

Mourning Our Losses and Rekindling our Hope
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NOTE: Preaching is an unrepeatable communal event, which occurs among a particular people at a specific time in the context of a worshipping congregation. Rightly considered, fully experienced, preaching is a sacramental event, endowed with the life concerns, the energies, and the longings of the people gathered. The words contained herein are taken from the minister's memory and notes as prepared and delivered. They are lifted out of their proper context and should be considered the thinnest abstraction taken out of the fullness of the whole Sunday Service. [Adapted from words by Roy Phillips]

Tuesday September 11, 2001. None of us will ever forget this date. Each of us carries with us forever a memory of where we were and what we were doing.

Single words evoke emotional images: Stunned, tragic, sad, terrifying, numbing, disbelief. And others: Anger, hate, suffering, violence and despair. Each word has its own story, its own tug at your heart. I keep repeating the words to myself. At moments tears roll down my cheeks. At moments I collapse, exhausted. My mind races, to discover some tiny shred of meaning in this madness. None shows itself.

I can not watch anymore TV coverage; hear anymore radio news. The quick analysis that babbles on, and the political rhetoric are not meaningful. This national tragedy is beyond words. In the past few days I have tried to gain some perspective. It has not been easy. But two realities came through; two moments that help us restore meaningful life for each and all. Each is a common human need. One is to 'mourn' our losses. The other is to rekindle our hope.

So in our time this morning I invite you to join together as a liberal religious community in first, mourning our losses; and second, in looking within yourself for the a way to rekindle your hope. May these two opportunities in this hour lead us toward a renewed faith in life.

Mourning Our Losses

It is natural when death is present for grief to well up in us. Shock and sorrow are deeply felt. No religion or philosophy ever taught can prevent this reaction in our human hearts.

We are in mourning, as individuals, as a community, and as a nation. We mourn the innocent dead. We weep with the families, the friends, the co-workers and the strangers. Grief is our moment of unity.

Our anguish frames one overriding question. Why? But there is no answer that removes the question. No answer can bridge the chasm of loss. We can only mourn the loss of innocent

people who lived and loved. Our national tragedy, this scourge of terrorism has reaped the lives of kindred souls. We mourn their death today; and that is enough for the moment. Perhaps some answer to the question will come later.

What weighs on my mind in this hour is also how many other losses we mourn.

I mourn the loss of innocence in our children. Children's lips were created for laughing and kissing. They are not to be muted by the choking ashes of the fires of hate. But now most of them in their tender years are racked with fear, doubt and distrust of life.

On September 10, 2001, one day before life changed for our children, some Junior High students completed an assignment on 'Violence'. They were asked, "Are you respected if you beat up another person?" One young man I know answered, "No. If you are good at fighting and win a lot, then people will fear you, but when someone brings you down, you are instantly a fraction of your former self." The students were asked, "Does violence always solve a problem?" The same student replied, "No. The person is just going to come back at you with more violence."

On September 10, 2001, there was hope, sanity and innocence in those answers. Today we mourn the loss of that innocence in our children. They now know life is more complicated, uncertain, and dangerous. They are acutely aware of death.

How can we explain to our children such death and the grief it causes?

Here is a story for you the children here today hear; as well as for the innocent child that still resides in many adult hearts in this room.

The novelist Chaim Potek speaks about death in his story *My Name Is Asher Lev*. Asher is a Jewish boy about 6 years old. He lived in the city and watched everything that went on around him. He drew pictures of the things and people he saw. One day he found a lifeless bird in the street.

I drew ... the way my father looked at the bird lying on its side against the curb near our house ... "Is it dead Papa?" I was six and could not bring myself to look at it.

"Yes," I heard him say in a sad and distant way.

"Why did it die?"

"Everything that lives must die."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"You too, Papa? and Mama?"

"Yes."

"And me?"

"Yes," he said. Then he added in Yiddish, "but may it be only after you have lived a long and good life, my Asher."

I could not grasp it. I forced myself to look at the bird. Everything alive would one day be as still as that bird?

"Why?"

"That's the way the Ribbono Shem Olom made his world, Asher." (Ribbono Shem Olom was one

of the names of god in the Jewish faith)

"Why?"

"So life would be precious, Asher. Something that is yours forever is never precious."

This is the lesson, children: Life is precious. Each and every life is irreplaceable. Each of our lives is a place for laughter and love. That means every life is beautiful and important. Life is precious so we cry and are sad when people and other living creatures die. It means a little bit of the world's laughter, love and beauty are gone forever.

That is what's happened this week in America (in New York City and Washington) when the jet airplanes crashed into the tall skyscrapers and The Pentagon. A whole lot of people died. And, a whole lot of laughter, love and beauty disappeared from our world.

So, it is okay to be sad and cry. It is okay to hug and kiss. You may have seen your parents doing all these things. They may have held and hugged and kissed you. Well, that's what we do when someone dies. We hold on to what we have, which is each other. So, I mourn the loss of innocence in our children, and want them to understand what's going on.

Understanding what's going on is really something we are all trying to do. I have heard from a number of you who felt a need in this time of tragedy to question a national unity based on the rumor and rhetoric of war. I have struggled with my own conflicted feelings. I find myself, now, six days later, in mourning. I am mourning the fragility of peace.

