

Redeeming the Time
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Gather the people, for we are in need of one another.
Gather spirits that grieve and hearts that give.
Gather together
for now is a sacred hour.

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offense
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

*Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.*

*Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.*

*The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote
About Diaghilev
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.*

*From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;
"I will be true to the wife,
I'll concentrate more on my work,"
And helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,*

*Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?*

*All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.*

*Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.*

- W. H. Auden

*In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful....
Believers, fulfill your duties to God
and bear true witness.
Do not allow your hatred for other men
to turn you away from justice.
Deal justly; that is nearer to true piety.*

- excerpted from The Qur'an, Sura 5:1,8 (tr. N. J. Dawood)

Yesterday radio stations began reading the names of those who were killed in Tuesday's terrorist attack. The effect was poignant and well taken. In the rush for solutions and explanations the sheer enormity of the catastrophe intrudes upon us. I spoke with several friends on Friday who, like me, were experiencing the weepiness that often follows a few days after an initial shock of grief. The kind of turmoil expressed by many reminds me of words spoken by an eleven year old girl in 1982, who said, "I don't know, I feel like there's a nuclear war going on inside me. It's terrible."

The first reading of names I heard was during a memorial service broadcast from Ireland, where as in much of the world, the people are grieving the loss of human life and the loss of America's innocence. That those all over the world - from Dublin to Moscow, and from Capetown to Beirut - are weeping with us is a testament of the ultimate unity and hope of humanity. Even in our own country, divided as we have been by so much, we are beginning to find that, in the midst of the horror, we can and we do come together in community.

Several years ago, in a dusty theology book given to me by a retired minister, Andy Mahy - now well over 90 - I found a postcard used as a bookmark. Sent from Nazi Germany in 1938, it said,

Dear Andy,

The Germans are scarcely in a mood for discussing religion - scarcely in a mood for discussing anything - but we have "redeemed the time" by asking questions....

It was signed, "James Luther Adams."

James Luther Adams, Unitarian Universalist theologian and the smiling prophet of religious liberalism had traveled to Germany in the midst of the Nazi regime and saw more closely than most of us the evil of which humanity is capable. Although he was never imprisoned, he had been detained by the Nazis, and he watched the building of a furor of hate, an organized chaos of the human heart. He witnessed first-hand the galvanizing of humanity for purposes of inhumanity.

Yet it was the same James Luther Adams who years later wrote that one of the basic principles of religious liberalism is that the resources, divine and human, for meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. As horrible as the Nazi holocaust was - and it was an atrocity that dwarfs even that which faces us today - Adams found cause for ultimate, if not immediate, optimism. We are not stuck in hopelessness.

"We have redeemed the time," he wrote to a young Andy Mahy, "by asking questions." It is no accident that Adams spoke of "redeeming the time." He was quoting from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil."

In these days when some have been moved to evil and others to respond to evil with evil - we as human beings who seek the dignity in others find ourselves needing to walk circumspectly, not as fools, but wise. Those in our own Mount Washington Valley who responded to terrorism against innocent lives with bomb threats against innocent Afghani owned businesses - a terrorism of their own - walk as fools. I have sympathy for the grief and anger they feel; I too feel it. But now is not the time to walk in hatred. The words of the Qur'an speak wisdom to us - "Do not allow your hatred... to turn you away from justice." Now is not the time to walk in hatred. Now is the time to walk in the transforming spirit of love and hope and community.

If we are to walk circumspectly, we will recognize that the United States has not always been a good neighbor to the world; we are not loved everywhere. If they sent no other message,

Tuesday's attacks made that clear. We can and certainly should take better steps to embrace a humanity that extends beyond our borders. And we have taken some of those steps. Many members of our fellowship have served in the peace corps; others have served humanity overseas in other ways. Our government, despite all for which it is criticized, does lead the world in foreign aid programs. Yet we all know that we can do better, that we as a nation have sometimes placed arrogance and presumption over wisdom and community.

However, there can be no justification for the evil that has been committed. No actions of our own, however arrogant or even inhumane, may serve as an excuse or in any way justify the actions of those who would fly passenger jets into buildings of tens of thousands of innocent people. This is not America's fault. It's not George Bush's fault, and it's not Bill Clinton's fault, whether or not we agree with their policies. This is the fault of the terrorists. Nobody did anything to deserve this.

How, then, do we "redeem the time?" How do we keep ourselves walking circumspectly, not as fools, but wise? Where in the midst of such chaos is wisdom to be found? And what on earth can we, as ordinary people who are not part of the FBI, the CIA, or the government at all, what can we do now?

There are terrorists being pursued by the FBI. We have no role in that investigation; we must trust them to their work. There is another danger, however, that we can address, that you and I and everyone in this room and in this country and in this world can address. This is the danger of hatred, of suspicion, of mistrust and of divisiveness. These are natural, if misplaced, reactions to injury, but if we are to survive we must overcome their temptation. Now is not the time to retreat into our shells. Auden is right: "We must love one another or die."

Divisiveness, hatred and misunderstanding are tempting paths indeed, for they provide answers, a place to go with all the emotion that is inside us. Whether directed blindly outward, at people of certain religions, ethnicities, or national origins, or guiltily inward, they are not enough.

