

In the Wake of Tragedy

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In the wake of tragedy, one of the most important things we can do is to gather with others and open ourselves to our emotions. In community, we can express our true feelings, share our innermost thoughts and fears, and let others who care for us know how the experience has touched us.

This past Tuesday, as we all know, our nation experienced a true tragedy, a series of events of unprecedented terrorist violence. These acts took place in our country, in New York and Virginia and Pennsylvania, but in a larger sense they were directed not only at us, but at all the civilizations of the world. This was brought home to me when I heard that some of those missing and presumed dead at the World Trade Center were Japanese citizens. These terrible events took place on our east coast, but the suffering they have caused is felt in countries across the world.

Events like this do grievous harm to the victims and all those close to them. While we can never and should never forget that harm, there is a less tangible harm that may affect us more directly. Events like these rip the fabric of our nation, of our society, of civilization in general. That fabric is woven from our sense of security, our ability to trust those whom we do not know, and our confidence in the basic goodness of human beings. In short, that fabric is woven from our hope for the future, and it has been ripped in a manner more violent than I could have imagined.

I believe that we can, in time, repair that fabric, but the scars will always show. Those scars may serve to remind us of our vulnerability. Even as the world's strongest military power and largest economy, we now see ourselves and will remain shockingly vulnerable. If we as a nation can remember this, and can act accordingly, there will be at least some small recompense for the pain and suffering of this week.

The fabric of our society has been seriously torn, and at some point, we must begin to stitch it back together again. Some of us are more practiced at sewing than others, but I hope that we will each do all that we can. But what kinds of thread can we use to mend the fabric of a society? I don't claim to have a complete list, but here are a few ideas.

First, if you know someone who has been touched very closely by this tragedy, do what you can to be of support. Call, express your sorrow, and offer to bring a dinner over. Offer the person an opportunity to talk, and help him or her find resources to face the loss. If you feel uncomfortable talking to someone in this situation, we have a brochure at the front door that can help you.

Second, do what you can to help the general situation. Giving blood or making contributions to organizations like the American Red Cross will provide assistance to someone in need. Our own Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is organizing a support effort for the victims of the attack on the World Trade Center, and we will have a special collection for this cause at our service on Sunday, September 30th.

Third, do what you can to support the members of Southern Illinois' international community, especially those of Arabic background and those of the Islamic faith. Let us make it clear that there are Americans, that there are many Americans, who do not blame anyone in this area for this tragedy. In particular, let us show our support for SIU's international student community . . . and incidentally, a good place to do that is the Friday afternoon coffee hours at the Interfaith Center.

Fourth, talk about what is going on and about your feelings about what is going on. Talk with those closest to you, including your children. In the sermon rack, we have a green page entitled "Helping Families Respond to Tragedy." Prepared by the Rev. Pat Hoertdoerfer of the UUA Religious Education staff, this provides a number of ideas about how we can help our children understand and cope with this week's tragedy. In a few minutes, you can share your feelings and questions here. You can share your hopes and fears. Or you do not have to say a word, but you can light a candle. And while we are speaking and lighting candles, we will pass around a basket of green and white ribbons. I invite you to put on a ribbon, indicating both that you remember and that you continue to hope.

These are a few things that we can do today. This is not a complete list; there are many more things we can do. What is important is this: that each one of us do what we can to help.

I hope and I pray that someday the fabric of our society will be repaired. We will see the fabric, and remember its original beauty, even as we see where it has been torn and repaired. And I believe that, over time, we will see not only the lost original beauty, but also come to appreciate a new beauty, the beauty of the stitches themselves, the beauty of humble, irregular, clumsy, imperfect human efforts that when taken individually seem insignificant. But we will not see only a single stitch. We will see them in their collective beauty, for theirs is the beauty of rebuilding the security, trust, and hope that form the fabric our society.