

THE USES OF MEMORY
SERMON DELIVERED BY
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FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
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Here we are, alleluia and thank god! I signed up for Garrison Keillor's 'Writer's Almanac' and receive a poem by e-mail every day. This one came this week and I dedicate it to you in this beloved community:

i hold you

By Jeffrey Robin

i hold you up to the sun
your fertile grace
your beauty
your peace

i hold you up
for all to see

your courage
your wisdom
your "way"

i hold you
to what you are
to whom you know
to the turning sky
to the grace of stars

i hold you as close as
i dare
i would not break you
in your fragility

i trust myself
as I know
that you trust me
it is good
that we
are here.

You are my people...for you are the people who reside with me in a faith that requires us to learn that all people are our people. And this is no easy learning for we humans are prone to making walls when we are afraid. You are my people who reside with me in a religion that disallows an easy retreat into the safety of similarity, and this is a life- saving, a world- saving faith. It is good that we are here!

On this, our ingathering service, and the tenth anniversary of the horrific happenings of September 11, 2001 it is good that we are here to continue to hold ourselves to what we are as Unitarian Universalists. As we pause this day to remember something that happened a decade ago, we wonder what we have learned that will be helpful as we live forward. As Lewis Carroll wrote in *Through the Looking Glass*, "It is a poor sort of memory that only works backward."

My theme today: commemorating the tenth year after 9/11 through the lens of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

We hear things like, "9/11 has changed us forever". How have we changed? How will this commemoration day show how we have changed? How does it help or hinder the evolution of human consciousness toward peace? We hear that those who do not remember their history are bound to repeat it. But it is also true that the way we collectively remember history can snare us in a repetitive net of anger, revenge-seeking, and the closing of our hearts to the work of compassion that the world so desperately needs.

David Reiff writes in a *Harpers Magazine* a month ago:

Designed by the architect David Michael Arad and the landscape architect Peter Walker and called "Reflecting Absence" the memorial will be about eight acres in size and consist of two sunken reflecting pools, each surrounded by an enormous waterfall, the largest manmade ones in North America, according to the memorial's official website. The names of the 2,982 people who died on 9/11 and in the failed 1993 attempt to destroy the twin towers will be etched on bronze panels edging these memorial pools. The closing sentence of the memorial's mission statement reads:

May the lives remembered, the deeds recognized, and the spirit reawakened by eternal beacons reaffirm respect for life, strengthen our resolve to preserve freedom, and inspire an end to hatred, ignorance and intolerance.

These are unexceptional statements. A memorial is a place, and this will be for a time, for solidarity rather than subtlety, deference rather than criticism, and piety rather than revisionism. But in affirming that remembrance is humanely necessary, we must not pretend that it is ever completely innocent, or, to put it more bluntly still, that it has no moral downside.the ghost at the banquet of all public commemoration is always politics-above all of the mobilization of national solidarity.....after all... to remember may not just be a means to grieve; it may also be a means to harbor a vision of securing justice or vengeance long after it's time to put the guns away.¹

¹ *Harpers*, August, 2011.

Today, then, in our house of hope I offer a reflection on how we might be present in this day of memory as Unitarian Universalists. If we would liberate our memories toward the creation of a world at peace, what might our focus be?

It is good and necessary to be present with those who lost loved ones that day, those who grieve most dearly, still. Even more important, we can open our ears to the stories of so many who have integrated their loss into living life with a deeper reverence and sense of duty to the good. Let this day of commemoration be for the comfort of the grief stricken as well as for the celebration of their healing and transformation toward the service of love.

And, we are grieving, I believe, for something else this day as well; we are grieving the loss of the feelings we had the first few days after the attacks of solidarity as a nation. The astounding heroism that arose, the myriad ways people stepped into the fray to help, the falling away of divisions that seemed so important before. In these days when our country is so fractured with a kind of politics that openly hopes for the failure of a president and where winning the next election is the sole purpose of many of our leaders, rather than the good of the whole...don't we long for a more noble country informed by what we learned is possible in the human spirit after 9/11...the truth that we are all in this together? We experienced in those days the fullness of what it means to be humans on the planet together without notice of boundaries.

