

9-11...TEN YEARS LATER...HOW HAS IT CHANGED AMERICA?

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, Florida

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As all of you, I will never forget where I was and what I was doing when the news broke (mid-morning on Tuesday, September 11, 2001) that the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City (and the Pentagon in Washington, DC) had been struck by hijacked passenger airplanes. I was with the newsletter assembly crew at the River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation, the congregation I then served, just 7 miles up the Potomac River from the Pentagon...watching the terrible events unfold on a television we had wheeled into the room.

Together with the rest of the church staff we watched in horror as the twin towers collapsed – one after the other -- and then watched the live local coverage of the Pentagon burning with a gaping, jagged hole in its side. After watching the worst of the unfolding horror -- and urgently trying to call loved ones who were in downtown Washington, largely unsuccessfully because the telephone circuits were totally overwhelmed by panicked citizens, we prayed together. The newsletter crew eventually all went home, and I decided – after finally reaching Collins by phone and ascertaining that he was safe and on his way home, having been evacuated his office as was the entire Federal and downtown DC work force, – I decided to get on my bike and go down to the Pentagon to see for myself the tragedy that was unfolding.

I will never forget cycling my way down the old C and O Canal Towpath that runs along the Potomac River, with thousands – literally thousands – of distraught and disheveled looking commuters, men and women alike with their business suits, dress shoes and briefcases, slowly walking the 10 miles home from downtown Washington. Because of rumors of attacks at both the State Department and the Metro subway system, the subways were shut down, and the streets and buses of DC were at a total standstill because of traffic gridlock. So walking home was the only sensible option.

In any case, soon I arrived at the Pentagon, which was completely cordoned off, and I watched in sad disbelief as the hundreds of first responders and military personnel fought the still-raging fires where the hijacked plane had been flown into the massive building at several hundreds of miles an hour. Because they did not want untrained citizens anywhere near the building, there was nothing I could do to help, so after watching for a half hour or so, I biked back to church, and began planning with the other ministers and staff our response to the terrible events of the day, and the worship and memorial services we would hold that week.

When I finally got home that evening to Collins' and my home in DC, which was just 6 blocks North of the White House, the numerous armed military jet fighters and helicopters which had been brought in to protect the city from further attack were zooming menacingly overhead – as they would (24-7) for many weeks. Needless to say, it was hard to get to sleep that night in Washington, DC.

This morning -- on the tenth anniversary of those terrible attacks which led to so much death and disruption in America and, soon after, so much death and disruption in other parts of the world – I want to reflect with all of you on 9-11 and its aftermath...specifically how the events of that day have irretrievably shaped and affected and changed us as a people – and how 9-11 continues to have power over us and the rest of the world, now fully 10 years out.

Now...let me be very direct and clear about this. I know that, as a minister in a leadership

position in this congregation, I am about to wade into some very dangerous, sensitive, complicated and emotional waters this morning. By sharing my personal analysis and understanding of these powerful events and their repercussions, I am certain – certain – to offer perspectives and conclusions which are not shared by some of you. I am further certain to say some things this morning to which some of you will take exception, perhaps even passionate exception. But one of my jobs as your minister is, from time to time in the life of our nation, offer such perspectives and reflections, to help us as we together shape the moral and spiritual future of our nation. But I do so knowing full well that my perspectives are just that, the perspectives of one member of this congregation.

So to ensure that we as a congregation all have the opportunity to speak our minds, and engage one another in open and respectful dialogue about 9-11 and its aftermath, at 11:30 after about 30 minutes into our coffee hour those who would like to have further conversation will be invited back into the sanctuary for such interchange. I want to establish right now that this will not be an opportunity for individuals to argue, angrily or otherwise, with me or one another, rather it will be an opportunity for us to thoughtfully share our individual perspectives and beliefs about 9-11 and its aftermath, and be respectful of the diversity of views which are represented in this free-thinking congregation. I hope many of you will stay for this conversation and dialogue today, for in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, the thoughts and feelings of every individual matter and will be respected. So, if your schedule permits today, please stay with us for this important dialogue...because there is always more than one way to see and understand both our individual lives and the life of the nation...and it is always important for us to listen to and learn from one another.

