

**TEN YEARS AND COUNTING:
A LIBERAL RELIGIOUS RESPONSE
September 11, 2011**

Where were you on the morning of September 11, 2011? You can all remember. Perhaps, like me, you were working at the office, not tuned in to the news of the world. It was a Tuesday, and I was catching up with e- and snail mail following the weekend, when I received a telephone call from a congregant, who insisted I go downstairs and turn on the television, “because a second plane just hit the World Trade Center.” I did so, and spent the rest of the morning watching in fascinated horror as the events of that terrible morning played out over and over again as every TV station played and replayed the clips of the second plane hitting the tower, the Pentagon displaying a smoking gash in one side, the twin towers falling in what surely was a slo-mo bad TV movie. And then the news came from Pennsylvania—that another plane had plowed into a field, and maybe, just maybe there was a heroic story behind that.

Let's take a minute now, for each of us to briefly re-live that morning, as did our anonymous third grader. Think about where you were, how you received the news, and how you responded. We do not have time to share all your stories—each one with its own significance, each accompanied by pain, sorrow, an awareness of tragedy. However, let yourself experience those moments again.

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At what point did you realize that the world was changed for the United States, as well as for you personally? I think we came to those understandings at different times. I had a meeting scheduled for that afternoon, with the Jewish/Christian Dialogue, a group that sponsored Dialogues between scholars of different faiths. This planning committee sat in mostly shocked silence. Then the leader asked us to take turns giving voice to our feelings. In the midst of sorrow, shock, fear and rage, I said something like, “I am most concerned about what this will do to our society. Our record handling threats to our culture and safety is not good. I read a lot of history, and I remember reading about Sacco and Vanzetti. During the First World War we lost many freedoms. During the Second we locked up Japanese Americans. I fear we will lose freedoms, and experience a loss of democracy.” Most there were surprised, some expressing denial of that possibility. Ten years later, I think I was a pretty good prophet.

What are we all thinking, ten years later? It has been interesting to see the response in the Main Stream Media, who are uniformly lifting up stories of heroism, stories of loss, stories of trying to get beyond loss and fear to an appreciation of others. Many cities and towns will have interfaith services this afternoon, demonstrating that the participants do not hold their Muslim brothers and sisters responsible for 9/11. And many churches will do the same—however, I predict not all will do so. More about that later.

All of the memorializing and honoring and interfaithing is good: we do need to remember and honor those who lost their lives. We need poetry to help us feel, so the words of Steve Schick, who evokes the gray clouds into which so many people disappeared, and Robert Weston who calls us to love are appreciated.

We need to honor those first responders who risked and often lost their lives attempting to rescue hundreds, indeed thousands of people. And we most especially need to form bonds across the divisions of Father Abraham's extended family. Other faiths should also be included, but especially those descended from Father Abraham, for this struggle is basically a sibling rivalry. The ceremonies are all good. And if I lived in Mount Pleasant I would have attempted to organize an interfaith gathering this afternoon or evening. For, if we are to maintain hope for a viable future, we must build bonds of hope and love and mutual respect.

And yet, it is also, I believe, insufficient. Just as I believe it is insufficient to hold hands and sing "We Shall Overcome" while celebrating Martin Luther King's birthday, without addressing his trenchant critique of rampant capitalism, I believe this anniversary calls out for a discussion of causes and critiques about actions, and an analysis of how we might proceed to build a world in which we can all live together.

I have seen little of this, and none from clergy. I hope that other colleagues will also do so; and I am most conscious that my analysis is and will be incomplete, probably inaccurate in some respects, and perhaps unpopular. For we Americans (maybe we humans) like to avoid hard work, uncomfortable thinking and challenges to the status quo. Yet one must start somewhere, therefore, answering an inner call that demands a response, "Here am I."

Let us begin with the actions of Muhammad Atta and his colleagues, and ask ourselves, just who was responsible for crashing those planes into the twin towers, Pentagon, and the thwarted plan to hit either the White House or Capitol? It was NOT, let me repeat NOT, Muslims. It was fundamentalists. The men who flew those planes happened to be fundamentalists of the Muslim variety, but they should be named and remembered as fundamentalists.

Further, let me say that the larger situation in the Middle East, as well as the climate of revenge and hate that shaped the response of our own government was greatly shaped by fundamentalisms. The plural is intentional. I will examine this plural more deeply, however, let us first address the response fundamentalist Muslims crafted in response to fundamentalist Jews living in Israel.

The New York Times published an article by Simon Critchley this week in which he quotes the words of Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden said that he remembered watching television and seeing Palestinian apartment towers burning and falling after being hit by a rocket fired by Israeli soldiers. (Towers, burning, falling, rockets...)

