

"Shaped by Hope, not Fear"
Rev. Scott Gerard Prinster
Unitarian Universalist Community Church
Portage, Michigan
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(first part of sermon is preached with curtains closed, and room is partially darkened)

We find ourselves overwhelmed with a variety of responses to the enormity of death and destruction this week. This has been a terrible reminder of our vulnerability and fragility, and many older folks have reminisced about their memories of Pearl Harbor, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy. My own loss of innocence was in January of 1986, when the space shuttle Challenger exploded, etching on my mind the televised shape of the shuttle's vapor trail in the same way that the ever-present image of the burning Trade Center towers is now fixed in the minds of others. The Challenger accident shocked all of us too young to remember Kennedy's assassination or the Kent State shootings, and called into question the importance and value of all that I had been working toward as a physics student. This week another generation discovers and mourns that the terror and loss we regularly see other countries experience can happen here as well. There will be plenty of time to analyze the news and critique our nation's responses, which will be more the subject of next Sunday's service, and anyway, we can already get plenty of that in the news. This morning we gather simply to mourn the enormity of our losses, to acknowledge the depth of our feelings, and to affirm once again how important it is for us to be together.

Aside from the deaths, perhaps the most traumatic lasting repercussion of this attack has been the loss of our sense of security. We have been well protected by two oceans and a variety of systems designed to keep the horrors of human suffering far away from our lives, but we realize - so painfully - that we can no longer maintain this illusion of impenetrability and invincibility. We are forced to worry far more deeply than before what the future will mean for us. I think of the words that John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail in 1774, "We live, my dear soul, in an age of trial. What will be the consequence, I know not." There is still a great deal that we do not know, and not knowing is difficult for people used to having quick and unlimited access to answers.

We are each responding in different ways to this crisis and to the lack of clear answers. Psychologists tell us that common responses to trauma are:

- feeling preoccupied with the disaster, and having difficulty thinking about other things;
- finding ourselves riveted to television, radio and newspaper reports;
- having trouble remembering, concentrating and sleeping;
- feeling anxiety, anger, sadness, confusion, distrust, frustration and helplessness; and
- feeling guilty for responding differently from those around us.

You might already have noticed that responses are very personal, and perhaps you've felt uncomfortable at how other people have responded, or that perhaps your response wasn't the "right" one. Friday morning, after a Peace Walk through downtown Kalamazoo, quite a few of us gathered at Bronson Park to hear city officials speak about the crisis. I marveled that the only words they seemed to be able to find for the occasion were promises of retribution, each ending with the phrase "God bless America," a sentiment that does not seem to comfort me as much as it does others. Yesterday afternoon, I stopped by the grocery store to pick up a few things, and found that they were playing military marches over the sound system. We are hearing political, social and religious leaders desperately seeking someone to blame, even drawing conclusions that seem absurd to those of us without an agenda. And on the rear windows of cars, which used to have that crass decal of a cartoon character urinating on the Ford logo or the Chevy logo, now is urinating on the words "Osama bin Laden". There are many responses, from the ones that comfort us to the ones that worry or disgust us. Again, how we feel in the moment is a very personal thing.

My own response has been mostly to struggle with sadness and overwhelm. I'm feeling a lot of grief at the thought that terrorists' hatred for America is great enough that killing innocent people becomes acceptable. The real and lasting damage to our nation, and indeed to all humanity, is that even after the deaths, the lasting effect of terrorism is to create terror in the daily lives of ordinary people. It is truly a situation in which everyone loses. At the same time, our leadership's use of war language implies that they will also declare that "collateral deaths" are an unavoidable part of our response. Despite our achievements as a civilization, it is still such a deeply embedded part of us to want to hurt someone back after they have hurt us.

I think back to my two years in Romania, when I was teaching English to Unitarian student ministers at the Theological Seminary. One morning, I was walking through the downtown on the way to school to prepare the classroom for my first class, and stopped at the crosswalk to wait for the light to change. Across the street from us, the other pedestrians and I saw a woman who did not even bother to wait for traffic to stop. She was unmistakably severely mentally ill, and responded to everything around her in an amazing rage. She spat at passers-by, snarled at objects in her way, and shook her fist at the cars as she walked in front of them. As she reached our side of the street, we parted to let her pass, and she stomped by us, consumed by her rage. As she passed, she turned to me and struck me on the shoulder, not hard, but a surprise nonetheless. Without even missing a beat, I hit her back in the same way.

