

Like Tissue on Some Vast Incredible Gift

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The Unitarian Church in Summit

April 27, 2002

Metro NY District Gathering, Saturday worship

Clinton Inn

Tenafly, N.J.

Reading:

"Morning in a New Land" by Mary Oliver

In trees still dripping night some nameless birds
Woke, shook out their arrowy wings, and sang,
Slowly, like finches sifting through a dream.
The pink sun fell, like glass, into the fields.
Two chestnuts, and a dapple gray,
Their shoulders wet with light, their dark hair streaming,
Climbed the hill. The last mist fell away,

And under the trees, beyond time's brittle drift,
I stood like Adam in his lonely garden
On that first morning, shaken out of sleep,
Rubbing his eyes, listening, parting the leaves,
Like tissue on some vast, incredible gift.

(From *New and Selected Poems*: Beacon Press, 25 Beacon St., Boston, 1992, p.251.)

Sermon:

Of course, you cannot preach a sermon to kick off a day of reflections on "Affirming our liberal faith in a brand new world" without talking about why it feels like a brand new world. In other words, without talking about September 11th and how it changed our world.

September 11th will be one of those days, like the day Martin Luther King or John F. Kennedy was shot, or the day Pearl Harbor was bombed -- days when everyone remembers where they were when they heard the news. It is one of those crucibles -- a day that shapes everything that follows, and you know that even as it is happening. So it gets seared into your memory like some Technicolor dream.

It was easy for that day, September 11th, to be Technicolor. The world *was* Technicolor that day. It was one of those perfect days -- the handful we get each year when the sky is blue, and the clouds are almost entirely absent, and the air is that perfect crisp temperature, and everything seems alive and radiant. It was one of those *perfect* days. It was one of those days when you cannot help but lift your eyes to the heavens in wonder and gratitude, and breathe deeply -- a day when you have the sense, the unassailable *knowing*, that the world is good and all is right, right here.

I'm sure I wasn't the only one who noticed what a perfect day it was. While crossing Park Avenue, Richard Leonard, one of the ministers at All Souls in New York City, noticed the sky ... *and* the odd commercial airplane silhouetted against it. Moments later that airplane would strike the first tower, but as he walked the avenue, he noticed what we did - - one beautiful day.

For months afterward, the beauty of that day and the handful of beautiful days that followed it haunted me. It seemed so cruel, somehow, that nature would put on her best dress for that day and its tragedy, and even worse that she would continue to wear her best in the days that followed. I wondered whether she was ignorant of our suffering or merely indifferent. And neither of those answers offered any comfort. I longed for a Good Friday world where the earth shakes and the sky turns dark in sympathy with the evil of the day.

In the days that followed, we all saw both the best and the worst of human nature. We saw evil done from brilliant planning and with seemingly flawless execution. And human beings risking their lives and using all their faculties and simple human endurance to try to rescue what lives they might. There were trucks like the beaten-up one I saw with Ohio plates loaded down with blankets and bottled water -- people with nothing, offering what they could to a city in need. Acts of sweet generosity that were like sandbags against the tide of despair.

Meanwhile, the world sat shiva. At Ground Zero, few bodies were pulled alive from the wreckage. We waited and watched for the Easter miracle of empty tombs, and life raised from death, but there was almost none. So the fall seemed to pass in a fog of shock and loss and recovery and fear and mourning, and finally the determination to go on.

It was a "terribly good year," as the Rev. Justin Osterman put it to me the other day. The "good" part was how we came together. My church raised money for the families who'd lost loved ones, to get them through until insurance money arrived. Others reached out to local Muslims, and frequented Arab-owned businesses, and scheduled speakers forums and support groups. Each congregation in this area can tell a similar story of creative and loving response to the events and their aftermath.

All around us, it seemed that the events made people want to get back to basics. We grounded ourselves in the love of family and friends, saw the necessity of community, felt the call to do work that is meaningful, prayed and worked for peace. And through it

all, there was a gratitude for the day-to-day sacraments of life. It was certainly that way for me.

There was solace and healing in the mundane rituals of life. In a sense, what happened to us is what always happens when we are reminded of life's fragility, when we are pressed up against the backdrop of days washed in fear and tragedy: The ordinary day becomes sacred for us again.

And so I found myself (as did many of you) falling in love with the world again. Slowly it grew, like feeling coming back into our limbs, that sense that life was good and trustworthy, and that all that was worth loving was somehow right at hand in each day. Like Mary Oliver in her poem "Morning in a New Land," you and I woke to each day, rubbed the sleep from our eyes, and pulled back the dawn, "like tissue on some vast, incredible gift." We were born again to ourselves and to the world and to the sacredness of life itself.

So it may not be surprising that my sense of that blue September sky has changed these days. I don't see it as cruelty or indifference anymore. Now I see those perfect days in September as nature's stubborn determination to go on, her insistent reminder that we cannot stifle beauty or turn down the day. In this sense, blue and cloudless skies are a backdrop and a refrain, saying in the only language Nature has: "Do what you will, humanity -- hate, hurt, forget, kill, mourn. But life will go on and blue skies with it. So are you with us or not?"

It can seem like cruel indifference or sheer stubborn grace, depending on where you stand. Today I stand with grace. And this created world, this vast, incredible gift to which I wake like Adam on that first day, is what gives me the power to go on affirming life and my faith in this new world. It might go on without me, but I would rather it did not.

May we stand -- all of us -- with the stubborn grace of the blue sky, peeling back each dawn like tissue on some vast, incredible gift, affirming life (and our faith) in this brand new, terribly good world.

May it be so. Amen.