The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism calls us to respect "the interdependent web of existence". Then, let this day of memory, reignite the strength of that awareness, and transform us toward national and international dialogue that seeks the health of the entire web.

I have been listening to the stories of those who survived the attacks; those who were in the Pentagon and those who got out of the twin towers before they crashed into oblivion. And I have been letting their bravery, their self-sacrifice, their actions to selflessly help others wash over me all week.

I listened to the story of a brigadier general who was in the Pentagon when it was hit. As he makes his way out of the building through extreme smoke and fire, he realizes that it is very likely he will die. He decides that he will do what he can in whatever moments he has left to help and comfort others. And so he does. As he is almost out of the building bringing others along, it begins to fill with water. He notices that there are human body parts floating at his feet. Without hesitation and thinking of others he begins to do the unimaginable. He begins to collect them because he knows they will have meaning to the loved ones of the dead. He weeps openly as he recounts placing a small hand in his jacket pocket for safe keeping.

Or the man who was making his way out of the second tower down many many stairs. The first tower had already fallen and he knew time was of the essence. At some point he saw four or five women behind glass office walls just standing, facing inward. He could have continued on his way. He, instead, knocked on the glass and said, "Let me in. You need to move quickly." They pressed the automatic door and, amazingly, it opened. When he entered, the women parted to reveal one of their colleagues, another woman, in a wheel chair. The man asked, "Do you need help?" She answered, simply, "Yes".

And so, together, they carried the woman down many flights of stairs and out to safety. Those women were not going to leave their friend. They had made that decision without any discussion. And the man who came to help made his decision that they were all going to get out. And all he could say as he recounted this act of heroism is that the real heroes were the 100 or so firefighters they passed going up the stairs to help others...most of whom never made it out; the firefighters who offered words of comfort and encouragement as they climbed toward their own death in the service of others.

I listen to the stories and revel in the courage and the easy compassion that so often rises in human beings. It gives me hope and makes it easy, then, to believe in the “inherent worth and dignity of each human being”, our first UU principle. Listening to those stories and the stunning humility people have about their actions, I know that these stories reveal the higher aspects of human consciousness...and that these higher aspects of our beings can save the world.

Then, may this day of commemoration, saturate our minds and fill our hearts with the memory of what is possible in the human being of courage and selflessness and tenacity and the expression of love above all else. May we evolve to a place where we do not need tragedy to bring these qualities to the fore.

I confess that I wonder about what messages the buildings rising at ground zero will give to the world. Yes, we need to rise to life again. Yes, we need to continue to live as a country and not be cowed by terrorism. But, a taller building, the tallest in NYC now, I gather? Do we, in any way, need to reflect the deep understanding we should have gained that day of the fragility of life and how that binds us to all people? What is the difference between national pride and the hubris that is a false antidote for fear?

I find myself looking for the strength that can be found in recognizing our mutual vulnerability as human beings. The buildings gleam and rise and say that America is “back in business”. I personally was more captured with the story of the pear tree that was recently replanted at Ground Zero. A branch of this tree was found in the rubble and had only a little life in it. Saving this tree became the spiritual project of one man. He nursed it, and watched it and sweated over it until the recent day when it was planted in the memorial garden, large and lush and pear-bearing! As a symbol the pear tree speaks more to me personally of the wisdom in recognizing our solidarity with all humans in our vulnerability.

So may we allow this day to open us to naming the false strength that tall buildings can represent and the deeper strength inherent in the survival of a small fragile tree when care and compassion are brought to bear.

