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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

# In The Aftermath

a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene

Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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## Sermon

Maybe you had a week like mine.

At about seven on Tuesday morning-September 11-911-I called Jennifer, our Religious Education Director, to confirm that we were riding our bikes to work that morning. She told me what had happened. My husband Bob and I immediately switched on the TV, to an incomprehensible scene. A little King-Kong-and-the-Empire-State-Building airplane ran into a building. Then flames gushed out. America had suffered a terrorist attack.

I rode to Jennifer's in a state of distraction, confused about reality. I got there, to find her in tears: her husband, Steve, hadn't answered her call to his cell phone, and he was flying that morning. Only to Phoenix via Salt Lake City, but who knew what was going on in the skies over America? We stood dumbstruck, awkwardly hugging, with my bike helmet clunking against her shoulder, watching the next horror: two of the world's biggest buildings descending in a slow-motion collapse into dust and rubble.

Steve called, to our intense relief, stranded in Salt Lake, and we rode to

church, talking of nothing else, in a confused and befuddled way.

We decided to have a prayer vigil/meditation that evening, and got busy arranging for it. Setting up a room where our community could gather felt as though we had control of something.

At the vigil, we sang and prayed and lit candles and spoke, desperate to make sense of the impossible, filled with intense gratitude for community.

On Wednesday morning, I went to my Journal-Writing group for people in the helping professions, where we wrote of grief and despair and hope. My friend Nancy had lost two bright shining nephews, young men who had loved their wheeling and dealing job on the 104th floor of the first tower. I wept for the first time, writing furiously about my feelings.

On Thursday, driving to the church, I felt a heaviness upon my spirit, dragging at me. We had much "ordinary" work that had to be done, carried on among our obsessive conversations and speculation. I "spaced out" a lunch appointment with a valued colleague. On the radio, we heard news of anti-Muslim violence and hatred. Our national leaders were speaking heatedly, unequivocally, about finding the villains, eliminating them and all governments that harbored terrorists-speaking of a kind of war heretofore unknown to America.

I spoke to the president of the local Islam Center that day, inviting them to worship with us on Sunday. He declined graciously, saying they were "keeping a low profile." (We will continue pursuing the possibility of their renting from us.)

Later that day, as I was heading east on State Street, I noticed to my great surprise, huge black clouds boiling in from the east. "But our storms always come from the west?" At that instant, as I was remarking to myself almost superstitiously on the strange weather, I was flooded for a-thankfully-brief-moment with a gut-level, despairing realization of

how we will never be the same. The realization seized me viscerally, shaking me with terror, exploding through my body-then ebbing back to its permanent home, lurking beneath my everyday surface.

Sunday Services Committee meeting that evening was a strange mixture of affection, business as usual, undercurrents of grief and confusion and anger, some short-temperedness with each other. I slept fitfully that night, waking often, so grateful for Bob's warm body breathing peacefully next to mine.

On Friday morning, I left the house on foot, walking to an 8:00 a.m. appointment in the North End. My soul and body were weighted with a terrible fatigue. At the same time, the air smelled overpoweringly of life and freshness and growing; all the greens of God's palette leapt out at me with crystalline intensity; life coursed through me, singing to me that I could fly, that I should run and leap down our hill.

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Maybe you had a week like mine?.

Maybe you spent your days, as I spent mine, in a bewildering stew of grief, and anger, and love, and horror, and confusion, and gratitude for life. Maybe, like me, you were fatigued, and terrified, and prayerful, and depressed, and distracted, and desperately thankful for loved ones and community.

Maybe you felt like a motherless child. [Debra sing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child"]

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And now: what??

It is just five days since our world changed, and I can only offer glimpses of the hopes and intentions I feel stirring in my heart.

For our country, I am heartened that we have not sprung to conclusions without solid evidence. I am also disheartened by what appears to be a continuing resolve to ignore that America has acted in brazenly arrogant ways-walking out on discussions of such matters as global warming and racism, as though they are of no concern to us-I am disheartened that our arrogance allows us the luxury of a falsely righteous indignation.

