

In the Aftermath of the Unthinkable

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One of my favorite television shows is the "Third Watch." This series uses an ensemble cast of police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians to tell the story of life on the streets of New York City. Some characters like Doc, an EMT, are strong, steady, and reliable. Others like Bosco, a police officer, are loose cannons. Each week, these women and men encounter the unexpected on their 4 to Midnight shifts. We have seen firefighters racing into burning buildings; police officers chasing an armed suspect down darkened hallways; and EMTs risking their own lives to save a life.

I've thought of this show quite frequently since Tuesday morning. I've thought about it since the "Third Watch" does an excellent job with character development. The characters struggle with the difficulty of doing their job day in and day out while maintaining a semblance of a normal personal life. Some are single, some married, and some divorced. We see the extra difficulty of juggling parenthood with employment in the police or fire department. In a week that has seen the heroic acts of so many police, fire, and rescue professionals, the "Third Watch" gives a glimpse into the personal lives of these courageous men and women in a way that the networks are unable to do so.

There have been so many heroic acts this week. We have learned of some as the survivors shared their harrowing experiences. We will never learn about many of the acts of heroism since the participants died as the buildings collapsed around them. But let's imagine just a few of these incidents.

The firefighters, dragging their hoses, axes, and oxygen behind them, who were huffing and puffing up 30, 40, or 50 flights of stairs while cracks were appearing in the walls of the staircase.

The individuals who chose to stay with older co-workers or those who used a wheelchair.

The men and women who offered to help others down the stairs thereby slowing up their own escape.

The passengers who died struggling with the hijackers of the United Airlines flight that crashed into the Pennsylvania field.

Father Mychal Judge, the Fire Department Chaplain, who was crushed by the debris as he administered the last rites to one of the victims.

These individuals, among others, gave their lives in an attempt to save others.

In times of adversity, Americans rise to the occasion. New Yorkers are doing everything possible to courageously respond in the aftermath of this catastrophe. Thousands of volunteers have worked long hours in the efforts to find survivors. Food and clothing have been donated by

countless others. Throughout the nation, there have been long lines at blood banks and millions of dollars have been contributed to the American Red Cross and other disaster relief organizations.

In times of adversity, Americans have always risen to the occasion. The shadow of hard times has often knocked on the doors of our ancestors – during the colonial period, the Westward expansion, the period of slavery, the Civil War, the arrival of the immigrants, the two great wars, the depression, the Korean war, the Vietnam conflict, the civil rights movement, the burning of our great urban centers, and many other times – Americans have circled the wagons and united to defeat the common enemy.

But who is the common enemy today? Terrorism is not new to the global community. Let's remember just a few of the more memorable incidents:

the Black September attack at the 1972 Munich Olympics;

the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847, the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro in the Mediterranean, and the bombing of an Air India 747 off the coast of Ireland;

the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland;

the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center;

the 1995 bombing of the Murrow Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the poisonous gas attack in the Tokyo subway system, and a Saudi National Guard training school;

the 1996 bombing of the Air Force housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia;

the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania; and the

decades of assassinations and bombings in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East. Since September of last year, 573 Palestinians and 166 Israelis have been killed.

In fact, the State Department reports hundreds of international terrorist incidents each year. 1987 was the record year when 666 incidents were documented throughout the world. Of course, all previous terrorist attacks pale in comparison to this week's attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Current estimates point toward a loss of more than 5,000 men, women, and children. If true, this loss of life is more than double the 2,388 individuals who died at Pearl Harbor.

Terrorism is not new, but the alarming trend is toward more dramatic incidents with a greater loss of life. In fact, the United States has been planning for the use of chemical or biological agents – an attack that would surely result in unimaginable loss of life. Time Magazine reports that a four-star general advised his family not to drink any tap water for 36 hours following this week's attack. Sobering advice to be sure.

The world must confront this global cancer. But how? We know that cruise missile or F-16 strikes against terrorist training camps is not particularly effective. If they were, Israel would be a land of peace today, since they have been launching offensives against Palestinian or Syrian-backed forces in Lebanon for years. The suicide bombers keep striking at civilian targets in Israel.

The challenge facing the Bush Administration is to respond without creating a new generation of terrorists ready to die for their cause. This will be difficult, even more so given the thirst for swift retribution among so many Americans. We are a people who consider the long-term to be one or two years. I am not a pacifist. I believe the United States, acting in coalition with other nations, must bring to justice those behind these and other terrorist attacks. But I feel somewhat like Michael Dukakis when he was asked during the 1988 Presidential debates whether his stance on the death penalty would be different if his wife, Kitty, were raped and murdered. I support measured responses that effectively strike at those who planned and carried out the attacks on the United States this week, but they must comply with a moral standard that does limit collateral damage to innocent children and adults. We are a nation of laws based on high moral standards. In our reading this morning from *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More cautions Roper not to cut a great hole through the law to get after the Devil. Paraphrasing More, do we really think the United States can stand upright in the winds that would blow then?

In order to break the back of all terrorists, particularly the Muslim fundamentalists, their organizations must be infiltrated. It will take years, many years, to do so. It will be very difficult. For instance, there is already a \$5 million reward on Osama bin Laden's head. For another, many suicide bombers against Israel are recruited by members of their own extended families. It will also take the active assistance of other governments together with the support of leading Islamic organizations. And that will happen only when Islamic leaders recognize that these fundamentalist terrorists are leading to the destruction of their own religion and societies.

