

# *Struggling to Make Sense of it All*

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I, like many of you, have been through a roller coaster of emotions this week. I have been dumbstruck in amazement and disbelief, felt overwhelming terror for myself and others, and lots of empty, empty sadness. More than anything there has been despair that, for me, began with the stories of men and women leaping from the buildings and continued as so few people were rescued from the wreckage. It has been a week of horrors.

As if to make things more incomprehensible, up against all of these horrors and the emotions that go with them there have been moments of great joy and inspiration. This week I have also felt incredible amazement at how many escaped from these two buildings -- buildings with daytime populations that exceed those of many small towns, including possibly our own. I have felt gratitude at the safety of our own community and their families, and of the safety of my own family. The generosity of people who have come together to gather supplies and volunteer to sift through the wreckage has been astounding. There is the courage of the emergency personnel and firemen who work amid dangerous and trying conditions. For me, there has even been the comfort of the far-away nations and friends who send their sympathies, stand in solidarity with our suffering here.

Is it a wonder we are all reeling, exhausted, and bewildered after this week? All that is terrifying and beautiful has passed before our eyes. Cruelty and generosity have played across the stage of life, thanksgiving and anger, terror and courage, all these emotions in close succession to each other. Is it a wonder we are having such a hard time making sense of it all? I don't think it is possible to make sense of all this!

Certainly I cannot. I don't think, as perhaps some folks do, that life wraps meaning in pain. That God is some cruel gift-giver who would force us to endure such a nightmare of the soul just as a prelude to some paltry truth. I believe in a God who casts truth and meaning at our feet in lavish abundance and wraps beauty around our days like garlands. Whatever meaning we find in these days, then, is meaning we could have found elsewhere, but didn't. Or meaning that we choose to recognize and surrender to these days as an attempt to pay tribute to those who have suffered.

Having said that, I am determined that we find meaning in these days. Again, not because I think these events were intended by some larger force, but perhaps out of a kind of stubbornness, a desire not to let evil and ugliness have the last word. So, given cruelty and ashes, I am determined amid the rubble to rescue something of beauty and the courage to be good.

So what would I rescue from the debris of these days? Only these reflections, all half-formed, groping and grasping toward a way through this. But I will share them with you, and hope you will share with me what you have found amid the rubble and the loss.

First, I have found a determination not to be afraid. Michael Walzer, ethicist and philosopher, wrote in his book *Just and Unjust Wars*: "The word 'terrorism' is used most often to describe revolutionary violence. ... The systematic terrorizing of whole populations is a strategy of both conventional and guerrilla war, and of established governments as well as radical movements. Its purpose is to destroy the morale of a nation or a class, to undercut its solidarity; its method is the random murder of innocent people." Reading this on the day of the plane crashes, I decided that the one victory we could deny to the authors of these deeds and those behind them was to refuse as a people to be afraid. To continue to lead our lives, as New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani rightly instructed his city's residents. Let them see that we will not be dropped to our knees, even by such awesome destruction and cruelty as this.

There is more to this resistance to fear, however. I think we also owe it to ourselves to resist fear because of how dangerous it is to mind and spirit and heart. Fear, like no other emotion, twists the heart and clouds the judgment. It is fear that blinds us to the good in others. Fear that often prompts us to sacrifice much that is sacred for a modicum more -- perhaps only the illusion -- of security. Just look at what we did to our own people, those of Japanese descent, during World War II. I am convinced it was not hate that convinced us our own citizens were dangerous. That was fear. And we must not go there again.

Hate is not the opposite of love. It is fear that drives out love. And without love, we find ourselves in the greatest danger of all -- in danger of betraying what we value most.

So, cast out fear. Great. Easy to say, but so hard to do! It was Thursday night when it hit me just how difficult that is. My TV hasn't been working, so I had missed the weather report and news that night. I awoke that night after midnight to flashes of light in the sky. For 20 minutes I lay in bed frozen, not wanting to move, wondering if what I was seeing was artillery or just the front end of a thunderstorm. The next day, being embarrassed by what had happened, I told no one about it. Until my neighbor, a woman of European descent and a survivor of World War II, confessed to me that *she* had lain awake that night thinking the same. She was taken back to the nights of terror of her childhood. It was only when the rain finally hit the windowpane that each of us fell back asleep.

So fear is not easy to banish these days, certainly not just with the wave of a hand or a grand intellectual decision inspired by Michael Walzer. For me, these days past have revealed what does banish fear. It is the second thing I have found amid the rubble.

What I discovered is the only thing that really keeps the fear away these days is the times I am with you, in gatherings like this or the worship Wednesday night. When you all agreed so readily to reach out to each other by phone, even when we just met in the office one on one or exchanged notes by mail, I felt it easier not to be afraid.