She turned on me, even more furious, if that was possible, but perhaps decided that it was not worth the confrontation. I was left with the realization that all of my learning about non-violence, my understanding of power between the genders and my support of feminism, my commitment to living a civilized life, had disappeared in that one moment. That the values I spoke so highly of from the pulpit were secondary to the deeper animal impulse to retaliate. I understand how quickly and powerfully we hunger to hit back.

My hope is that we can shape our responses to serve us in the long term, and set our sights on justice rather than revenge. Justice does not mean hurting people back, especially when it includes creating terror for uninvolved civilians, unless we want to find ourselves also playing the role of terrorist. I believe that justice is instead about working to create a world in which we

would wish to live, and sometimes includes setting aside the more satisfying reaction of hitting back. I have watched closely the examples set in the Middle East, the Balkans and Northern Ireland and seen that revenge never ends a conflict, only perpetuates it. And I am filled with sadness that we may be joining these troubled countries in our own protracted and fruitless war against an opponent with no obvious location.

I believe that our emotions come to us as we need them to, and that we generally cannot expect to choose what we feel. We are right to feel anger at these terrible attacks, and we are right to feel sadness at the enormous loss. We can, however, choose what we do with those feelings, how we respond. In particular, we can be intentional in shaping our actions based on our values, and not merely on the emotions of the moment, as natural as they might be.

And so I urge us to be intentional in our responses, or at least as intentional as we can manage in the midst of all this upheaval. I think that most important is that we spend the days ahead listening to one another and to our own bodies and spirits to help us decide how to respond. I'm concerned about the effect of such constant coverage of each new fact, or potential fact, or rumor, or speculation. Being flooded with information is not the same thing as being well-informed or understanding, and I've found that being overwhelmed with reporting elicits two responses from me - either withdrawing into unfeeling, or being filled with anxiety, neither of which have been helpful responses. We will each need time to reflect and heal, and also time in which we can simply immerse ourselves in our daily routines and let our minds wander.

This week, I drove back from Ann Arbor with the radio off, and allowed myself to process in silence all that has happened. There were a lot of feelings that I had been keeping at bay, and my own responses to make sense of. Without the radio, rather than spending the hour arguing with the reporters and the President, I saw three herons in a field of goldenrod, and a beautiful patch of blue sky, and was reminded of the world that still lives around me. It is important not to forget, in our need to feel informed and to process our grief, that beauty still lies all around us, and comforts us with the reassurance that there is still much to love about this world.

(re-open curtains, revealing the beautiful nature outside our picture windows)

The things that give us joy still exist, and are perhaps more important than ever as we struggle to find our direction this week. We need these connections more than ever before.

And we need each other more than ever as well. I was so proud that, even without a central place to gather, many in this congregation created ways to be with one another this week. By coming together in one another's homes, at our vigil on Wednesday, at community events, and this morning, we re-affirm that we need not struggle alone with our confusion and grief. We have received messages of condolence from Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists around the world - from Canada, the Czech Republic, from South Africa, England and Spain, and this message from the Rev. Dr. Árpád Szabó, the Bishop of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania:

Dear Unitarian Universalist Sisters and brothers in the United States of America,

Time has come that it is we, ministers and members of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania, who address to you words of compassion and support now that destructive terrorist forces have hit the democratic society of the United States.

We never thought that we would have to live up this day. During the almost 200 years of our relationship and cooperation, it was always you, citizens of the free and safe America, that intervened for us when nationalist or communist forces attempted to destroy the very existence of our Unitarian communities.

Today, it is with shock and sympathy that we are taking part in your losses, especially the lives of thousands of innocent people. It is also embittering to see how a country, built by the ideals of freedom and justice, is suffering for speaking up for these ideals all over the Earth.

We trust that the United States will respond to these attacks by searching for justice, with the conviction that no political or social ideals can be served or corrected by violence. We also believe that it is our duty as witnesses of this horrifying crime to make sure that neither the United States, nor any other democratic society in the world, would ever have to live through events like these again.

Our prayers and thoughts are with you in these hard days of trial. May God bless America and humankind with a safer future.

In our shared faith, Rev. Dr. Árpád Szabó

Bishop of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania

In the midst of horror and shock and the threat of hopelessness, it is in relationship that our recovery lies. Let us draw together and find comfort in this community, that our grief might be shared, and our hope multiplied. That is what I am here for, and that is what this church is here for. Amen.