To achieve widespread support throughout the Moslem world, the United States must recognize the deeply felt grievances that drive young men and women to die for their causes. Much of the rhetoric heard this week in the United States, including comments by leading government officials is not helpful to this cause. Referring to the West as the "civilized" world and our enemies as "uncivilized" is inflammatory and betrays a lack of understanding of the root causes of the anger against the West. These root causes are complex.

One root cause is cultural. Many individuals perceive Western culture as immoral and threatening to societal values. Thus the support for establishing Islamic governments and legal systems in counties ranging from Iran and Afghanistan to Pakistan and Malaysia.

Another root cause is religious. There is a battle being waged for the heart and soul of Islam. This "civil war" between the modernists and the medievalists has been going on for years, particularly in Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Pakistan. It is a battle not unlike the battle between the fundamentalists and mainstream protestants here over the direction of Christianity. Is God loving and merciful or judgmental and vengeful? To combat Osama bin Laden and his supporters will take active leadership as demonstrated by the leading Islamic

cleric in Saudi Arabia on Saturday. Sheikh Abdul-Ariz Al al-Sheikh stated that such acts as the attack on the World Trade Center are "great sins" and not condoned by Islamic teachings.

Still another root cause is economic. These terrorists recruit within economically depressed communities. Yet they are aware of the abundant wealth of the West. They see the West doing very little to help the people of their nations. They have seen economic sanctions cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children and adults due to inadequate supplies of potable water, food, and medicine. The United Nations calculates that 225,000 children under the age of 5 have died since 1990. They have seen the economy of Palestine virtually collapse under the repressive policies of the current Israeli government. We need to find ways to improve the economies of these communities, not unlike the efforts to create more economic opportunities and hope in Northern Ireland.

Another root cause is political. These terrorists see the corruption among the economic and political elite within their own countries. There is no region of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, that has fewer freely elected governments than the Arab-Moslem world. Most of these governments are highly repressive. Is the ultimate target of Osama bin Laden the West or the country of his birth, Saudi Arabia? Is he hoping that our retaliatory strikes will so enflame the people on the streets of various Moslem nations that they will rise up and empower fundamentalists like the Taliban in Afghanistan or the clerics in Iran? It seems unclear whether Osama bin Laden is a religious leader using terrorism to extend his fundamentalist theology or a shrewd political leader using religion to oust existing governments in the Middle East and South Asia. Assuming he is behind this week's attack, his organization must be stopped, even though this goal will be difficult to achieve. Remember Afghanistan brought the Soviet Army of the USSR to its knees back in the 1980s, which contributed toward the end of its empire.

In order to combat these terrorists, we need to be smarter. Osama bin Laden or whoever dreamed up this attack on America is very smart. They didn't need sophisticated weapons. Instead they turned our own advanced technology against itself. They used one of the leading symbols of global communication, transportation, and commerce, the commercial jet airplane, to turn a leading symbol of our engineering prowess, the World Trade Center, into dust. We need to use all our resources including economic, technological, religious, diplomatic, and military to outsmart these terrorists. We also need patience, patience to match theirs. The *New York Times* columnist, Thomas Friedman, wrote Thursday (September 13, 2001) that, "We have to fight the terrorists as if there were no rules, and preserve our open society as if there were no terrorists. It won't be easy."

Just the other day, so-called Christians like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell blamed groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and People for the American Way along with pro-choice advocates and supporters of gay and lesbian rights as the cause of Tuesday's tragedy. They explained that God is punishing the United States for our sinfulness. It is important for Unitarian Universalists to speak up in opposition to such statements and against proposed restrictions on our civil liberties. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson believe in a God of Hate who punishes not unlike Osama bin Laden and his supporters. Unitarian Universalists, along with the vast majority of religious people of all faiths, believe in a God of Love. We need to speak out against hate and oppose violence. We will have an opportunity here in Maryland in next year's referendum to

repeal our hate crimes legislation. I hope our congregation takes a leading role in support of this legislation in Howard County.

What else can we do? We need to be ready to support our Islamic friends here. When they seek zoning approval to build their mosque, we need to do everything we can to support their application and to minimize fear and opposition to it.

What else can we do? Our congregation hosted an Interfaith Service involving individuals from five congregations and four faiths – Christian, Jewish, Moslem, and Unitarian Universalist. It was a meaningful and moving service attended by over a 100 individuals with only a few hours notice. I am committed to making our Interfaith Center truly an Interfaith Center. Renting out our rooms to congregations of various faiths is an important service. But what if we collaborated with these congregations in various education, service, and advocacy projects? Do we really understand what people believe? There is so little interfaith dialogue and collaboration in our society.

And perhaps that is our collective mission. Perhaps the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia is called to build a truly functioning center for interfaith study and collaboration. To do so will require substantial improvements to our existing facilities. It is a dream worthy of our collective effort. In the months to come, we will see if this dream is viable.

The Reverend David Eaton, who served as the Senior Minister of All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, D.C., often ended his services with these words from Burrows Dunham:

Now therefore since the struggle deepens since evil abides and good does not yet prosper. Let us gather what strength we have, what confidence and valor, that our small victories may end in triumph and the world awaited be a world attained.

So May it be.