One more crucial caveat before I begin. When I talk this morning about how 9-11 has affected us as a nation, I mean how it has affected all of the American people, all of us together, Republican, Democrat, Independent, liberals, conservatives and everybody in-between – all of us together regardless of where we fall along the political or philosophical spectrum. While some may on this occasion want to make partisan accusations about the mistakes other individuals and groups made after 9-11, that is not my purpose this morning. This morning on this 10th anniversary, I want to look, in the overview, at our collective national reaction – which I think should more accurately be called our collective national over-reaction. This includes countless decisions made by the President and the White House; by both political parties in both houses of Congress; by the Federal Courts and the Supreme Court, by both Democratic and Republican appointees; by our military leaders; by financial, banking and business leaders; and by all of us ...the ordinary citizens who make up this republic...and who ultimately decide what kind of nation we are to be. All right, with all that said, let me get started.

The first (and I think most obvious) thing that can and must be said is how grateful we as a nation should be that there has not been in the ensuing decade another successful attack on our homeland and citizenry. We know that various radical Islamic terrorist networks around the world – which, it is important to note, all together represent only a few thousand people, with rather limited financial and political resources – have tried to attack us by various means over the last decade since 9-11. And although there have been some decidedly close calls, like the Christmas day airline shoe bombing incident over Detroit last year, we have as a nation managed to remain safe from further attacks against the civilian population. But the fact that our national security apparatus has, by hook and crook, been able to prevent any further attacks is not enough for us to focus on this 10th anniversary, for I am persuaded that there have clearly been other ways in which we, as a nation and a people, have been seriously and involuntarily changed, diminished, manipulated and weakened by 9-11. The curiosity here is that terrorists of 9-11, while largely failing in their stated goals, nonetheless did us serious harm in ways it

appears they did not, and probably could not, have imagined at the time of the attacks... significant harm we have, at least to date, not been able to prevent. We know, and the FBI and CIA have verified this in repeated testimony before Congress, that the primary goals of Al-Qaeda in the 9-11 attacks were: 1) to force the removal of U.S. military forces from the Persian Gulf area; 2) to end U.S. economic and political support for several Muslim Arab regimes – specifically Saudi, Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and others which Al-Qaeda has labeled as “corrupt” – ; and 3) to force an end to U.S. support of Israel and its harsh occupation of Palestinian areas. None of these Al-Qaeda goals have been achieved in the last decade, in fact, if anything the 9-11 attacks only deepened and expanded the U.S. involvement in the Middle East in the ways these Islamic terrorists abhor.

So, quickly moving on from the terrorists’ unachieved and unrealizable goals, just how did 9-11 do us serious harm as a people and as a nation? I would suggest to you this morning that 9-11 worked its malevolent and persistent power on and over us primarily through fear. Franklin Delano Roosevelt once famously said – in 1933 when America was in the grips of the Great Depression – *“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,”* and that observation is a reminder that unchecked and unrealistic fear has a way of gravely harming a nation. It is certainly germane here on this 10th anniversary of 9-11. I believe that had the American people, following 9-11, taken Roosevelt’s warning to not let fear dominate and direct us and cloud our judgment, we would not have overreacted in the terribly costly ways which we did. Following 9-11, our safety and security fears – again, as a total people, across the entire American spectrum – caused us to wildly overreact in a number of fronts in American life – overreactions and excesses that I believe haunt and diminish us to this day. Our over-reaction to the attacks on 9-11 have:

- 1) Cost us trillions of much needed public dollars,
- 2) Caused great economic upheaval and hardship,
- 3) Threatened to curtail many of our basic freedoms, civil liberties and national ideals,
- 4) Caused an ugly rise in religious and racial intolerance, and
- 5) Created deep and painful and angry divides in the body politic.

Let me take each of these 9-11 aftermath costs in turn.

First, there is the incredible, fear-driven, financial costs of our security and military spending that have occurred since 9-11. One analysis from the online publication “The Curious Capitalist” bluntly states that Osama Bin Laden, although now dead, nonetheless appears to have single-handedly cost the United States trillions of dollars by striking such fear in our hearts, and I think it is hard to argue otherwise. Another analyst has concluded, *“If Osama Bin Laden’s goal on 9-11 was to goad the United States into a massive overreaction, then it is clear that Al-Qaeda’s leader got his way. The terrorist attacks on Washington and New York have extracted a terrible price in terms of blood and treasure....a terrible price with no end in sight.”*

