

"Mortality by Terror: The Threat to Life"

– A sermon given by the Reverend Peter Raible, STD,
lead minister of Eliot Unitarian Chapel,
on Sunday, September 16, 2001

Once or twice a generation comes a tragedy so immense that our whole nation comes to a stop and some new day of infamy becomes ingrained upon our memory and calendars. Such a date now becomes September 11th. We fixate on the horror; and then fear, anger, and a kind of helpless despair follow, but the final note is grief – a pervasive, penetrating, profound mourning to which there seems no end can ever come. A prominent psychiatrist dealing with upset, grieving friends and relatives, workers and survivors commented: "October will be worse. The reality of their losses begins to weigh." (Dr. Manuel Trujillo quoted in New York Times, September 15, 2001, page A10)

In time, we will embark upon a national response and we can assign blame and we can strive for new strategies of prevention. But for now, we hold numbly to our grief. We are humbled before the monstrosity of this senseless terror. If evil be the infliction of needless, wanton, unredemptive suffering, then the events of last Tuesday meet that test. The waste, the destruction, the needless deaths, the pain of the survivors, and the unspeakable shock of those who lost friends or relatives - all these should be so overwhelming that we abjure mundane response. Glib words cannot assuage; and I would not strive to belittle the horror pictured again and again upon our television screens with mere platitude or bromide. But we can choose new resolve even amid the grief of tragedy.

We would dishonor our dead and disgrace ourselves, if we were to hold any particular world religion responsible for the carnage. God knows that there are in every faith group, enough bigots, and fundamentalists, and arrogant folk, who blaspheme by taming god to be their private errand boy to deliver their twisted rancor or their theology of a cruel, vindictive, punishing god. Jerry Falwell, echoed by Pat Robinson, on a recent day, asserted that an angry god had allowed the terrorist acts to succeed. Then this reverend sir continued:

"I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the A.C.L.U., People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'"

Can we any longer wonder if our small, fragile religious movement is needed as some kind of leaven in such a loaf? We all carry the burden of our own compatriots, who spew hate, who mock a god of love, who are deniers of life. Are there fanatic Muslims? To be sure, but are there fanatic Christians and Jews and Sikhs and Hindus – yes indeed. And perish the thought, some fanatics, who lay claim to being Unitarians. We succumb to fanaticism if we fall into the prejudice that all in Islam are to blame for the terror of a few.

At a memorial at his Manhattan church four days ago, my colleague, Forrester Church said, "If we answer the hatred of others with hatred of our own, we and our enemies will soon be indistinguishable."

(quoted in sermon posted on the UUA website at uua.org). So, how do all who affirm a religion of faith in life, here on this earth, deal with our dual need to practice both justice and mercy? Dr. Church, I believe, set the balance neatly, when he warned,:

On the one hand, if hatred and vengeance spur our lust for retribution, rather than the greater quest for peace, we will but add to the world's terror even as we seek to end it. On the other, if we pray only for peace, we shall surely abet the spread of terrorism. our hands will end up far bloodier than those that lift up arms against it. (ibid.)

At times in the last decade, I have brushed against despair at the increasing selfishness, egocentrism, and narcissism in the dominant attitudes and practices of too many in our land. However, in the last few days, I find the outpouring of concern on every side redemptive, but how tragic that so much blood had to be sacrificed before we could break through our veneer of selfish ways and our cynicism toward concern for life. I speak not just of the common anguish so many now feel, I think of those lined up to give their own blood and the gifts of money being showered on the victims and the special offerings being taken in many churches this morning.

We should take pride that our own high school youth group took leadership to prod our congregation to undertake an offering this morning. Be prepared to give or write a check to Eliot Unitarian Chapel marked "terror relief" and place it into the coffers the youth will have at hand as we leave this service . Not only are our youth doing this, but they pushed a hesitant adult leadership in this congregation into approving this appeal. (Nota: Some \$4,500 was raised in this effort.)

Might I also salute the laity who took the initiative in making possible our own Friday night vigil and service, when this minister was feeling that getting the word out and planning a service would be an impossible task

with the confined time frame within which we had to work and our limited communication resources. But a handful of determined members proved me wrong and we had our vigil and service somehow squeezed between everything else going on at Eliot and nearly 150 persons of all ages were present.

As with many tragedies, after the initial reports of the catastrophe, not much new information is breaking that is truly newsworthy, but the media have switched to continuous reporting. So by default our television stations are left with programs of talking heads analyzing, speculating, pontificating, as if some magic spoken word might assuage our hurt, lessen our grief, and somehow bring everything back to normal. But then, I imagine, the stations even temporarily run out of talking heads and so they shift almost in desperation to focus for long periods upon the relief workers in the rubble of the World Trade Center. I found these sad tableaus almost soothing, a respite from repetitious words and blather. Something redemptive was portrayed in all the footage of workers simply doing their duty and volunteers flocking in to assist. That was and is America at its best, responding not in word to the question, "What can I do?" but in service, faith in action, relating to the needs that were most obvious, and in the depths of our anguish, touching us with inklings of hope.

