

"Time of Terror" Delivered at The First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco

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Bless you for being here this morning. Every one of you. We need one another now, more than ever. We need to help one another not to turn away from the tragedy and grief, but rather toward one another. To turn "from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, [and] from fear to faith."

There are at least four things that we can do together, religiously, in response to these events and that none of us alone can do adequately.

First of all, we can lament and mourn together. Each of us in our aloneness deals with grief in our own very personal way. But when we mourn, then we grieve together, and are comforted. Note that Jesus is not quoted as saying, "Blessed are those who grieve," but rather "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." For when we grieve and lament together we admit before God and one another a shared vulnerability, a shared loss.

This week in our country we not only lost more than 5,000 of our fellow citizens. Women, children, men with whom many many more lives were intertwined in manifold ways, both intimate and distant. We also lost together any illusion of invulnerability based on our nation's wealth and power.

If we are wise, we will never again attempt to measure America's or our own success only in mere material terms, but in spiritual terms. I think of the courage of the firefighters and the rescue workers and the police, admonishing those fleeing the World Trade Center in almost Biblical terms, "Don't look back!" and then turning themselves to go into the crippled buildings, to do try to save others.

In the weeks and months ahead, if we are to save ourselves, we must look back, however. Not with the firefighter's physical courage, perhaps, but with their spiritual strength. Only if we turn away do we give terror the power to harm not only physically, but spiritually.

For make no mistake, my friends: terrorism is a form of warfare not only against buildings, cities, nations, and the bodies of vulnerable, innocent; it is also warfare against the soul. It tries to use the weapon of fear to continue the damage even after the initial attack has passed. And so the first thing we can do is gather together in places of the spirit, to use the spiritual virtues of faith, hope, and love, to cast out every fear. To follow ancient wisdom embodied in the saying of Kaddish, to bring even into the house of mourning a song of praise for the precious, fragile gift of life, and to do so in the spirit of love.

On Wednesday night this week, at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City – where I served seven years as co-minister, and where Margot worked with me one year – over 800 people gathered for one of many candlelight vigils around the city and country. Over 400 of them came forward to speak the name of a loved one, neighbor, or co-worker who had died or was missing.

So a second thing we can do is to pray. With such people. For them. For ourselves. For our nation as a whole. Because our individual and collective character is being tested by this attack upon our country.

We need to pray together because too often, alone, the inarticulate longings of our hearts are just sighs too deep for words -- and we may not know even how or what to pray for. Together our common prayers can help the Spirit teach us not only how to pray, but what to then work for. There is an impulse in many of us, for example, to pray only for peace just now. This is understandable, and good, but it is not enough. We must pray not only for peace, but also for justice. No peace ever comes without justice. This, like hatred not ceasing by hatred, is an old rule, as the Buddha said.

It is especially important for those of who would make a religious witness for wise restraint by our government not to speak out just for peace, or to leap too quickly to blame this crime against our nation on America's policies or actions. If we do so, we will simply not be heard. We will not persuade. Our prayers will be in vain. We will only seem to be "blaming the victim."

We must make clear that we also want justice. That we want those behind Tuesday's acts of terror and murder brought to justice -- as the criminals. War criminals, since indeed this attack does have all the marks of an orchestrated declaration of war. And not just against our country. Just as Slobodan Milosevic has been brought to trial for mass murder by the whole international community, let us ask every nation to join with us in bringing the criminals who did this to trial.

But when President Bush says that we will "make no distinctions" between terrorists and those who harbor them, I can only another fear in my heart. "Mr. President," I wanted to tell him, "in my theology, only God gets the privilege of making 'no distinctions.' Of making the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. Human beings are required to make distinctions.

Especially leaders. Doing justice, not mirroring the crime by retributive actions in which civilians are simply treated as "collateral damage."

