

"Piecing It All Together"

A sermon by

Dr. Laurie E. Proctor

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Readings

We have entered a new Middle Ages, a time of plague, famine violence, extreme class disparity, and religious fanaticism-- and also (as in the later Middle Ages) a time of profound discovery and change. A time when it is terribly important, and often dangerous, to preserve values and knowledge--to stand up for visions that most of this crazed world can't comprehend or tolerate.

The value of having an inner map of the world as it is (not as it is broadcast) is this: it allows you to know that your task is larger than yourself. If you choose, just by virtue of being a decent person, you are entrusted with passing on something of value through a dark, crazy time-- preserving your integrity, in your way, by your acts and your very breathing for those who will build again when this chaos exhausts itself. People who assume the burden of their own integrity are free--because integrity is freedom, and (as Nelson Mandela proved) its force can't be quelled even when a person of integrity is jailed. The future lives in our individual, often lonely, and certainly unprofitable acts of integrity, or it doesn't live it all. (Michael Ventura)

The thing is
to love life
to love it even when you have no
stomach for it, when everything you've held
dear crumbles like burnt paper in your hands
and your throat is filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you so heavily
it's like heat, tropical, moist
thickening the air so it's heavy like water
more fit for gills than lungs.
When grief weights you like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief.
How long can a body withstand this? you think,
and yet you hold life like a face between your palms,
a plain face, with no charming smile
or twinkle in her eye,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again. (*Ellen Bass*)

Offering Dedication

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the

next thing that comes along.' You must do the thing you think you cannot do. (*Eleanor Roosevelt*)

The Sermon

The sermon I was going to write changed on Tuesday. The focus on "Where do we go from here given the world as it is?" has not changed. What has changed is the world.

I have struggled about what to say to you. What should a minister say to a congregation at a time like this? What does a congregation need to hear? What do I say about grief? About anger? Do I give you facts? Do I say the easy stuff -- the things with which no one can have any disagreement? Or do I say the hard stuff -- things that might make some of you angry? After all, we have a building to finance. The pledge canvass begins in just two weeks, and it is not good to have people angry when the canvass begins. I asked myself, "What will they think when they arrive at the Meetinghouse and there is no flag on me or on this chancel?"

The truth is that I am not sure that I know what a minister should say to a congregation at a time like this. I think that I would have known what to say after Pearl Harbor, but, in spite of what so many have said, this is not Pearl Harbor. The actions to be taken after December 7, 1941 were clear. The nation would have to be mobilized to fight the enemy, and we knew who the enemy was. As Daniel Schorr said on National Public Radio, the bombs dropped on Pearl Harbor "had a return address."

True, there is talk of mobilization as there was then -- tens of thousands of reservists are being called up -- but the purpose of the mobilization is vague. And it is not clear, at least, it is not clear to me, that the administration knows exactly how to go about conducting a "war on terrorism." With such a nebulous and pervasive enemy, this "first war of the 21st century" seems to be more like the War on Drugs, and if that be so, we have started down a road that has no end.

As I have thought about what to say, I have also wondered what I could tell you that hasn't already been said this week. It seems that, with so many "talking heads" on TV and radio, just about everything gets said at least once, and some things get said more times than we can bear to hear.

In the past few days, I have been trying to discern meaning from the events of this past week. That is one thing ministers do -- discern meaning, or attempt to do so. Unlike Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, I do not see the hand of the divine in Tuesday's tragedy. I am with the novelist E. L. Doctorow who expressed disgust that those two men, supposed spiritual leaders, could suggest that the hijackers were instruments of God.

I am in agreement with something President Bush said at the national service of remembrance. He said, "adversity introduces us to ourselves." I think that it is true. Whether it be a personal crisis, or one of larger scope, we meet ourselves at a deeper level. Adversity, too, can be like an vaccination in that it revs up our immune system, which gives us the strength to do what we must in the coming days.

Because I claim no special wisdom, I have decided just to tell some of the things that I've been thinking about this past week as one person struggling to make sense out of events that, as has been noted, seem more like a movie, except that movies about terrorism never show the aftermath -- the days and weeks of looking for bodies, nor do they show the agony of both the families and the rescuers. They do not tell us that life will never be the same.

On Tuesday, as first one tower and then another fell, I watched the papers flutter to the ground. Just an hour before those papers had been important. They had shaped peoples lives, and now they were fluttering to the ground. I thought of an oft-quoted standard for what's important in one's life: "If your home (or your office) were threatened by catastrophe, what would you take with you?"

I am surrounded by paper in my daily life (as any of you who have seen my office know) and the vast majority of it is unimportant. Of course, all those millions and millions of pieces of paper, now carted off to a disposal site, are just a metaphor. Tuesday's attack reminds me how important each day is.

The insidious nature of terrorism is that it can occur at any time in any place. No one -- rich or poor, old or young, whatever color, nationality, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation, weak or strong -- no one is immune. We have seen this with shocking clarity as we learn who died.

This is the double-edged sword of terrorism. It is so treacherous, but it also has the power to unite those who are its potential victims. Perhaps, although history would argue against this, from now on the many will not alone bear the brunt to preserve the safety of the chosen few.

