

And Now What?
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I hope you will forgive me if my remarks this morning are a little more rambling than usual. It's been a terrible week, and there is so much swirling around in my heart and mind that it is hard to know how to focus. But I hear myself asking the same question over and over. "And now what?" That's always the hardest question. At least it is for me. Now what? Now what do we do? Now, that the illusion of safety, and even invulnerability, has been shattered, what do we do? Now that we have had our faces rubbed in the rubble and someone holds up that First Principle-the inherence of worth and dignity in ALL people-what do we do? Now what? How do we face the rising sun in the morning? How do we look the future in the eye and sing? Or has the sound of shattering lives silenced music forever? Now what? I am reminded of some lines from the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay:

Life must go on,
Though good men die.
Life must go on.
I forget just why.

Now what?

I am wrestling with my feelings. I want to be honest with you. Part of me is so deeply angry that I can hardly breathe. Tuesday night I woke up with images in my head of killing the hijackers, and I could not erase the images and go back to sleep. And even now, when my mind wanders and drifts across random images, I sometimes get images of killing and war. When I think about those who supported and trained these hijackers, I find myself wondering how to kill them dead enough. Yes, indeed, I am angry, deeply and profoundly angry. So I have to ask myself, "Now what?"

How can I react without giving way to that anger? How can I embrace my beliefs, my religious principles? How can I acknowledge my anger without having to commit sins of my own? How can I go on as a religious leader? How can I pretend to be on a spiritual journey and feel this deep, existential anger? Now what?

Several times over the last few days, I have heard people asking different versions of what I think is one of the most profound questions we can ask at this point. It is a question that I am terribly afraid will be lost in the anger and the cries for revenge and punishment and retribution. One version of the question is this: "What could have brought someone to do these things?" Another version is this: "What have we Americans done that these people hate us that much?" Another version of it is this: "How did those beautiful babies grow up to be such murderous adults?" The version that moves me is this: "How can we change our behavior so that this will not happen again, ever, anywhere, to anyone?" Whatever version may move you, the question is about how we have been involved in producing the conditions that lead to this moral catastrophe. This is the real "Now what?"

America has almost always preached the rhetoric of compassion for the poor and dispossessed. We have always talked about caring for those who have less, about sharing our abundance with those who do not have enough, about being a champion of freedom and justice and equality. And we have meant it, meant it with our minds, with our hearts, and with our actions. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breath free." We all know the rhetoric. It is good rhetoric. I believe in it. I preach it. I embrace it. It is also one of my ideals.

But no nation or human being ever lives up to its principles, not fully, not completely. It is an impossibility. The very nature of an ideal is that it pulls us forward, always slightly beyond our grasp, calling us to become better than we were, more than we ever thought we could be. Who would want an ideal that is easy to live up to? What kind of ideal is it that suggests that we are already good enough, that we cannot do any better, that we can just stop and stay where we are? What kind of ideal would it be that told us that we are finished? For I tell you, we are not finished; we have barely begun.

Now what? Now we must look to see where these ideals of democracy and worth and dignity and compassion call us. Now we must begin to ask ourselves, honestly and with our own dignity, how we have failed our own ideals and how to start over and go beyond the complacency that leads us to look at the Muslim world and remain blind to the suffering that America has been a party to. I have spoken of this before.

We must ask ourselves where healing may lie, a healing that embraces not only those whose lives were broken last Tuesday morning, but also those whose lives were so broken that they could embrace and even celebrate such a terrible thing. When even one human being on earth celebrates the pain and death of another, there is a failure, a failure of religion, a failure of compassion, a failure of democracy, a failure of human decency. There is a failure of love. There is a failure of humanity to reach beyond its limits to embrace its possibilities. And that applies to us as well as to our enemies. If we celebrate the deaths of those who are responsible for this atrocity, then we become what we have hated.