So on Friday I joined with hundreds of other American religious leaders – of all faiths and denominations – in signing a statement entitled "DENY THEM THEIR VICTORY: A RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO TERRORISM." [Copies are available.](#) It says, in part:

"The terrorists have offered us a stark view of the world they would create, where the remedy to every human grievance and injustice is a resort to the random and cowardly violence of revenge - even against the most innocent. Having taken thousands of our lives, attacked our national symbols, forced our political leaders to flee their chambers of governance,

disrupted our work and families, and struck fear into the hearts of our children, the terrorists must feel victorious.

“But we can deny them their victory by refusing to submit to a world created in their image. Terrorism inflicts not only death and destruction but also emotional oppression to further its aims. We must not allow this terror to drive us away from being the people God has called us to be. We assert the vision of community, tolerance, compassion, justice, and the sacredness of human life, which lies at the heart of all our religious traditions. America must be a safe place for all our citizens in all their diversity. It is especially important that our citizens who share national origins, ethnicity, or religion with whoever attacked us are, themselves, protected among us.”

So that is a third thing we can do together, religiously, in a time of terror. We can speak and act out of our deepest, grief-tested, prayerful wisdom. We can turn to the democratic process of helping our leaders discern how best to respond to this test of our national character. We can turn toward them, and toward our fellow citizens, in dialogue, not away in cheap and easy alienation. No doubt some will disappoint us in their response.

Certainly every decent religious leader I know was ashamed this week when Jerry Falwell said, on Pat Robertson’s TV program, said that the attacks were God’s punishment of America for the work of the ACLU, feminists, gays, lesbians, and supporters of abortion rights. To them I say, “Shame! Shame on you! Your divisive, un-Christian attempts to divide Americans against one another are no more religious than are the distortions of Islam used to motivate murdering terrorists.”

The root of the word “religious” lies in a Latin verb meaning to bind together again. Which is one reason I am proud that my successor as President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, this week went to call on the leaders of America’s Sikh and Muslim communities, to assure them of our friendship and concern.

The Muslim Public Affairs Council, by the way, issued a statement saying that

1. “We feel that our country, the United States, is under attack.
2. All Americans should stand together to bring the perpetrators to justice.
3. We warn against any generalizations that will only serve to help the criminals and incriminate the innocent.
4. We offer our resources and resolve to help the victims of these intolerable acts, and we pray to God to protect and bless America.”

Which brings us to the fourth and final thing that we can do religiously. We can turn toward the Muslim community, not away, seeking not only to understand better what has driven some – but only some – of its members to such hatred of America. We can seek understanding. We can study. We can do an examination of conscience, which is religious work at any season, but especially in this one.

Tomorrow evening marks the beginning of Rosh Hashanah. In Jewish tradition, the start of a New Year. The start of the prayerful Days of Awe, a time of solemn repentance leading up to the holiest day of the Year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Margot and John and I now ask you to join us in three concluding prayers in the true spirit of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. You may find them at numbers 507, 508, and 509 in the back of the hymnal. Please join us we pray:

Margot Campbell Gross: A Jewish Prayer

Grant us the ability to find joy and strength
not in the strident call to arms
but in stretching out our arms
to grasp our fellow creatures
in the striving for justice and truth.

John Marsh: A Christian Prayer

Save us from weak resignation to violence,
teach us that restraint is the highest expression of power.
that thoughtfulness and tenderness are the mark of the strong.
help us to love our enemies,
not by countenancing their sins,
but remembering our own.

John Buehrens A Muslim Prayer

Save us, our compassionate Lord,
from our folly, by your wisdom,
from our arrogance, by your forgiving love,
from our greed by your infinite bounty,
and from our insecurity by your healing power.

CLOSING HYMN 159

This Is My Song, O God of All the Nations Finlandia

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
song of peace for lands afar 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.

CLOSING WORDS AND BENEDICTIONS

St. Francis of Assisi

In the words of the patron saint of this city:

Where hate rules, let us bring love; where sorrow, joy.
Let us strive more to comfort others than to be comforted,
to understand others, than to be understood,
to love others more than to be loved.
For it is in giving that we receive,
and in pardoning that we are pardoned.

Go in peace, with God's blessing, and be a blessing in a hurting world. Amen