

LASTING LESSONS FROM 9/11

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
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The tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington has generated a wave of television programs from every conceivable perspective. We have been challenged to relive that day of incredible horror and heroism—truly one of the worst of times but also the noblest of times in our nation's history. And now, with the apparent threat of new terrorist attacks this weekend, we find ourselves engulfed in the anxiety and uncertainty that we experienced that day. Millions of Americans are once again caught up in the emotional web of 9/11. This morning I want to share my thoughts about the lessons we have learned, the lessons we might have learned but didn't, and the lessons we can carry forward into our future. As usual, after I have shared my thoughts, I will invite you to share yours.

The most inspiring lesson from 9/11 is the **amazing human capacity for helping others**. Among the countless stories of bravery and personal sacrifice that day, one that stands out is the story of Frank DeMartini and Pablo Ortiz, who worked on the 88th floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center—just five stories below the place where the first plane struck. [Details: saved 77 people, incl. Frank's wife, before perishing in the collapse of the building.]

Those who managed to escape from the buildings tell about strangers helping one another down the stairs. They also talk about the firefighters trudging up the stairways against the steady stream of those who were fleeing downwards. Joseph Pfeifer, who commanded one of those units, says, "Many of the firefighters who went up there, it was the last time we saw them. But they went up. They went up and climbed the narrow stairs to help those that were in their greatest moment of need. . . . People ask, What does it mean to be a hero? I define heroes as those who do ordinary things but in an extraordinary time." [*Time*, 9/19/11, pp. 54-55] Unfortunately the word *hero* has been so overused in the years since then that we can lose sight of the example these people set for others to follow. Have you ever wondered how you might react in a situation like that?

Another uplifting lesson during the past ten years is the **resilience of the human spirit**—especially among families who lost a loved one. Siblings who lost a firefighter have joined the NYFD. More than 3,000 children lost a parent on 9/11. Every summer these kids can spend time with others like them at Camp Haze in upstate New York, which was founded by a couple who lost their adult son. The ten children who were born after their fathers died on 9/11 have become celebrities—poster children for perseverance in the face of loss. Many of the surviving spouses have moved on but they have not forgotten. Lyzbeth Glick Best, who spoke by phone with her husband before his hijacked plane crashed into the Pennsylvania countryside, says, “I don’t think you ever get over the loss or the pain. Just the other day, I’m thinking, He’s really not coming back this time, or not in this lifetime, and 10 years later that’s still difficult for me to accept. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t found joy in my life. Somewhere along the way, I’ve learned to separate the pain from joy.” [*Time*, 9/19/11, p. 22]

The years since 9/11 have also demonstrated the **power of fear**. In the wake of 9/11 we witnessed the unfortunate American tendency to deal with our fears by **externalizing** them. We identify a threat that embodies the source of our fears and then **declare war** on it. Within a few weeks after 9/11, we invaded Afghanistan and then within 18 months Iraq. In the ten years of continuous warfare since then, this massive military response has cost trillions of dollars and nearly 100 times as many military and civilian lives in those countries as were lost on 9/11. Don’t get me wrong. Like most other Americans, I was relieved when we finally found and killed Osama bin Laden, because he continued to pose a threat to innocent civilians. At the same time, I fear that we have created a whole new generation of permanently wounded veterans and their family members, who are secondary casualties of the longest war in American history.

If nothing else, the attacks on 9/11 demonstrated that we Americans are **vulnerable**—a painful realization that we are still trying to deny ten years later. Our obsession with preventing another successful terrorist attack has undercut many of the basic freedoms and qualities of life that we enjoy as Americans. Like many other presidential administrations—including John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt—the Bush administration sought broad powers to curtail the rights of accused terrorists and eavesdrop on ordinary citizens in their

efforts to avoid another 9/11. Fortunately, our court system has curtailed most of these attempts. What remains is this disturbing truth: Regardless of whether our enemies can launch another large-scale assault, they have already succeeded in creating a climate of continuous fear and mistrust among us. What underlies this obsession with personal safety? Osama bin Laden put it bluntly: “You Americans love life. We love death.” Is it possible to love life without fearing death? Let me quote William Shakespeare:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
 The valiant never taste death but once.
 Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
 It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
 Seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.

[from *Julius Caesar*, quoted by Edward Searle, *Beyond Absence*, p. 68]

One of the most disturbing expressions of the ongoing effect of fear and mistrust has been **widespread misunderstanding of the Islamic faith**—much of it deliberately exploited by groups who have their own religious and political agenda. This afternoon in Harrisonburg, an event sponsored by Valley Family Forum and the local Tea Party will feature a speech by Michael Del Rosso, one of the authors of *Sharia: The Threat to America*. *Sharia* is the set of customs and practices that devout Muslims observe in their personal lives. The message of this book is that American Muslims’ observance of *Sharia* poses a threat to our security and our government. The fact is that Islamic teachings clearly require Muslims living in non-Muslim majority countries to respect and uphold the laws of that society. For a more detailed discussion about *Sharia* in America, let me refer you to the resource listed on the back of today’s order of service. For me, the biggest threat to American freedom and security are those who would use the government to impose their own form of religious fundamentalism on the rest of us.

If we must not give in to our inner insecurities about death and the loud voices of intolerance that surround us, then what should we do? Eboo Patel offers some helpful clues in his book *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. This book is moving at several different levels, because it is not only the remarkable story about his personal journey, but also his urgent plea for the future of our

country. Growing up in the suburbs of Chicago, he spent much of his childhood and adolescence wrestling with his identity as a Muslim, complicated by the fact that he was not just a Muslim, but a Shiite Muslim from India surrounded by a Eurocentric community. During his college years at the University of Illinois, Eboo not only rediscovered his own identity, but more importantly he came to appreciate the identity of others who were viewed as outsiders. He came to realize that he could affirm his own identity as a Muslim American while also affirming the worth and dignity of those who were different from him. As he came into contact with young people from a variety of faith traditions who shared his passionate commitment to social justice, he became a radical pluralist.

With encouragement from Brother Wayne Teasdale and others, he and his Jewish friend Kevin _____ founded the Interfaith Youth Core, an international network that combines community service and social reform with interfaith spiritual exploration. Thanks to his involvement with this organization, Patel has come into personal contact with some of the world's leading spiritual figures, including an unforgettable encounter with the Dalai Lama in India. Toward the end of their meeting, the Dalai Lama said, "Religions must dialogue, but even more, they must come together to serve others. Service is the most important. And common values, finding common values between different religions. . . . And then he turned slightly to face Kevin and me together. 'Jew,' he said, and pointed to Kevin. 'Muslim,' he said, and pointed to me. 'Buddhists,' he said, and pointed at himself and his secretary. 'This is interfaith. Now we have to serve others. But we'—the Dalai Lama pointed to his secretary and himself—are not young. Can we still join?'" [Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith*, p. 96]

Eboo Patel argues that religiously-inspired violence such as 9/11 are most often the actions of idealistic young people. His book is about "how some young people become champions of religious pluralism while others become the foot soldiers of religious totalitarianism." [p. xvi] "Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach." [p. xix] That sounds like something we UUs are uniquely well-suited to pursue with our young people. Let me close with the words of Kenneth Patton in honor of the victims of 9/11 and in hope for the future:

Now welcome every living hour;

Delight in every newborn day.

Life is our fame;

Death has no power unless our fear gives death away.

[quoted in Edward Searle, *Beyond Absence*, p. 3]