

**VIGIL AT FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MADISON, WI.**  
**The Rev. Dr. Michael A. Schuler, Parish Minister**

**September 11, 2001**

I come here this evening, as I'm sure you do, harboring a variety of feelings.

It is an absolutely gorgeous late summer day; a day on which one could easily say, "God's in her heaven, and all's right with the world." But obviously that is not the case. Nature's radiance contrasts sharply with the burden we carry with us into this place. The wars of the world - the climate of terrorism linked to remote places like Palestine, Bosnia, Rwanda, Ireland and Indonesia - today they are part of our cultural experience as well.

What names, then, can we give to our feelings?

Most obviously, there is grief; desolation over the horrendous loss of life that has occurred in New York City and elsewhere. It is simply impossible for me, standing here, to imagine the terror and despair that those caught up in this calamity must have experienced. My heart goes out to the hundreds of thousands, if not millions affected by this catastrophe - family members, colleagues, friends, neighbors, associates... The ripples of pain continue to radiate further and further from the circumference of this morning's events. The dimensions of our grief tonight are huge. When all is said and done, many of us will know someone first or second hand who was killed or injured today.

There is anger in my heart as well. A piece of me cares not a whit what may have provoked today's attacks. I am simply outraged at the unmitigated evil of these calculated, unmerciful, inhumane undertakings.

These hijackings offend every moral fiber of my being. There may be explanations, to be sure. But there can be no excuses and certainly no justifications. This is Columbine writ large. This is kamikazi fanaticism taken to its illogical and indefensible extreme. Tonight the pacifist in me, the life-long advocate of nonviolent resistance is furious at the futility of it all... The futility and the senselessness.

With this anguish and anger, then, comes confusion, doubt, uncertainty. It is truly hard to comprehend the minds that conceived this horror; the kind of people and the movement they serve, which could have spawned a terrorist act of such colossal ugliness. How can human beings, in the name of whatever religion, ideology or nationalism -- in fealty to whatever God or gods -- unleash such savagery on armed soldiers, much less innocent civilians? And so we are left to wonder and to wander - to ask repeatedly, what provoked this outburst? How can one body of humans hate another with such intensity? Why is this country so despised that now it has come to this? What are we to think? How ought we to respond? It is all so confused, so incomprehensible.

Finally, I am, of course, afraid. Less afraid for myself than for our entire country. Afraid that this will by no means be the end of terrorist attacks. Afraid that our leadership will respond in ways

that invite fresh reprisals from this nation's many unknown, unseen enemies. I am most afraid for my son, and for the children of others - for future generations who will be fated to live in a world of gross inequalities and fierce jealousies - an interconnected world in which oceanic barriers and fortified boundaries mean nothing. I am not so much afraid of what might happen tomorrow, but of what this nation and the world will be like in 2010, if this is any indication of things to come.

And so we come to our faith community, to a place familiar, serene and comforting, to process these feelings, seeking solace for our loss, a little clarity perhaps, and relief from our loneliness.

It is not to sort out the political, social and religious implications of today's events that we spend these precious minutes together this evening. We all have theories about what happened and why; we all have opinions about the perpetrators, and about the way our own country's policies may or may not have precipitated this tragedy. Those things we can talk about later. For now, we come in compassion and in sorrow, in solidarity with the our victimized countrymen and women. There is a place here for anger, but this is no time for enmity. For now let our spirits bend toward sympathy, not revenge; healing, not retaliation; commiseration, not polarization.

I invite you now to observe a few moments of meditation and prayer.

It is profoundly ironic that today, September 11th, is the International Day of Peace; that today the UN General Assembly was scheduled to open its new session with a minute of silence for world peace. We don't know if this happened; let us pray that it did. For a moment, however, let us look to ourselves and to our own troubled hearts and conflicted minds, and let us ask:

How can there be peace between neighbors and nations when there is no peace in ourselves? When anger and unrest prevail, when our voices quaver and grow shrill, is any larger peace possible? Can peace germinate and grow in such acid soil? How can war in the world end when so many of us are brawling within ourselves? Those who cherish peace must pursue that discipline from inside out: Taming the unruly inner aggressor, while urging, with gentle firmness, society's witless warriors to lay enmity aside.

If we would make peace, we must radiate peace. Those who do peace must also be peace.

Amen. Shalom. Om Shanti.