

“10 Years on!! – What have we learned?”

For the last few weeks both television and newspapers have been full of stories about the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC exactly 10 years ago today. I am aware that so much coverage may be too much to take in – so much tragedy, so much background, so much analysis, but I still need to face this tragedy in today’s sermon. So let’s start by remembering where you were when you got the news about aeroplanes being flown into the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001....
[pause for a few seconds]

I was in an electrical department looking for a new washing machine, when I observed a group of people looking at an instore television programme. I peered over a shoulder to see what was so interesting. There was an aeroplane flying into a tower building in New York. My immediate thought was it must be a film, but I quickly realised that it was for real – New York City was being attacked by terrorists. A second attack followed shortly afterwards. Then the television coverage showed the buildings crumbling, people jumping from the high office blocks screaming with terror. The Tower Blocks fell as though they were made of cardboard, leaving a shroud of thick smoke and dust. Meanwhile the terrorists were aiming for the Pentagon building, where many more lives were lost. We learned later that there was a fourth plane intended for the White House or the Capitol Building but the plane crashed elsewhere because passengers rallied against the terrorists.

While watching the television my mind went into turmoil. My daughter and her boy friend had just returned from New York two days previous. Their last tourist visit in New York had been to the Twin Towers, and if it had not been for the boyfriend wanting to come home a couple days early to celebrate his birthday, they would have still been in New York and possibly in the Towers.

Then there was the other personal worry – my stepdaughter lives near New York and only a year before had worked in the Twin Towers. As it turns out, she had taken a day off her job to go to the Central Library to do some family genealogy

research. If the attack had been a couple hours later, she might well have gone up to the 102nd floor to visit former colleagues during their lunch hour. Oh dear..... After several attempts, John was able to contact his daughter and find out that she was OK, although shaken by the events.

We were to find out that those responsible for these terrible acts were Muslims. The deeds were well planned and resulted in the deaths of almost 3,000 people on the day. It took a couple years for a clear picture to emerge, such was the destruction and confusion. In the event, 2,996 people, including the 19 terrorists, were killed in the attacks and untold thousands were injured by debris or inhaling the powdered glass and chemicals that resulted as the buildings collapsed. The almost 3,000 dead included 51 Muslims, the 19 terrorists, and 32 others. Citizens from at least 78 countries died, including the terrorists. For comparison, the United Nations just admitted South Sudan to its General Assembly as its 193rd member.

How can governments around the world help to prevent this happening again? – because mass terrorist attacks did happen both before 2001 and after 2001. Leaving to one side the terrorism connected with Ireland and Northern Ireland for a moment, the World Trade Center itself was attacked in February 1993, a US office building in the state of Oklahoma was bombed in 1995 killing 167 people and injuring 684, and London experienced a coordinated bomb attack on the 7th of July 2005 that killed 56 people (including the 4 terrorists) and injured over 700 people. Even Glasgow had an attack at its airport in June 2007 connected to attempted car bombings in London the day before. Fortunately little damage and only the death of one terrorist resulted that time.

Airport security arrangements and border controls have certainly stopped some terrorists, – but not all terrorists are nasty foreigners and not all terrorists are Muslims, something that newspaper editors can easily forget along with the central message that not all Muslims are terrorists.

While there have been some worrying developments in Northern Ireland in recent months, it is clear that it was only when real dialogue was established with terrorist leaders and when some attempt was made to understand their perceptions of injustice that progress was made.

So, why did terrorists attack the Twin Towers and the Pentagon? This question is not often mentioned in the press. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world try to follow their religion's message of peace and love, so what changes in some few of them? And is it enough to come up with just one answer? Are the different terrorists not individuals, each with separate personal motivations for understanding how their religion's teachings of love and peace can be reconciled with terrorism? And let's remember that the terrorists of Northern Ireland and Oklahoma were supposedly Christians.

Anger is part of the answer. It must take a terrible anger to plan to kill large numbers of people you've never met. Fear, greed for resources, and desire for power may be more obvious in conventional wars between nations, but these must drive terrorists as well. The search for understanding is NOT the same as approval, and we need to understand terrorists to learn from them.

Doing a search on the internet for "Motives for 9/11", I found some interesting information. President Bush in his address to the American people the day after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon claimed that, "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." Well, whether it is true that America is the brightest beacon for freedom in the world or not, the FBI in its evidence to the 9/11 Commission had a different understanding of motives: (1) Opposition to U.S. military forces in the Persian Gulf area, most notably Saudi Arabia; (2) U.S. support of corrupt Middle Eastern countries; (3) U.S. support for Israel's brutal occupation of Palestine; and (4) the ongoing assault on civilians in Iraq. So the 9/11 terrorists were not driven by blind hate or jealousy of the American people but because of American policies, many of

which our government shares, which assist the oppression of Muslims. So one lesson to be learned from 9/11 that isn't talked about seriously very much is that Western support for local repression of Muslims by both Muslim and Jewish regimes, is a key driving factor. Another terrorism expert, Richard E. Rubenstein, says "Bin Laden has made clear in previous remarks that he is seeking to force a U.S. withdrawal from the Arabian peninsula. He also hopes to destabilize pro-Western regimes in the Middle East and possibly provoke a U.S. military response that will further anger and alienate the Muslim world. It's actually quite clear what he wants," Rubenstein says. "What makes him different is not what he wants, but the way he proposes to get it."