Now, most analysts (and Americans) agree that the war in Afghanistan – which was a direct and immediate result of the 9-11 attacks, and was embarked upon to rout out Al Qaeda, shatter their training and financial base, and preserve our national security – was a necessary action, and a necessary expenditure of public funds...and that is the way I see it, too. But the subsequent, unrelated war waged against Iraq – nation which we now know clearly had no discernable connection to the terrorist networks that threatened us, nor any weapons of mass destruction to worry about – and the coincidental massive expansion of spending on the security apparatus of

the United States, has cost the nation trillions of tax dollars that could have gone for other beneficial social and societal purposes – like providing universal health care, quality education, and repair of the nation’s crumbling infrastructure. If you go online, as I did, to research just how much our government has actually spent both on the war in Iraq and the incredible expansion of the national homeland security apparatus, you will find that even the experts aren’t exactly sure about the total costs, because so many billions of dollars are unaccounted for in the military and intelligence budgets of the United States, not to mention the unconscionable spending of corrupt military and intelligence contractors who greedily enriched themselves. But the figure, by all reputable estimates, totals more than two trillion American dollars since 9-11... and counting! Add on top of these costs the billions this excessive spending continues to add to our national debt, and the costs to the American people become staggering.

And then, of course, there are the terrible human costs of the Iraq war. In addition to costing us more than a trillion dollars, the war in Iraq has led to almost 4,500 American deaths, with more than 32,000 American soldiers wounded, many of them grievously disabled for life by the wars’ countless improvised explosive devices (IED’s), not to mention Iraqi deaths, largely civilian, which total in the hundreds of thousands. Had our national reaction to 9-11 been more measured, not nearly as much blood would have been spilled.

And then there are the financial costs that have been incurred with the exponential expansion of the homeland security apparatus we have built...all to protect us from a few thousand terrorists. In a stunning and detailed 2-year investigation published in the *Washington Post*, reporters Dana Priest and William Arkin write, *“The top-secret world the government has created in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, has become so large, so unwieldy, and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs, how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it, or exactly how many agencies do the same work....After [a decade] of unprecedented [security] spending and growth, the result is that the system put in place to keep the United States safe is so massive [and costly and redundant] that its effectiveness is impossible to determine.”*

One of the investigation’s findings shows that just *“In Washington [DC] and the surrounding [suburbs], 33 building complexes for top-secret intelligence work are under construction or have been built since [9-11]. Together, these complexes occupy the equivalent of almost three Pentagons, or 22 U.S. Capital buildings – about 17 million square feet of space.”*

I think the bottom line here, folks, is that because we as a people – and yes, our President, our congress, our military and intelligence leaders – let our fears of terrorists run so rampant following the attacks of 9-11, we have spent billions upon billions of dollars trying to ensure our homeland security. As the American economy has weakened over the last decade – and some analysts directly blame our post 9-11 military and security spending as the trigger – we have nearly bankrupted our nation, putting our economy and our social health as a nation at great risk. I do not think Osama Bin Laden, even in his wildest dreams, could have imagined that the attacks he perpetrated on 9-11 could so grievously wound the American economy, but that indeed is what the facts indicate.

But enough on the mounting economic and financial costs of our overreaction to 9-11! Another area of American life which I believe has been greatly endangered by our fearful, national overreaction to 9-11 is the systematic and willful abrogation of many of our basic American freedoms and civil rights. More than any other single event following 9-11, I believe it was the passage of the so-called *“Patriot Act “* (overwhelmingly passed by both chambers of congress... with the approval – or at least acquiescence – of both Democratic and Republican leaders... and signed by an eager President just 7 weeks after the 9-11 attacks) which points to how we

fearful Americans have willfully allowed the government to set aside the basic rights and freedoms granted to us by our founders.

Go online if you want to learn the alarming details but, in a nutshell, I believe the "*Patriot Act*," which was recently renewed and continues to give the Federal government incredible spying powers, clearly and unnecessarily endangers and diminishes basic and time-honored American civil rights and freedoms...again, all in reaction to one day's terrible violence. Because of our fear of further terrorist attacks, I believe through the "*Patriot's Act*" and other Federal legislation and policies, including the unconscionable torturing of prisoners that ensued, we as a people have allowed an unprecedented and dangerous expansion of our Federal Government's right to collect information and intelligence on us – even when there is no reasonable suspicion or probable cause, which used to be the time-honored civil rights standard which regulated federal surveillance of citizens. This increased federal spying includes including random searches of our phone calls and records, computer and data files, financial information, even warrantless physical break-ins at our private homes...all because we are fearful of what small bands of terrorists around the globe might try to do to us. And because of our post 9-11 fears, the Federal government even has the power in some cases to detain or jail citizens indefinitely without proof of any wrong-doing.

