

## **Walking Through the Pain**

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**South Nassau Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

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I changed the title of this morning's sermon. It was called An Unusual Package and it was originally about a package we received here at SNUUC that looked for all the world like it was a letter bomb. It wasn't. The sermon was going to focus on our expectations, our projections, our abilities to make much out of little and our collective willingness to expect the worst. The tone would have been lighthearted. In other words it was the worst possible sermon I could have given here this morning, given the events. I don't know if I ever could give that sermon; my world changed. All of our worlds have changed.

Because Tuesday happened, life as we knew it will never be the same again. Our worlds have changed. So forgive me if this sermon is not as coherent and polished as I usually strive to deliver. The events of the last week are still too fresh and still too raw to make much sense. As I said during our Tuesday evening vigil, "I don't know what to make of this." I still don't. I'm not sure I will for a long time.

One thing is clear, at our vigil Tuesday evening everyone who shared expressed similar and yet differing feelings. Some of us were feeling sorrow, others anger, many of us were just numb, and some of us felt so many different things in a torrent of emotional waves. We were all correct in feeling what we felt, and we may feel unbalanced, shocked and distraught for quite some time.

For myself, I have felt all of these. I go from sorrow, to anger back to numb. Each one of these having various shades and permutations of emotional intensity, none staying so long that I can claim it as solid rather than a chimera.

Tuesday's terrorist attack was and is an unmitigated horror. And our own reactions have been mixed. Some of us have sought the evil solely outside of ourselves, others have blamed ourselves. The truth may lie somewhere in-between. There are no easy answers. The reality is that every single life in our nation has felt this blow. Our body politic is wounded, our national psyche is wounded, our individual souls are wounded. And there are thousands of people who are physically wounded or dead. No one in our country has not felt this blow. And most of us in the New York Metropolitan area have felt this blow the hardest.

Some of us were there to watch the buildings fall. Some of us used to work in the World Trade Center, but in what may now seem like the grace of God, had been laid off from work just a little earlier. Nearly everyone knows someone who has died, been injured, or knows someone whose friends or family has died or been injured.

Danny, the gentleman who has been working on refurbishing our Religious Education wing, is also a NYC firefighter. He has been there all week digging out survivors and bodies. And he has lost many friends.

While there are plenty of stories of the atrocities that continue; the still missing people, the number of dead and wounded, the spurious bomb threats, trying to track down terrorists, there are also stories of hope.

I often stand up here on Sunday mornings and speak of the failings of our system. I do it because I want us to be better, to truly live our ideals. But this morning I stand before you proud to be an American. Because amidst all of the horror, the ongoing tragedy, the stories of pain and suffering, there is also hope.

It is easy to feel helpless during a time like this. It is easy to feel that we don't know what to do or how to help. And everyone wants to help.

As a people we have pulled together and pitched together to do what we can. There is a surplus of blood at the blood banks. There are so many people coming forward to give blood that the blood banks simply cannot handle all of this generosity.

As a people we have been volunteering in unbelievable numbers. There are so many volunteers that even as they are being turned away more come to fill the line. Those who are on the frontlines, the firefighters, the police, the paramedics, have been working day and night without sleep and without complaint. People want to help. In my lifetime I have never seen such acts of selflessness. I am proud to be an American.

All of this points toward something larger. All the stories of both the tragedy and of how we have as a people volunteered and helped, point to the larger vision of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Despite the tragedy, a tragedy of which the toll of pain and suffering may never be counted, there is hope. It was a relatively small number of people who did this. Unitarian Universalists try to see the goodness in people rather than look for the evil. Nothing may try our faith like this tragedy. Make no mistake, the terrorist attacks were evil and sinful. Under no circumstances am I prepared to minimize or forgive. I'm still too angry. But it is easy to get wrapped up into this and not see the miracle of human love and the hope of our human condition. It's too easy not to see the compassion, the empathy, the love and the genuine efforts to reach out and build bridges.

Right now our sorrow and our anger may cloud our larger vision. That's alright, there is always blinding smoke in any fire.

As a Unitarian Universalist, and as a minister which to my mind means one who is committed to the ideals of our religion, I struggle to have faith in this tragedy. It is easy to look at the genuinely evil acts of some people and conclude that people are bad at their core. It is times like this when we could rely on that old standby Original Sin. It answers the age old question, why do people do bad things by proclaiming a metaphysical fall. We do bad things because we are at our very root bad. It is at a time like this when this answer to the age old question makes sense.

From my perspective that is a far-too-easy and faithless cop-out. Evil is a reality in our world. These acts were evil, and sinful, and horrible. But at the same time there are thousands of acts all

week long that have proven the courage, the bravery, the nobility, the compassion, the love, and the generosity of people. I still have faith in human nature. I still have faith in humanity. And yet, in the face of this evil I struggle with this faith.

There is no doubt in my mind that we will act in all sorts of ways as a result of this tragedy. One thing is certain, all our lives have been changed. I feel out of control, and I feel that much of what I had taken for granted can never be taken for granted again. I am saddened by this. And I'm too close to the events of the past week to feel much more than sadness and anger. I struggle with my faith. This morning my faith is winning, but some days it isn't easy.

I encourage each of us to do what we can to help. I encourage each of us to look to our faith to sustain us. I encourage each of us to look to our community to sustain us. In closing this morning let me share the words of someone else who faced evil and yet had her faith. This is from the Diary of Anne Frank:

*In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us, too, I can feel the suffering of millions, and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think it will all come out right, that this cruelty will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.*

Amen.