The news has been full for months of the rebellion against Colonel Gaddafi, and now that the rebels are victorious, we are finding out that American and British secret services were supporting Gaddafi and working closely with him in very shady deals, probably involving torture, right up to the start of the rebellion. This is merely one example of Western policy injustice and support for dictators. In January of this year John and I holidayed on a Nile cruise in Egypt. Everytime we stopped ashore we were met by rather persistent vendors trying to sell us trinkets – they did not understand 'no!' and followed us around, making our time off board ship very uncomfortable. It was only later that we found out that these vendors were relying on these sales to feed their families. Monies for hotels, cruise, tours, etc went to the organisers and the government. Discussion with our excellent tour guide clarified that while there was officially no unemployment in Egypt, this was because everyone was considered self-employed, living on a small pittance. Mubarak had extensive backing from Western governments because of the 'stability' he provided in the region but this stability was built on exploitation of ordinary people and corruption in both politics and the army. Two days after we returned to Scotland the unrest boiled over into an uprising against their government that saddened us but did not surprise us.

So, what have we learned from this moral outrage? I saw a brief report on the telly about a woman whose Muslim husband worked in the restaurant at the top of the

North Tower. Fortunately, John was able to find for me an article on the web about this woman, the first 9/11 widow to give birth: her son was born only two days after the attacks which killed his father. In 2002, the widow left New York City but couldn't leave her memories. She now lives near her sister in a suburb of Oklahoma City with her daughter, aged 15, and her son, almost 10. While she does not attend the small local mosque, she has a strong Muslim identity, wearing a hajib and sending her two children to mosque to learn the Quran and Islamic history. She has had both bad and good experiences, being a Muslim in post-9/11 America. Bad are the occasional insults just because she is a Muslim; Good is the religious diversity in this area where one of her daughter's close friends is Jewish and, last year when a Florida pastor made headlines by threatening to burn a copy of the Quran on the 9/11 anniversary, her daughter went to school to find classmates wearing green to honour Islam and one student had even written "I love the Quran" on her trainers. Mother and children struggle with the constant reporting that Muslims killed her husband and their father. The daughter, in tears, told the interviewer that, "for a Muslim person to go through this, it's something that no one can understand. Extremists used the religion as an excuse to do terrible things. It's so much easier to be mad at people than to get to know them."

"It's so much easier to be mad at people than to get to know them." The words of a 15 year old girl who lost her father due to the actions of people of her own religious community.

Unitarians are not the only religion that urges its members to have dialogue with other faiths, but we are unusual in our attempt to have dialogue without starting with negative assumptions. We want to understand other ways of seeing the world, other ways of living together in respect and harmony. We want to expand our limited experience and get to know both what is different and what is common. Essentially, we want to get to know other people as people – people who have religious identities other than ours, but essentially just people. In the disturbances following the 7/7 attacks in London, several Unitarian Chapels opened their doors and contacted

community leaders, publicly promoting dialogue and respect for Asians and Muslims. John tells me that on the Friday after 9/11 he and a couple others from Unitarian HQ attended Friday prayers at a London mosque and gave words of support to its Imam so they would know that some of us in Britain did not see Islam as an enemy.

While it was not getting much publicity at the time, Unitarian Universalists in New York were immediately active in reaching out to those directly and indirectly affected by the events of 9/11, offering support and counselling. In a few cases this led to further study and qualifications in Trauma intervention and then volunteering to assist in other major tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina's destruction.

As part of my reading for this sermon I've come across an article by Colleen Kelly, the winner of Pax Christi USA's 2011 award as Teacher of Peace. Her brother was one of the 9/11 victims, attending a one-day conference at the Trade Center. She describes her feelings of moral outrage at the extremists who murdered her brother, at humanity that allows for violence as a means to make a point, causing so much destruction, causing so many deaths. She talks about her feelings of confusion at her country now retaliating by bombing others in another part of the world, causing others the same horrific violence and destruction – the things that America had witnessed and experienced that fateful day. She questioned her religious beliefs. What is a Just War, exactly? Why does the justification for injuring others seem so hypocritical. When we think of our Bible and it tells us not to kill and to turn the other cheek towards violence, do we act upon these Gospels or do we ignore them?

She worked through these feelings by finding others affected by the 9/11 events and in February 2002 they set up an organisation, "September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows". The group works together to break cycles of violence. They've supported each other through their loss and bereavement. Attending a conference earlier this year on Moral Outrage and Moral Repair, she was particularly impressed by one of the speakers, Rabbi Irwin Kula. As he put it, the most important and sacred value in our very fragile human lives is love. Following the 9/11 attacks,

he became fascinated with seeking out all the last words of victims who died that day – and he did not find a single one that intimated revenge or said, “Kill them!” No, their last words were not of hatred – sometimes of fear, but overall the last words uttered by those killed that day were about love: “Tell Mom and Dad I love them”; “Tell the kids I’ll miss them and I love them”; “Julie, it’s bad, but know that I love you”.

There’s a time for righteous moral outrage just as there’s a time for accountability and justice. The organisation Peaceful Tomorrows assists one to meet these goals. But in the end it’s about love. Her brother loved much and was loved much and she wants the world, instead of focusing on political violence, to be a place where last words are reflections of a full and just life, well lived. Peaceful Tomorrows has 200 members who lost relatives in 9/11. It takes its name from a Martin Luther King quote: “Wars make poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows” and has twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

So to close, I quote from Robert Grenier, a retired 27-year veteran of the CIA’s Clandestine Service. He was Director of the CIA’s Counter-Terrorism Center from 2004 to 2006. Here he is reflecting this month on President Bush’s September 2001 speech about the attack to the joint session of Congress, where Bush called for a war on terror and proclaimed it as not just America’s fight but also the world’s fight. Grenier’s analysis reads: “For the world to come together to close the door on terrorism as a political tactic, it would have to open another path to justice for those who felt long deprived of it. And if the US, as the putative leader of the struggle, were to engage upon this important front in the war on terror, it would have to commit itself precisely to the quest for justice – whether in Kashmir, in Chechnya, in Xinjiang [Jing-Yang], or most prominently, in Palestine.”

Amen