Can anyone doubt that it is fundamentalist followers of Judaism that stoke the fires of Israeli intransigence in the hottest of hotbeds in the Middle East? They read the Torah, as the literal words of God, promising them the land of Israel, and they resist the majority of Israeli citizens who would rather find a path toward peace. And the fundamentalist Muslims chant "death to Israel" and send suicide bombers to kill men, women and children.

Osama bin Laden was a member of Saudi minor royalty and his family is extremely wealthy. When a prominent playboy of wealth, privilege and influence embraced a fundamentalist version of Islam, called Wahabism, the family collectively shrugged their shoulders and ignored both him and the Wahabis. They camped out in the desert and grew stronger, drawing adherents from every frustrated class of Arabs who suffered under dictators of varying stripes, or insufficient access to jobs, or a general lack of meaning in their lives. When they embraced Wahabism they learned that Islam was meant to rule the world, and radical fundamentalist clerics called them to action. They studied the Qu'ran, the literal words of Allah, and tried to envision a cleansed world living in sharia. Suddenly their lives had meaning.

And the one government that could have stopped them only watched warily and calculated how they might benefit should some of these fanatics actually carry out jihad.

Meanwhile, in the decadent West, especially these United States of America, our own fundamentalists were growing. Let me be clear about defining who I mean by fundamentalists. They are people who believe in the literal word of God, as He spoke in the King James version of the Bible. They are NOT everyone to the right of us—a very large group—or even everyone to the right of mainline Christianity. All evangelicals are not fundamentalists, and Pentacostalists are mystics, not fundamentalists. They are people who believe that the word of God exists in the Bible, and those who are true Christians must follow it according to fundamentalist interpretation.

All of the fundamentalisms share one characteristic. They are idolaters of the Word. They all draw from the same source, with some variations.

The Qu'ran contains many of the same stories as the Bible, and has many of the same characters. Christians add the story of Jesus of Nazareth and the development of Christianity to the Hebrew scripture. We are all spiritual descendents of Father Abraham. Yes, as an offshoot of Christianity, we most liberal of liberal religionists are sisters and brothers of the People of the Book. And we all claim to worship ONE GOD. Christians just define one god as a trinity, a triumph of creative theologizing. Muslims claim the prophet Muhammad as the last of the prophets, who came to reform a degraded religion. Retired Professor Martin Marty, a well-known scholar of religion, made an extended study of the various fundamentalisms, and concluded that they are all far more similar than any of them to the mainstream or liberal versions of their particular faith.

Most of the children of Abraham could get along, and many did so for centuries. However, the fundamentalists, those who are idolaters of the Word, are bound by their respective three faiths to fight for the reality of that Word. For, if another faith should be more prevalent, another version of the divine truth prevail, their lives have no meaning.

If this is true or at least has some merit, what is a good liberal religionist to do? Let us recall the words of Langston Hughes:

O let America be America again--
The land that has never been yet--
And yet must be....

If we are to claim hope and love and mutual respect for our lives and those of our descendents, we cannot just shrug our shoulders and allow our Christian Wahabis to retreat into the desert and mountains any more. That is basically what the mainline churches, and those of us who are liberal did in the recent past. We shrugged our shoulders after Clarence Darrow took on the fundamentalists in Tennessee. They retreated and fed their fear of modernity and nourished their grudges, and figured out how to use technology while deploring the culture in which it was developed. The secular life and its focus on materialism left many, if not most, of our people rootless, drifting, existing without a focus. Humans must have meaning in their lives. Fundamentalism provides an intense focus. They have grown by leaps and bounds.

If we want to reclaim the spiritual landscape we must learn about the fundamentalists who are most radical, most threatening, most adamant about the literal Word of God. We must learn about them, and we must learn to compete with them. For if we do not, we not only have no future as a faith, but our children will inherit a world constrained by literalism, if not controlled by dominionists and restorationists.

(A digression: please Google these terms, dominionists, from the book of Genesis, as in “having dominion over,” and restorationists, from which they developed. Then look over the current crop of presidential candidates and see if you want a representative of either of these groups as president. Plan your election year accordingly.)

I believe that, assuming we want a world that reflects our values, we need to know what the folks who disagree with us espouse, and we need to stimulate the growth of liberal religion. I believe that our own brand of liberal religion, Unitarian Universalism has much to offer, and that we should be proud to offer it.

Your political life is yours to plan, however, I think it is critical to continue to develop our own inclusive, loving, beloved community that is based on freedom. We have a saving faith here—a faith that mourns losses, but rolls up its sleeves to help others, a faith that honors heroes, but recognizes small acts of heroism in its midst, that embraces poets and prophets, that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

Let us love each other, and extend our affections to others who need our love. Let us care for each other and share that caring with the larger world. Let us respect everyone, even misguided fundamentalists, but let us not yield to them the definition of religion.

For if there is to be hope and love and respect in our shared future, we must make our voice heard.

Go forth and lift your voices.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.