In this country, we have such a sense of privilege. Much of the outrage this week has carried a tone of "How could this happen to us?" We expect to live forever, and are offended when life and death interfere. The reality is that most of the world lives with the knowledge that, in the words of one of our hymns, "Joy and woe are woven fine... We were made for joy and woe."

In England, this spring, I realized how much the WWII bombing of their country lives in the English character. Living on this edge of life and death is real to them in a way that it hasn't been to us.

On my way to and from London, I flew through Amsterdam. Imagine my surprise when my bags -- I had only carry-ons -- which had gone through security checks in the United States were again x-rayed, and I was asked, politely, if I would mind if the larger one was checked through. On the way home, passengers on the flight to Detroit were asked to come to the gate about two hours early. This time, we were all questioned, and our bags were again examined. I was impressed but I just thought it a function of the greater vulnerability in Europe, a vulnerability that I did not think that we shared.

In the last few days, it has been said that we were attacked because we are "freedom's home and defender." This rhetoric is perhaps necessary to whip up the troops, so to speak, and therefore to be expected at a time like this. But the reality is that much of the world does not see us this way.

I have been reading *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. Although it is a novel, Kingsolver thoroughly researched the factual context, which is the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba, the elected leader of what had been the Belgian Congo. Then, just last Sunday evening, there was a report on the overthrow of Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile. Both of these men were overthrown, and great hardships and terror were then visited on the ordinary people of their countries. In both instances, the United States was involved through the CIA, and approvals were given at the highest level of our government for these actions. The action against Lumumba was investigated by the Church Committee -- chaired by Frank Church, father of Forrester Church, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. In the wake of what happened this past week, the legislation that came out of this committee has been targeted for repeal by national leaders.

The two men who top the list of terrorists, Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, were both trained and funded by our government. Their methods were okay as long as we approved the targets. In March, the Bush government gave \$48 million to the Taliban government of Afghanistan because the Taliban opposes drugs.

Oh how I wish that I could jump on the bandwagon. Fly the flag, and support the president knowing that he is doing the only thing to be done. However, I don't think we can ignore the world context if we want to be successful in countering terrorism. Perhaps this tragedy can help us bridge the gap between us and those who have suffered comparable and even greater losses, much of it inflicted by weaponry from the United States. Perhaps we can now stop thinking about ourselves as so privileged and begin to see what we have in common with the rest of the people of this world. How our hurts are the same when we lose those we love, when thousands of our fellow citizens are wiped out in the blinking of an eye. Perhaps we can learn from them how to prevail.

At this point, I want to say that I am not wearing a flag, and I will oppose putting one on this chancel because separation of church and state goes both ways. I believe that a country, to be strong morally, needs religious communities that are independent, who do not see themselves as outposts of nationalism, but rather, as people who can assess current happenings in light of transcendent values. While I always had some vague appreciation of this, it was brought home during my time in seminary. One of the professors was a native of Germany, in the part that became East Germany. As a young man, he fought in the German Army in WWII. Most of the churches supported Hitler and flaunted their nationalistic pride. As a result of his experience, Professor Knerim refuses to preach from a chancel where the country's flag was displayed.

Yesterday, while driving home from Johnny Appleseed, Gary and I heard "The Eve of Destruction." For those of you who don't know or remember it, written in the 1960s, it was the frustrated cry of my generation. Born into the Cold War, witnesses to violence and inequality all over the world, Barry McGuire's spoke for all of us when he asked that attention be paid.

As I listened to the words, I thought that not much has changed. For a brief time, we breathed easier thinking that we were free of the threat of nuclear holocaust -- a threat that could be carried out at any time. (In fact, that was what I first feared when I heard the initial report. I thought that the Pentagon was attacking, not being attacked.) Now we know ourselves vulnerable

to the worst of terrorist attacks. No matter how much money is spent, how many Osama Bin Laden's are executed, how many innocent lives are lost as "collateral damage," we will never again live in a world where we know ourselves to be safe. Ask the people of Oklahoma City. Ask the people of New York. Ask the people of Israel. Ask the people of Spain. Ask the people of Northern Ireland.

What do we do in light of this knowledge? We live life as if it is precious because it is. We love our families more fiercely. We learn a new kind of respect and new ways of engaging with those who are different from us and those who disagree with us. We learn how to love our country as the great country it is, and this means working actively for course corrections when needed.

In adversity we do meet ourselves, and we have met the both the good and bad this week. Like most of you, I have been touched by the stories of heroism on the plane and in the towers. I have been surprised by my admiration of Rudy Guiliani, whose leadership has been not only what New York needed, but what this country needed. I was also surprised to hear that Donald Rumsfield did not bunker himself, but stayed in the Pentagon to rescue people.

Being the granddaughter of a firefighter, I have cried over the loss of so many women and men who, along with many brave police officers, did what they were called to do, only to be lost.

I have been heartened by the people, including some in the administration, who have responded to the President's call to war, with moderation, cautioning us not to take innocent lives, and warning that if we do, we will become the evil we seek to weed out.

Inevitably, there have been those whose response has been wrong-headed. I count Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson among these. Also the people who have shot at and otherwise harassed people of Middle-Eastern descent.

As Unitarian Universalists, I believe we can play a large part in the healing of this country and its strengthening by calling on our deepest traditions of reason, tolerance, and compassion.

And now, I would like to hear what you have to say.