"We have redeemed the time," wrote James Luther Adams, "by asking questions." In asking questions, Adams walked circumspectly and taught us something about how to live with integrity in a difficult time. In asking questions of others we reach across personal boundaries and invite others to know us more deeply. We, too, in our very questioning, reveal something of ourselves. We forge connections with other human beings, perhaps some who with whom we would not agree. "We have redeemed the time by asking questions." In asking questions we admit that we do not know everything; we leave behind our well worn positions, whatever the issue is, and seek greater understanding.

There is another kind of questioning, one that is basic to the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Questioning, since well before the time of Olympia Brown and well before the time of Channing, has been a central part of the Unitarian and the Universalist way of making meaning. We have always asked questions, sought to find the truth, and admitted that whatever truths we have found are incomplete, imperfect, error-laden human truths. Life is complicated, and we admit to that.

Last week a well known and respected author told television reporters that one positive result of the attack would be that Americans would no longer see the world in so many shades of gray, that we would see good and evil more in black and white. Though I respect Mr. McCollough, I respectfully disagree. If anything, the attack should teach us in a powerful way that the world is not black and white. A simplistic view of the world may, at best, bring us to a new equilibrium, perhaps one in which Americans will feel more physically secure. But a such a view does not see the world as it is. It allows us to see that evil exists, but it misses the human brokenness in which evil festers, and misses the opportunity for healing. With such a view we may well come to find ourselves no better than those who have wounded us. Let us not miss the truth that life, as Thomas Merton so aptly said, "is lived in the vast complexity of the gray." Indeed, as a friend reminded me last night, life is lived in an infinity of color.

The questions we will be asking do not always have easy answers, and there are far more questions than I could begin to recite. Perhaps one question that this week dominates my thinking is this: How do we find the transforming in the tragic?

There is a sense, of course, in which we cannot help but find the transforming in the tragic. Few if any of us will ever see the world in quite the same way again. Death has intruded upon our innocence in the most terrible of ways. We have experienced, whether directly through the loss of loved ones or indirectly through mere knowledge, a new kind of horror.

And yet there is another kind of transformation that comes not in the tragedy itself but in our response. This is a transformation in which we begin to redeem the time - not to give in to despair nor to hide behind a blustery jingoism, but to transform ourselves and our ways of relating to the world so that we may be a part of the healing of humanity.

This week we have seen the generosity and kindness of millions of people all across the country and the world who have volunteered their help, their money, their time and even their blood to answer the needs of strangers.

Many of us have been to vigils and prayer services this week. I've been to three and I've known of many more. On Friday night I participated in a hastily put together gathering at the Little White Church in Eaton. After a time of silence, we all walked outside together and lit candles in the coming darkness. With no plans and no particular leader, people simply started talking. I will never forget the tears that strangers shared with one another that night. And then we sang, sang songs that we all knew, songs of patriotism, songs of peace and songs of hope. Coming back into the church, four children stood up, with no prior plans to do so, and sang "He's got the Whole World in His Hands." Every one of us that night came in need, and every one of us found love.

That kind of miraculous togetherness did not take place only in the small communities of rural New England, nor indeed only in houses of worship and village squares. While we were lighting candles outside the Eaton Church, a few people at a Chinese noodle restaurant in a strip mall of suburban Rockville, Maryland asked the chef to put their dumplings on hold for a few minutes while they went outside to light candles they had brought with them. The whole restaurant joined them, and 17 Buddhists, Christians, Unitarian Universalists and who knows who joined together in sacred remembrance, and in seeking wisdom, and in prayer.

"In a dark time," wrote Theodore Roethke, "the eye begins to see."

How can we redeem the time? How can we find the transforming in the tragic? I tell you, we have already begun to redeem the time, without even knowing it and often without thinking very much about it. We have begun to redeem the time by reaching out to one another as human beings do when they are afraid and finding that all these years - all these years when we were confident and independent and wrapped in our private lives - we had been missing something.

Even now our grief has begun to be tempered with hope, because it is human to return to hope, over time, and also because we have been reminded of something in ourselves and in each other that we needed to know.

My grief this morning is great; it is greater than any words I could choose to describe it. But my hope is also great. Communities like this one that you and I share feed my hope. It is in communities like this one - communities of meaning, conscience, character, hope, thoughtfulness, and transforming love - that we begin to redeem the time. And in the process of responding to the wounds of hate, we have discovered the strength of love.

It is happening everywhere - in churches, in synagogues, in mosques, in temples - wherever human beings gather to find meaning and integrity, there is hope. In street corners where the homeless gather, in homes, in bars, in the halls of congress and in the halls of our schools - there is hope that we may yet redeem the time.

Nurture this hope. Nurture the value of togetherness you feel. If you have been moved to speak to strangers in stores in new ways, hold on to that impulse. If you have been moved to tell Middle Eastern and other immigrants in our community that you are glad they are here, hold on to that impulse.

If you have a clearer understanding of what is important to you and what is, in the end, trivial, hold on to that understanding. If you feel you have something in common with children and women and men of war-torn Rwanda and Afghanistan and Bosnia, hold on to that feeling. If you have begun to feel a love for those around you and a deeper respect for human life than ever before, hold on to that feeling. Let it grow inside you. Let it become you. Let the beauty of humanity overwhelm your soul - because in the end there is nothing more important, and there is nothing more healing, and there is nothing more redemptive than love.

*There is more love somewhere.
There is more love here and all around us.
There is more hope, more peace, and more joy.
Hold it close and give it freely
that it may renew our spirit and our world.*

*Salaam and Shalom.
Go in peace.*