

## **Even In the Face of Tragedy: The Covenant of Dignity and Worth**

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The events of the past week have left us reeling. As individuals, families, communities, and as a nation, we are shocked, saddened, angered, and at some deep level, **changed** by the sudden reality of overwhelming violence intruding into our daily lives. We have been changed because we cannot pretend any more that we will always be safe because we chanced to be born and to live in the United States.

We are all struggling to make sense of a senseless act by coming to terms with the change it brings to our lives. How will it be to travel? In what kind of world will our children or grandchildren live? How often do we remember to tell the people that we love that we love them? What will we do in the face of war? We pay attention to the changes that happen, both internally and externally, to make sure they are healthy and appropriate. This is a good thing, and a hard thing.

As we face the challenge of coming to terms with the tragedy that has suddenly inserted itself into our lives, we also face an inner challenge. Many would call it a spiritual challenge. In the face of such hateful acts, what will we do? How will we behave? What can we still believe? What is the right thing to do now—now that everything has changed?

This is one of those times when it isn't easy to be a Unitarian Universalist. Our tradition is not one of pat answers. Though we draw our strength from a wide variety of sources, there is no book of answers from which I can quote with final authority. But I can assure you that Unitarian Universalism has a powerful message, even in the face of tragedy.

Some of you may have noticed that in spite of Tuesday's events, I did not change my sermon topic. I was scheduled to preach a sermon entitled *The Covenant of Dignity and Worth*. In your order of service, you will see that I did not change the title, but only added to it. *Even in the Face of Tragedy...*

As we face the uncertainty of this change that we did not initiate, invite, or intend, it is important—perhaps even crucial—that we look beyond ourselves for guidance. As our emotions cycle through shock, sadness, and anger, we must look for what transcends our feelings, what is enduring and honorable even in the face of tragedy.

Earlier this week, I sent out a letter to those church members I could reach by email. It said:

*Dear Friends,*

*The events of this week will mark our lives forever. The destruction that began a few days ago with the senseless attack on American lives and landmarks threatens to continue as we begin to hear reports of violence against Arab and Muslim people. As hate seems to beget hate, our presence as Unitarian Universalists becomes ever more important.*

*As we, and the nation, begin to heal from these tragic events, I hope we will stand up for our belief in the worth and dignity of every person and the interdependent web of all existence by supporting all people—including our Arab and Muslim friends and neighbors—who were and are affected and injured by these events.*

*As we grieve, let us remember the myriad reasons for hope: there are hundreds of stories of courage and heroism to remind us of the human capacity for good; there is our deep and steadfast need to be of use, to help others, to bring more love and more hope into the world; there is the incredible depth and breadth of human compassion. Even in our grief and anger, let us not give in to rage or despair.*

*In these troubled times, may we stand up for the good and stand against hatred, discrimination, prejudice and injustice of any kind.*

Forrest Church, one of our ministers in Metro New York, spoke of it this way at the vigil held the night after the attack, "We are not human because we think. We are human because we care." Today, as I look out over your faces, I want to tell you how much I care, how glad I am that you are all here, how glad I am that we are here together, facing the uncertainty and the tragedy. And I want to remind you of the beauty not only of human compassion and strength, but also of our first principle—the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

This is, perhaps, the most difficult time I can imagine to live by this principle. Like many of the people I hear on the television coverage, and even like our president, I feel the fierce fire of anger in my veins. How easy it would be to let it ignite into hatred and vengeance! How easy it would be to begin to dehumanize those who **I** believed to be responsible for this act of terror that has changed the world I live in. How easy it would be to say that they have forfeited their worth and dignity by committing an inhuman act.

It would be easy to give in to that kind of thinking because I **am** enraged. These despicable acts are cowardly, they are evil, they are wrong. There is no system of thought—religious or secular—that condones such an act. Only the most selfish and misguided of minds could conceive such horror. Yet even in the face of this incredible wrong, our principles stand. We must grapple with them, wrestle with them, and let them guide us, even in the face of this tragedy.

As I have wrestled this week with what to say, I have become convinced that now more than ever, we must commit ourselves to live by this principle. Every person has value. Every life is precious. Each baby, child, teenager, adult, and elder deserves life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This radical idea is the foundation of this amazing country—the best of what America has offered the world. The heart of democracy is the understanding that every person is important. To live by this principle in the face of tragedy is a very difficult thing, but it is exactly the right thing to do. If, even in our terror and our anger, we can continue to uphold the value of life, then the terror has not defeated us.

In a time like this, it is important to remember that "inherent worth and dignity" is not the same as blamelessness or freedom from accountability. If we uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every person we are not saying that whatever they choose to do is somehow okay. What we are saying is that unlike the people that planned and carried out these horrific events, we value human life—every human life. When people behave cruelly and with hatred we will intervene, but we will do so in ways that protect and preserve life. Even when we are enraged and seek to redress a horrible wrong, we will measure our acts by the standard of dignity, honor, and justice. Even in the face of tragedy, we must not forget that every life—American, Arab, Persian, Afghani—is precious. May we not waste a single one.

The "inherent worth and dignity of every person" is not an ontological principle. It is an ethical one. Inherent worth and dignity is not something we confer upon people when they are good and rescind when they are bad. Inherent worth and dignity is not something that resides in the other, but something that is demanded of us.

Another Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Edmund Robinson, summarized it this way:

*...[T]he ethical command persists even when the person with whom we are dealing has acted against society's moral codes. That is in fact the test of the ethics. It's easy to recognize someone's worth and dignity when they are like us, or when they are behaving as we think people ought to behave. But when we say that people by their behavior have "forfeited" the right to recognition of their worth and dignity, then we really didn't believe that their worth and dignity was inherent.*

Even in the face of tragedy, even when people behave in ways that are hateful, dreadful, and wrong, our principles call us to remember the inherent worth and dignity of all and to act on that knowledge. Our president and leaders are calling us to war. Our principles call us to value every life. Even in the face of tragedy and the deep and urgent cry for justice, we must not give in to strategies that devalue human life. Those responsible for the horror thus far must not win the day. Hatred and prejudice must not win the day. Death must not win the day. Destruction must not win the day. Even in the face of tragedy—especially in the face of tragedy—we must uphold the value of life. Our lives have changed, but our principles must not. Only then will we truly triumph over terror.

As we face the changes that have been thrust upon us, may we call upon one another in our anguish, our anger, and our despair. May this community be one where each voice is heard, each person valued, each moment cherished. May we never forget the precious lives that were lost, the hearts that were broken, and the heroes that emerged. As we face the uncertain future, may we find the best in ourselves and in others and begin to heal.

Amen, Ashé, and Blessed Be.