So now what? We hear an increasing rhetoric of war. We hear a call for vengeance, vast and terrible and sure. We hear a call for retribution and that version of justice that will end only when we are all blind, deaf, dumb, and dead. And I must confess that my anger hears this rhetoric and rejoices. Part of me agrees. Part of me wants to see these people suffer. But another part of me understands that it is suffering that has led these people to commit these acts. And how will making them suffer even more help to stop them? Has that ever worked? Is the voice of love a voice of anger and revenge? Has love ever rejoiced in suffering? No. Love rejoices in the healing of broken lives and in the justice that brings compassion and builds up that which was destroyed and brings human beings into each other's arms.

So, I believe that vengeance is none of our business. But justice is, and that is where I come up short. I believe that there are times when there are no alternatives to war that are acceptable. There are times when the options are all so terrible that war is the least immoral among them. These times are as rare as they are terrible. Most often the rhetoric of war would have us believe that we face one of those times when, in fact, we do not. But these times do happen. And when they happen, they always represent a failure of humanity and civilization. These situations

cannot happen among people who genuinely treat one another with compassion, understanding, and love.

So now what? Are we in one of those terrible situations? Are there no moral alternatives to war? Is there no way to embrace justice and to bring an end to these acts of terror that does not commit us to equal acts of terror? Is there no possibility but to answer evil with evil? Is it no longer possible to answer an act of war with an act of love? I do not know. I do not know what act of love would be believed; I do not know what act of love would be acceptable to my people; and I do not know what act of love would be just.

My generation has learned to fear the military, and we find it hard, even impossible, to trust this rhetoric. Our fear is not a rational one. It is born of the trauma of Vietnam, and trauma is not rational. But our fear is real, and all of us are wrestling with it, trying to understand, trying to see whether we can turn around before having to go down that ugly and evil road. It is hard for us. It is hard for us to see even the possibility that there may be no acceptable and just alternative to military action. It is hard for us to contemplate the reality that humanity does fail itself sometimes and fail itself so thoroughly that military action is necessary.

I am of my generation, and I wrestle with this. I am afraid: afraid for my nation; afraid for my people; afraid for my son, who just turned 18 years old; afraid for myself. It may be that in a few weeks or months I will have to stand before you and preach about a nation at war. I tremble when I think about it. I do not know how to contemplate that possibility.

So, I ask again. Now what? Not surprisingly, I have far more questions than I have answers and far more turmoil than certainty. But there are few things I am sure of. I am sure that all acts of terrorism, these attacks included, are acts of desperation, made by desperate people. I am sure that, with all due respect to President Bush, we were not attacked because we believe in democracy. We were attacked because these desperate people see America to be the leader and the symbol of a culture that has created the desperation that breaks the loving hearts within their people. I am sure that the ideals of love and justice and forgiveness and humanity that every religion upholds have been broken. And I am sure that we must turn back from the road we are on, a road that will lead inevitably and surely to yet more destruction, desperation, hatred, brokenness, and death.

And now what? I started these reflections acknowledging my anger and wondering how it is that I can accept its reality and still follow those ideals that lead me. I remember a meditation from a Raja Yoga text that I read years ago. It said, among other things, "I have anger, but I am not my anger." Indeed. I have anger, but I am not my anger. If I can remember that, then perhaps I can allow myself to be angry and turn that very anger into love by directing it, not at those desperate men who did such terrible things, but at the conditions that broke their hearts. And then, perhaps I will be able to dedicate myself anew to the healing of those hearts and all hearts that are broken.

In my despair I remembered the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Perhaps, then, it would be appropriate to end with the healing words of the great German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. He imagines the words God speaks to us as we are made. His poem includes these lines:

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

No feeling, not even anger and desperation, is final, so long as we do not lose sight of the love that embraces every heart and weaves together every living being in a vast and golden web.

And now what? And now the very same thing that is always lying just beyond us, guiding us to that which is more vast and powerful than any of us can ever imagine. And now we are called again to the love of life and of humanity and to the healing of the brokenness that suggests that we can settle with less than love. And now we are called to turn from acts of hatred to acts of love. Are we as a people capable of such justice? I pray that we are.