (along with freedom and tolerance) of the Unitarian side of our religious tradition, going as far back as the early Roman church when our predecessors applied reason to the doctrine of the Trinity and rejected it.

Not only do I feel confident that your views have been guided by reason, but I also know that your reason and mine are drawn to the same set of ideals. These ideals are expressed in various ways in our tradition-in the covenant of this congregation that we recite each week, in its Mission Statement printed on the back of your order of worship, and in the Covenant adopted in 1985 by the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations of which First Parish is a member.

The latter is printed in the front of our hymnal. If you would please open your hymnal to Hymn #1 and then flip one page back toward the title page, on the left side, you will see in large capital letters "We the member congregations...covenant to affirm and promote..." and immediately below are the seven statements that comprise what we call the Principles and Purposes of that Covenant, our current best effort at expressing our ideals. I thought we might benefit from reading them aloud together.

"The inherent worth and dignity of every person;  
Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;  
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.  
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

"Inherent worth and dignity of every person...Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations..." Every person? What is justice, for whom? In our present anger, in the complexity of the global world disorder, how can we even know what these words mean, never mind promote them?

Our challenge in the coming days and weeks will be to understand, hold onto and promote our religious ideals in the face of fear and anger, danger and chaos. Meeting this challenge is spiritual work, and it is best done-not alone-but in community, together, here, with others who share our ideals.

As the late A. Powell Davies, activist minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington DC once said, "life is just a chance to grow a soul." At times of crisis, the chance to grow a soul looms larger, and the necessity to do so is all the greater. Life is just a chance to grow a soul-and, for that, we need one another together

On Friday morning, I was on my way to Canton when I heard on the radio about President Bush's request that Americans go to a house of worship for prayer on their lunch hour. "Duh," I realized, "then the houses of worship better get ready."

I painted two big signs for out front by the sidewalk proclaiming "Open at Noon." I cleaned up after the tenants the night before, straightened the pew cushions, set out memorial candles for people to light, put a plant on the altar table, lit the chalice, and I opened the sanctuary doors wide. People trickled in, sat in the silence, maybe lit a candle, and eventually left-maybe fifteen all tolled by 1:30.

I remember one young woman, a stranger to me, who sat longer than the others. I spoke with her as she got up to leave. I asked her if someone she knew had died on Tuesday or was still missing. She said "no, I just feel so sad for all those people and their families. It's so terrible." Her eyes welled up, and she wiped away the tears. She went on to say, "we've had it too good here, compared to the rest of the world." "Yes," I responded, "and we've been smug in our false sense of security." She nodded. And quickly added, "not that I don't feel like dropping a bomb on somebody." She paused. I waited. "Sitting over there," she concluded, nodding toward her pew, "I realized I really have to work on it. Or the anger I feel will win out."

If we didn't know it before, we surely know it now: we all have spiritual work to do, of one kind or another. Our religion provides the support community for that work, and the ideals that might guide it.

The events of the past week have shown us the worst-we hope it's the worst-of what humans can do. But, they've also shown how the worst can bring out the best in compassion and self-giving. We can't forget the horror of this week, but we must remember the good. And, we must do what

humans can do when bound together-grow our souls and make the world a more just, and safer, place for all. Amen.

**Let us join our hearts and minds together in prayer and meditation.**

Terror has struck close to home this week. With shock and horror, we watched it strike-and then witnessed it over and over again. At danger of becoming numb, instead we opened our hearts to sorrow and suffering, fear and anger.

Now, as a people, we are pressed into making sense of the senseless, fathoming the unfathomable, and responding to it with all the intelligence and resolve we can muster.

Yet, life has gone on for most of us this week. Babies were born and people died this week. Children went to school and workers went to work. The plow was out yesterday in the fields below my house and the sun shines brightly in a clear blue sky this morning.

Let us give deep thanks for life, for those we love, for the work we have to do, for the beauty of this earth and the pleasures we enjoy.

May the lives we live be worth dying for in the end.

Let us dwell together in shared silence followed by song.