Part of why that is, I think, is because it has been so hard to make sense of what happened. Yet when I talked with you, about your struggles and confusion, even if we didn't come to any great conclusions, at least I was not struggling alone, and there is comfort in that. However, when I thought about it, I also realized another reason that I find strength in the company of others, of people like you, and that is that last week you and I saw just what horrors human ugliness and hatred is capable of. Being with you all has been a reminder that there are people who are good, people who each day struggle to lead lives of greater wisdom and compassion, struggle to do what is right. That is so important for me to remember. So, yes, there may be cells of hatred in the world working for evil, as the news reports, but I know that there are cells of good also. I know that there are good people, *people as brilliant and as devoted* as the authors of this week's tragedies. In the weeks ahead, as we struggle to understand what continues to unfold, as we face more fear, we need to be together to find our way through this and keep up hope. I am convinced that reaching out to each other is the only way through it.

One last thing. If part of terrorists' intent is, as Walzer also said, "to undercut the solidarity" of a nation or of a people, then when we stick together through this, they will have failed there, too. Indeed, this week people have been coming together who never would have come together were it not for this tragedy. Just Friday night I went to visit my brother and sister-in-law in Jersey City. Their building complex is right on the river. It used to have a beautiful view of the World Trade Center. At sunset, after work, people came out by the hundreds, half of them with candles, spontaneously singing. These are people who never would have stood together with so much vulnerability, people who didn't come to rubberneck -- though there was smoke rising from where the towers once were. Most of them had a view of this from their own apartments. Instead they came out of a drive to be with others, to find comfort and offer strength. It was almost instinctive.

It is good to be together, at times like this the only salve and salvation for such brokenness and bewilderment, and it keeps fear at bay. It also just happens to deny our attackers the additional victory of undercutting the solidarity between us.

The last revelation of this week has been to understand as never before the full price of human suffering. I have known the pain of the loss of one life, but somehow this week, the ripple effect of such loss (which magnifies that loss) has hit home for me in a way it never had before. That one life lost can leave so much pain behind was made clear like never before.

Let me give you an example. My best friend and colleague called me this week. It turned out a family in her church had gone down in the plane that crashed into the Pentagon. She loved this family, but there was one daughter with whom she had a special bond. You know how sometimes you feel immediately drawn to one child? Well, my friend had this kind of connection with the family's 8-year-old daughter, Zoë. So my friend cried over the phone for this family, but you could tell she cried most of all for the loss of this girl.

Then, later in the week, at the UU ministers' meeting, a minister lit a candle for a girl. She'd been his secret pal at a UU camp this past summer, and though he knew other

people who had died on the plane, he missed this girl especially. Her name was Zoë. (Ironically, by the way, Zoë means "life" in Greek.)

Then, last night, a former parishioner from Washington who moved out west wrote me about a family she had known when she lived in D.C. and how this family had gone down in the plane crash on Tuesday. And she talked about this family, but particularly about this girl who was so full of life, their daughter, Zoë.

That one small girl could affect three separate people so deeply astounded me. That her loss could be felt by these three people, some of whose lives she'd touched only casually - it brought home just how much pain the loss of one life can leave behind it. And then I realized: **Each death is like this one.** Each death leaves a wake of loss behind it. Each one leaves a family and friends in pain. Each one, especially the way the lives were lost in this week's tragedies, can shake a community to its core. Each one. And we have been hearing about thousands lost, numbers so large it is almost impossible to contemplate. If you add to that these ripples of loss, it makes the total price in human suffering incalculable. Moreover, this isn't even considering the loss of a sense of safety and security, the loss of innocence felt by those who lost no one directly in this tragedy.

What has been most surprising to me this last week is the realization of the magnitude of human suffering and pain that these events caused. I find myself not wanting to cause that kind of pain to anyone else. It has been clear to me, a natural upwelling, that this is not the kind of suffering you share. That enough is enough.

It leaves me with a lot of questions as we struggle as a nation and individually with the question of how we will respond politically and militarily to what happened. And don't get me wrong, I still want justice. I still want those responsible to stand trial and be punished. I just don't want any more suffering than is necessary. I don't want innocents to suffer or be afraid. I don't want *us* to be the madmen and -women to author the next reign of terror.

Like you all, most of what I am left with these days is a lot of confusion and fatigue. But I'm also feeling an obligation to take from the rubble of these days something worth saving. What I have found so far is only the determination not to be afraid. The knowledge that that comes easiest in your company. And an understanding of human suffering that will make the debates about how we respond as a nation much more complicated for me. I look forward to being with all of you and working through it together.

God bless us all. Amen.