In my philosophy we have evolved as rather vulnerable creatures. I do not believe in an original sin that breeds evil. But I do believe in our original vulnerability. It has survival value. Our vulnerability generates our self-preservation, as we band together. It is the source of our national will to defense. It may even be the root of our deep sense of justice in our world. I see it as the source of inspiration and caring I have seen as people reached out to help even total strangers in this tragedy.

But our original vulnerability is also the source of our malice. Warped by history and hardship, vulnerability can result in hatred that breeds wanton harm. Terrorism is malice gone mad. In such moments, our natural defensive response sometimes diminishes peace. So, today, along with you, I mourn the fragility of peace. And, I must remind myself that peace is an activity not a state of spiritual bliss. Peace demands the exhausting work of balancing competing interests, justifiable fears, hope and justice. I mourn its fragility in this time of emotional distress when hatred breeds so easily.

But there is an even more basic concern for me. I find myself mourning the demise of decency. We cannot simply forget about the criminal depths to which human beings can descend. But we need not go there ourselves. I mourn the demise of decency in our disagreements with one another and our government over how to respond to barbaric events.

I am haunted by the vision of a bloody negation of life, the possibility of our barbaric nature. The cavalier attitude of suicidal terrorists toward innocent lives sickens me. I do not want us to succumb to an equal indecency as a people.

I am afraid of what may happen next. War and retribution are often methods used to satisfy deep emotional wounds. We live one step away from barbarism. This is perhaps our governments most daunting challenge; a strong measured response that does not lead us into barbarism. And I fear that the decency upheld by civil liberties and freedom in our country will suffer. I mourn the demise of decency that threatens our democratic society.

Even as I mourn all these things, the death of people, the death of innocence in our children, the fragility of peace and the demise of decency in our midst in the days to come, I wonder what must happen when the grief eases

But for the moment grief is enough. As Helen Keller wrote,

We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest community in all the world - the community of those who have known suffering. When it seems our sorrow is too great to be borne, let us think of the great of the heavy-hearted into which our grief (at this time of national tragedy) has given us entrance, and inevitably, we will feel about us their arms, their sympathy, their understanding. Believe when you are most unhappy, that there is something for you to do in the world. So long as you can lessen another's pain, life is not in vain.

[The congregation was invited to join in a time of Meditation, Prayer and Reflection; to lift up in memory the names of the dead, offer concern for the suffering, and thankfulness for those spared.]

Rekindling Our Hope

What can we do beyond our mourning? As people of the liberal religious way of living, we will certainly take on the practical humanitarian work and the reasonable political dialogue that are necessary. But we must pay attention to something else, first, something more basic.

We must help to rekindle the hope that lies at the heart of our faith. It begins here today in the midst of our grief. It begins with an acknowledgement of the preciousness of life and its possibilities. In the literature of social psychology it is commonly recognized that human beings can survive enormous hardships and handicaps, as long as they possess hope.

But hope is outside the scope of my limited powers to command in this tragedy. I just heard of a young man, only 21 years old. He watched the horror of Tuesday morning unfold. He committed suicide. I do not know any more about his history; his struggles with life before September 11, 2001. But the madness of the day destroyed his expectancy and receptivity to the worthwhile nature of life. He reminds me of the terrible reach of terrorism, and the limited command we have of hope.

So more than ever, I am an advocate for the natural realm and for humanity. And I have asked myself over and over again, "Is there hope for our world, and for our children's future?" And, "What must we do to rekindle that hope in our all our lives?"

But such hopeful living relies on a deep human grounding and perspective. To rekindle hope among us is our challenge in the days ahead. From the inner light of conscience and spirit will come the renewed flame and the new light for each of us, as we recited in our opening words today:

At times of our tragedy own light goes out and must be rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause this hour to think with deep gratitude of those who have re-lit the flame within us. Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our inner light, to receive the flame, to carry it, and to pass it on.

We gather here now as people of faith, with sorrow and need, with sputtering flame. We join together our gifts of life to light a beacon of hope, to illuminate our way, to discover anew faith, hope, and love in ourselves and in the world. (composite from A. Schweitzer, C. Robinson, and D. Hammarskjold)

Let us end this time together, this day, with the reaffirmation that life is precious and worthwhile. Its glory is reflected in our hopeful living. Our task is in the here and now, in the meanness and trauma of our present world. Let us go into that life with a thirst for decency. May we have the energy for a moral defiance that may counteract the crippling fear and barbaric backslide.

We live. We die. And in between we exist within the reach of one another. We are tied together in our destiny. May we remind ourselves, however, that after any great loss we have a human tendency to regress and become indifferent to life. Our task is not only to combat that regression, but to rekindle the hope that gives us courage to do what must be done. We must work together. We must help each other restore the faith in our better natures.

I mourn losses today, and I find myself needing to reaffirm in my life that only an obstinate human effort will preserve hope and peace in our world. We must find a way to acquire our voice, to speak beyond the grief and mourning, and to affirm the power of conscience and an indomitable human spirit. If we can, justice will roll down like a mighty river, freedom's bell will ring, and tolerance will reign.