And, we Unitarian Universalists have been a consistent voice, and must continue to be, for the prejudice against Muslims that has become so virulent after 9/11...and still. Islam did not cause this terrorist attack. What caused it is complex in ways that go way beyond religion. The religious piece of it is an example of extremist fundamentalism (using metaphors in sacred scripture as literal imperatives from God for nefarious purpose, taking action to slaughter thousands of innocents in order to advance your world-view).

Universalism was founded as a reaction against the idea that “some are saved and some are damned”. Our living, breathing spiritual communities thrive without a creed that separates us from truth in

whatever form it might be found. At every turn we must be vigilant about the ways religion is used to bludgeon others.

We would be mindful on this day commemorating 9/11 that fundamentalism of all stripes must not hold sway in the public sphere. And, we must realize that our own American politics at this moment are rife with fundamentalist religious views that some seek to make the laws of the land.

We pray this day that theocracy will not be our future...nor any fundamentalism, be it religious or economic or political.

And finally the most difficult call we must answer as Unitarian Universalists: How do we understand the inherent worth and dignity of those who killed so many? This is a challenging task to be sure. I don't have clear answers to this, although I recognize the work as crucial both personally and globally. I think that it has to do with trading our desire for vengeance for the rule of law. I think it has to do with speaking up when we see broad brush strokes of prejudice being painted. I think it has something to do with expressing the language of peace more often than the language of war. And I know it has everything to do with education and with equalizing power between the haves and have-nots and protecting basic human rights for all.

So may this day of remembrance for 9/11 reignite us with the fire of commitment to live our faith in every aspect of our lives. It is good that we are here.

Earlier in the service we told part of the story called "Old Turtle and the Broken Truth". We ended learning that the Truth had broken in two as it fell to earth. People were enjoying the power of that half of the Truth which was "You are loved". Yet, increasingly they realized that it was not the full Truth needed. Something was missing and anyway there had ensued great fighting over to whom the half-truth "You are loved" referred. There was much suffering in the world.

Now the rest of the story: "The suffering continued until one day. A Little Girl came to find Old Turtle. She had traveled very far-she had crossed the Mountains of Imagining, and the River of Wondering Why, and found her way through the Forrest of Finding Out. And when she had grown tired, she had ridden on the backs of animals or the wings of birds, and they had helped her find her way." They found Old Turtle on a great hill in the very center of the world.

Old Turtle inquires about the purpose of her visit. The Little Girl tells him that she wants to know the rest of the Truth in the hopes that it will stop the suffering. Old Turtle places something in her hand. "It was a kind of stone, a mysterious, beautiful stone. It was lovely to the touch, and it made her feel good just to hold it. It was the other part of the Truth that went with 'You are loved'".

The Little Girl took the stone and traveled back to her people. "She climbed to the high place herself. She took the Old Turtle's stone from her pocket and...carefully...added the missing piece to the old broken one. The fit was perfect!"

YOU ARE LOVED...AND SO ARE THEY²

You are loved...and so are they. This is the saving message of our free faith. All people are our people and the work of “loving our neighbor as ourselves” no matter what is the hard and essential work that we do. Our Universalist faith teaches that God loves all people, that all people are worthy of great respect. Our Unitarian faith teaches that God is one, that all of life is one.

You are loved...and so are they. This is the saving message that we labor to live. And this is the wisdom that our world of so many broken truths is longing to know. We are loved and so are they. May this Truth sing out from our lips this day and be the good news that informs the future.

You are loved. And, so are they. The saving message of our free faith...where all people are our people and the work of loving our neighbor as ourselves no matter what is the hard and essential spiritual work that is required of us. This is the Universalist faith...all are worthy and deserving of respect. This is the Unitarian faith...we are one. This is the saving message that we labor to live. And this is the wisdom that our world of so many broken truths is longing to know.

We are loved. And, so too are they. May this truth sing out from our lips this day and may we seek to carry it far beyond this day of memory.

² adapted from *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*, by Douglas Wood