Hour after hour, we saw men and women in the unglamorous work of search and rescue. The vast conglomeration of relief workers, construction crews, fire fighters police, medical personnel, laboring to exhaustion in the wreckage, not to mention the hundreds from these groups who gave their lives in the initial rescue operation. We cannot view their courageous undramatic and unsensational commitment and still believe that the age of heroism is dead. Sometimes in the midst of tragedy, we are somehow redeemed by the sacrificial spirit of concern and caring we see evinced by those who are simply doing their jobs, often as volunteers.

As for dramatic heroism, we should enshrine in our national memory, those who confronted the certainty of their own death, and then

tried to recapture their plane from the hijackers. All died upon the ground of Stony Creek Township, but because of their attempt, there was no fourth crash into some citadel where thousands more could have perished. Those few give new meaning to the biblical aphorism, "greater love hath no person than to lay down their life for another." Many rescue workers did this in the risky rounds of duty, but those on United Flight 93 over Pennsylvania did it with foreknowledge that they were ransoming other lives with their own.

But for all such inspiring example, we do know that the life denying is ravaging our world like an epidemic. We also know that the human capacity to persevere gushes forth from every tragedy and that acts of fanatic desperation cannot destroy our land or our ideals or our hopes. When our naive optimism is overturned, when our hubris of invincibility is pierced by reality, when our easy faith is rocked by outer earthquake that shakes us to the foundations of our being, we would repent. We confess our often bumbling efforts and our mountaineering on molehills have been inadequate to combat the evil about us; and our faith is oft too feeble and flabby, so that our religious sustenance is not adequate to confront the nihilism of death that provides us with no redemptive purpose or meaning.

May we abjure the easy, mistaken, simplistic response. May we take the time to sift, to winnow, to dig deep to where lies the bedrock of our spiritual being. There may we create acceptance for that which we cannot deny and cannot change, no matter with what rage we would cry out against the dying of the light. Let the challenge for each of us be to nurture the sustaining power which gives us strength not just for good times, but for those moments when madness seems to permeate our land, tragedy befalls us, and the forces of absurdity seem in control. And may we nurture also the seedlings of life affirmation planted in our being that strive to grow and survive, and flower.

One truth we should have learned anew in recent days. We cannot abandon or turn aside from the continuing commitment to practice mercy and to expand justice upon this earth. We must bring refreshing water to our spirits that we might be renewed and spring up stronger in our strength of soul. But let us remember always that salvation is never found strictly in lonely effort within and by the self. We reaffirm anew that only by caring, by cooperating, and by serving - all acts that require us to share our being with other beings - can the creative venture continue upon this earth. Free us from succumbing meekly to the hours of lead; refresh us for the adventure of life; summon us again to care for this fragile planet.

Ancient tales declares to us that our great symbolic wonders are ephemeral; the great wonders of the world in time all come tumbling down. Two centuries ago, the poet Shelley penned these words:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings
Look to my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing besides remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The attack of recent days struck upon two mammoth monuments our nation raised and dedicated to the gods of commerce and of war. The terrorists chose the wrong targets, for ultimately neither dollar nor might is our national symbol. If those deluded death affirming fanatics had understood us, they would have sought out our truly symbolic structures and crashed their planes into the Statue of Liberty, the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials, the Golden Gate Bridge, or perhaps even the arches here in St. Louis. Jesus said that a city set upon a hill cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:14), but those who do not really visualize our land cannot see our city upon a hill, because their hood of fanaticism blinds them to the true symbols of our nation.

Jesus further spoke of the kingdom of god as being within us (Luke 17:21), and that inner temple realm no terrorists can obliterate, only we ourselves can destroy the creative, the divine spirit within each one of us. Emerson put it succinctly when he declared that insofar as we are just, we are divine.

Ancient myths tell us in many different stories that the journey of the hero is ever the same. The heroic venture is always first a going out from the safe and secure, our protected fortresses of the ordinary. We then travel in strange lands, be they foreign or close at hand, and on that pilgrimage many adventures befall us – threats, challenges, and defeats, some life threatening. And in all this venturing, we are reborn in the crucible of our being. We find new abilities and powers, and perhaps most important, we discover, as did the heroes of ancient myth, that the arts of weaponry and war are not ultimately the primary tools for survival. We must understand what threatens to lay us low and defeat us. We must use our best intelligence to point our way onward in unfamiliar realms, where maps give us no sure guidance. We reach the edge of even such maps as we possess and find inscribed there, where land and sea end, the warning, "Beyond here be there dragons."

We must accept the fears, the fickle, the fateful - all that befalls us along the way, even as we have no guaranteed passage, many die along the pathway. This is the hero's tale of venturing forth into the quest of pilgrimage.