I believe with all my heart that we must, somehow, act to bring about justice. At the same time, I feel in myself a heightened responsibility to continue speaking out against our government's willful refusal to acknowledge our self-centeredness and arrogance. I also fear and must work against racial stereotyping and any attempts to abridge our civil liberties.

I shall increase my support of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which sent out these inspirational words:

We must react in a careful, measured way and not allow ourselves and our country to rush to judgment about who committed these acts of violence. Similarly, we must take care not to allow today's events to affect the freedoms and rights which protect all of our citizens. As the facts surrounding these attacks begin to unfold over the next few days and weeks, we must be diligent and urge our nation's leaders not to seek retribution against individuals, groups or nations for the sake of proving our might.

Personally, I feel inspired and challenged in a number of ways.

All this death has brought life into sharp relief for me. I am so unspeakably grateful for the beauty of the earth, for all those whom I love and who have the amazing graciousness to love me back; for poets and janitors and babies and old people and dogs and jokes and Shakespeare and trees; for all of you who labor in the vineyards,

making the humble sublime and the sublime humble. I resolve to pay attention to the wonders I witness in this everyday world, deepening my connection with the Divine.

My heart is full as never before, with gratitude for the Unitarian Universalist faith. Sometimes it has felt-to some-that we have no center, because we have no one theological foundation of Christianity, or Buddhism, or paganism or whatever. But can there be anything more important-anything-than a foundation that says, "Our religious path embraces all ethical roads to the holy"? I have often said, "Unitarian Universalist thinking can be the salvation of the world"-this awful thing would not have happened if everyone were Unitarian, Universalist or UU. I am profoundly grateful and honored to be a Unitarian Universalist minister, serving this congregation-if I have not thanked you lately, hear me doing so now. I resolve to work joyously to make our faith stronger, thus helping the holy Mystery become manifest.

Finally, I hope and pray that the grief and horror and shock of this awful time will call me-and you, and our government, and everybody else on the planet-into right relationship and right action, into practicing the love that casts out fear. Into acts and attitudes commanded by all great religions: treating others as we would be treated; forgiving ourselves and others; resisting the temptation to descend to the level of those who bait us, or speak ill of us; rising above pettiness; caring for the less fortunate.. Loving God with all our hearts and minds and strength, and loving each other as ourselves. For they are the same thing.

Rosh Hashana is tomorrow, the beginning of Judaism's High Holy Days. Ten days of looking unflinchingly at our behavior over the past year, atoning when necessary, forgiving and asking for forgiveness. I plan to honor that time-perhaps you will, too.

The Association of Trial Lawyers in America has responded in an astonishingly redemptive way to the devastation, and this seemingly-unlikely organization can inspire us. Here is what they said:

We, as a nation, must speak at this hour with a single voice, a voice of compassion for the victims and a voice of authority to those who would tear down our society. For this reason, for the first time in our history, the Association of Trial Lawyers of America, in this time of national crisis, urges a moratorium on civil lawsuits that might arise out of these awful events. There are more urgent needs that must be served at this time. Let us support our government so it can fully gather all the evidence needed quickly to identify and prosecute the terrorists. Let this instead be a time for healing, with our focus on bringing to justice the terrorists who perpetrated this tragedy.

I love that response. Here is a group whose members earn their daily bread through litigation. Further, many of them are constitutionally suited for adversarial proceedings, and really enjoy getting in there, arguing with great rhetoric and logic, making the opposing side look bad, doing their level best to win. And they are saying, "There is something far, far more important happening here. Our response must be transformative."

May we all find ourselves in such a place.

In such places, and in all the inspirations and challenges I have found, lie my hopes for all of us and the world. I do not diminish the grief and loss, the confusion and bewilderment, the fear, the magnitude of unknown change through which we all have to journey. These must be experienced, side by side with-hand in hand with-the joy in our beautiful world, the gratitude for our redemptive faith tradition, the comfort we find in each other's presence and laughter, the resolve we find to go forth and do better. Our grief must needs go hand in hand with love, the transformative and redeeming love taught by the great teachers.

As we participate in the offertory, then move silently outside to take a flower and make our blazing, diverse creation, let us reflect upon the

Prophet Mohammed's words:

That person is the  
most beloved of God  
who does most good  
to God's creatures.

May we embody this wisdom.

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