Look...I know reasonable Americans disagree about the standards of Federal surveillance and imprisonment...and disagree on how to balance our commitment to:

- 1) individual civil rights, with
- 2) the security and safety of the nation

but I believe that the "*Patriot Act*" and other Federal spying excesses that have been put in place since 9-11 pose a much greater danger to the nation and its principles than any potential attack by rag-tag terrorists. I believe that our post 9-11 fear has blinded us to the preciousness of many of our basic American rights and freedoms, and – now 10 years out – we must urgently be about the business of reversing these unwise and unsound over-reactions.

Which leads me to the next fear-based excess of the American people which endangers our national character and ideals...that being the widespread and growing denigration, distrust, and discrimination (not to mention violence) directed at Islam, Islamic centers, mosques and Muslims here in the United States. Surely you are all familiar with the steady, shameful pattern of prejudice, hostility, ignorance and violence which some Americans have exhibited toward Islam (and Islamic people and institutions) since a handful of militant Islamic fanatics attacked us on 9-11. No American, of course, can accept or condone the hateful, twisted, and murderous religion of radical Islamic Jihadists. But there can similarly be no toleration on our parts of American mosques and schools being burned or defaced, or banned from communities, Muslim cab drivers and storekeepers beaten or murdered, Korans being banned or burned (as they shamefully were here in Florida), or Muslim judges, doctors, students and teachers being denied equal opportunity. Some Americas seem to feel that their personal fear of a few thousand radical Muslims overseas gives them the right to denigrate and attack mainstream, peace-loving American Muslim neighbors. We Unitarian Universalists living here in America in this still-anxious time (10 years out) have a particular responsibility to speak up and act up against all such fear-based intolerance...and defend not only the religious freedom of all, but the inherent worth and dignity of all people of faith.

The final aspect of American life that I believe has been gravely endangered by the excessive fear-based American reaction to 9-11 is the deep and angry divide it has provoked in the

American body politic. Look, any historian of American political life will tell you that the “fault lines” between progressive and conservative Americans are nothing new, and have been intensifying over recent decades. But I believe the particular anxiety and uncertainty which the attacks of 9-11 caused have radically deepened the divisions among us. I believe that the events of 9-11 set into motion political and social conflicts that have caused us to become a terribly angry and divided nation – a nation in many ways now at war with itself.

Over the last decade since 9-11, Americans on the right and left have increasingly been at one another’s throats – over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the passage of the Patriot’s Act, the explosion of military and intelligence spending, the huge increases in the national debt, and the faltering economy. As I recently observed in my bi-weekly local newspaper column here in Vero, the quality, civility, intelligence and fairness of our political and social discourse have reached a painful nadir. I doubt that, when Osama Bin Laden was planning the attacks in his cave, he ever imagined, even in his wildest dreams, that 9-11 would cause us to bitterly turn on one another, ripping apart the body politic, and setting Americans apart from one another on polar extremes on the right and left. But from talk radio to cable television to town hall meetings to coffee shops all across America, that is what has tragically happened.

Well...my goodness...although it is not exactly what I intended when I began preparing this sermon, I realize now that I have spent the better part of half an hour cataloguing all the serious ways in which I believe 9-11 has cost us dearly as a nation and people. Although I sincerely believe that my observations on 9-11 and its aftermath are on target, this is decidedly not where I want to leave you today. It’s not where I want to leave you today because I believe it is not too late for us – the American people – to undo and repair most of the damage to our nation which the attacks of 9-11 so maliciously brought to our shores.

As I began this sermon, I quoted the great American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who reminded us that *“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”*...and that warning still has painful relevance to us ten years out from 9-11. But in closing, I will remind you of what another great President, Abraham Lincoln, said at another dark moment in American history. During his first inaugural address in January of 1861– just as the secession of the Southern States was complete, and the Civil War was about to begin – Lincoln called all Americans to rise up together and live by *“the better angels of our nature.”* Two hundred and fifty years later, this is exactly the spirit which must now guide us as a people 10 years out from 9-11.

The treacherous and heartless attacks of 9-11 have worked a pernicious power over our land, our government and our hearts...and much damage, some of it irretrievable, has been done. But my fellow citizens, I must say it...it is not too late – it is never too late – for all of America to rise to its best and most noble instincts, and defend, serve and restore our highest principles and values as a nation. Together, we can yet build a nation where all are safe and free. We can yet work together in genuine respect and goodwill for the freedom and well-being of all.

Let us then vow to never again let fear and distrust and anger cause us lose sight of *“the better angels of our nature”* both here and abroad. Let us roll up our collective sleeves, and work – together, by God – and build an America which is free, and prosperous, and just and beautiful to all who call her home.

AMEN.