The adventures may be long, but at last we journey the homeward track until we are back where we started out and, as T S Eliot reminds us, we know it then again, for the first time. Our task as Americans is to have the courage to admit where we have made bad choices and whored after false gods, and now to repair anew to being a people, who do not live in selfish isolation, but as dwellers in a global village, where we have survival gifts, if we will but use them, if we will strive to be creators rather than destroyers in our world, if we will practice cooperation rather than domination, if we will respect the life and resources of this planet rather than heedlessly squandering them.

Two mutually exclusive streams flow toward salvation according to our western tradition. One river wafts rafts which hold that salvation is an act of belief. The boat Salvation runs the rapids sure that our words can save us, whatever we may have done. Believe and be saved! Those who do not affirm the required declaration of faith, say the true upholders of salvation by belief, end up in a pit of punishment, wherein they suffer forever. Those with the right beliefs enter upon the moment of death into the glories of heaven.

The other great river of our heritage from which our Unitarian faith was launched nearly five centuries ago, flows with faith in the human adventure. Salvation by works is its gospel. The Universalist faith once streamed out of the proclamation, that a good and kind god will not vindictively cast folk into bubbling fire pits of everlasting punishment. God is simply too good for that, so away, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and all the rest, who honor god for punishing us with terrorists loosed upon the river of life. Instead, the way we paddle with the divine, in whose image we are created, as the Unitarians once affirmed, is by ever trying to flow toward our likeness to god. We do that by our acts, our affirmation by deed in the face of all that entices us to walk past on the other side of the road, to let apathy replace our redemptive acts of concern, to bewail the destructive and the horror of life, while refusing to join others in community to labor to make the good prevail. How we lose out to the forces of evil, most often, is that we become cynical, uncaring, and unresponsive to our own creative possibilities.

We scrape away our higher brain of civility and expose instead for motivating our act, our reptile brains which drive us to strike back blindly, like a rattlesnake, when we feel threatened. We repair to bloody tooth and claw of nature and revert to eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth – doctrines central to our reptilian, primitive brain. Our thin veneer of intelligence and civility lies in our higher brain function, still under evolutionary development. Civility is not passive, as is suggested by the phrase, turn the other cheek. Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., were hardly passive; but

they were smart enough to realize that their cause could not win, if they chose the way of violence to win their battles.

Terrorism cannot be ended by counter insurgency, that is finding our terrorists to pit against their terrorists. Not so long ago we found the ways to move us out of the morass of the Cold War without nuclear conflict. Now, we need to find more adequate ways to protect our people and to abate terrorism, but even more we need to abate the causes of international terrorist operations. And let us never be so blaming that we cannot recall the folly of American encouragement of terrorism in Vietnam and in lands south of our border.

This is not the moment for pleas that we surmount our mourning; this is not the time for belaboring who are the perpetrators and what should be our response, and certainty this is not the time for striking out without ascertaining for sure, who are the guilty. Revenge is not where we need to be, for that entices us toward silly excesses. The reason we should respond is because our world is not safe for anyone, if suicide terrorists, motivated by indoctrination, can violate all that is sacred. Such terrorists threaten everything precious, for they have no respect for the sacredness of life. For the nonce, we can mark appropriately a grief that sears our spirits and leaves our hearts heavily weighed down. Let us simply be glad that we in the Eliot community can be together to enfold each other in caring, and to renew our concern that we make better this planet whereon we dwell. We shall not forget the thousands upon thousands, who have perished and we shall in time redeem this insult to the dignity of life by our continuing commitments. But all that is ahead.

For now, we simply acknowledge how we have each been rocked to the core of our being by purposeless, unredemptive evil. We have as yet no sure answers for what must be our national response. We can only suffer together and strive to nurture one another. For now that must suffice as we mark this morning new beginnings commencing in our personal acts of redemption and rededication. The human adventure continues in our quest ever to have life and to have life more abundantly

Let us pray:

God of many names and no name, god of all nations and all faiths, we pray thee for all the peoples of this earth: for those who are consumed by mutual hatred and bitterness; for those who make blood war upon their neighbors; for those who oppress and are oppressed in tyranny, for all who groan under cruelty, subjection, who are struck down in innocence, and who suffer through no fault of their own.

We also pray for all those who bear rule and responsibility; may they have wisdom in crisis and may they not pursue selfish aim or fame in place of mercy and justice. We beseech thee to be with us as we strive in pathways of service so that we might be worthy of freedom and help us as we plod toward the clean world our hands can make. Renew our strength in the face of discouragement, defeat, disaster, and give us courage in all our labors.

We confess that we have made but feeble effort to understand the peoples of the world and to foster peace among the nations. In this house of joy, we would remember all sorrowing and troubled folk, all those consumed by bitterness, all those laid low by grief, anxiety, or suffering seeming beyond their ability to tolerate. Let us here enfold all in existence, good and bad, righteous and evil, active and passive, that all creation may be gathered into a common power of good will, which shall issue in lasting peace and larger right. Amen.

(drawn, edited, and added to from several sources)