



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Ten Years After

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As you know, this afternoon we will have a service in memory of Elizabeth Yeakle, who died this past week at 96 – just shy of her 97th birthday. Elizabeth had not been able to come to church much in the past couple of years, but when she was here, or when I visited her, she appeared as though she were becoming more and more translucent. Never a big person, she was bird-like – graceful and beautiful but a wisp.

I saw her last the week before she died, and on the way back here to church, I stopped by the Norton Simon Museum to see the Vermeer that is on display, on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Vermeer is my favorite painter. I remember the first time I saw a Vermeer, in Amsterdam, when I was 19, in 1966, in the Rijksmuseum. It was just around the corner from Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' a big and dark and brooding and powerful painting. The Vermeer was a painting of a woman in blue, reading a letter. Light was coming in through a window, highlighting the woman.

At the Norton Simon is the painting 'Woman Playing a Lute.' I have seen most of the Vermeers – he painted 60 or so paintings in his life, and, for me any way, he captures a sense of peace and eternity in his paintings. Uncanny. It is as if a moment was stopped, and all of the space and time in that moment were captured in paint on canvass. Like seeing pictures of those planes hitting the Twin Towers – moments captured in time.

In the Woman with a lute, the light comes in from the window in the upper left, and illuminates the scene. Most of his paintings are set similarly – at least the interior paintings, with light coming in from a window in the upper left hand corner.

When you walk into the room at the Norton Simon [it leaves the museum Monday] you know it is a Vermeer, even though it is darker than most of his works and the painting is not in the best condition. Looking more closely, you can see the light from the window highlighting a few things – the brass buttons on the chair – we have similar buttons on a chair I got when my Mom died, a chair that came from Norway with her parents, and which I helped her and my grandmother needlepoint seat and back cushion covers; the light hits the pearls the woman is wearing and the edges of glass in the window – small bits of light in a dark space, helping somehow to bring the painting alive.

Dark spaces in which bits of light illuminate, the mutilated world and the praise we might see in small things, in the things of community.

Ten years ago, on September 11, 2001, I was in my office at the church I served in Northern Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington, DC. We heard the news and I went home to watch the unfolding tragedy on TV. Kathe was on her way to work at George Washington Hospital in the District but was turned back – all the bridges into Washington had been closed.

That night we held a service in a darkened sanctuary, listening to Henrik Goretski's Symphony of Sorrowful Songs, hearing F-16 fighter jets in the skies above the capital.

I went to my bookshelves for the sermon that Sunday – we had over 1000 people come to worship – and I read here and there – in poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction, I read in the Psalms and in Buddhist texts, looked through the Bhagavad Gita, read Melville and nowhere did I find bits of light, even the little bits that illuminate the whole. The biggest questions remained.

Ten years. Try to praise the mutilated world. In the midst of tragedy, in the heart of darkness, in sorrow, in the face of evil, try to praise the mutilated world. Where was there light to shine in dark places? What did it all mean?

Here's a poem by William Jay Smith:

Invitation to Ground Zero

Into the smoldering ruin now go down:
And walk where once she walked and breathe the air
She breathed that final day on the burning stair
And follow her, beyond the fleeing crowds,
Into the fire, and through the climbing clouds.

Into the smoldering ruin now go down:
And find, in ashes bright as hammered tin,
A buried bone-white naked manikin
That flung from some shop window serves to bind
Her body, and its beauty, to your mind.

What does it all mean, my friends? The memorials are come and gone; we took a day to remember and then moved on. For some, the day never ends, for others it has disappeared in the distant past. What have we learned, if anything? Our country is filled with bile and division; the tenor of public discourse is simply awful. We have people who believe they can lead our country who ignore what is real – evolution and climate change, who think the wealthy deserve more than the poor and on and on. Sigh

It would be very easy to get political here, and I sure would love to rant for a while in this season of politics, but I won't [at least not a lot]. Rather I want to explore what religious significance 9/11 and the following ten years might have, what moral meaning it might have.

Where, we might ask, or how has the Holy appeared or been hidden?

One of the marks by which we judge ourselves, and others, is how we respond to tragedy, or to struggle, or to difficulty. I bet each one of us can think of times in our lives we are proud of – of when we responded well, usually with courage and compassion, or with integrity. And I bet we can all remember times when we did not respond so well – courage, of course, but with more. Maybe with compassion too, or integrity, maybe even humor or understanding.

I was struck a week or so ago by the story of the young Marine who received the Medal of Honor for his rescue of others in Afghanistan – courageous and brave, and humble through it all – gracious. Like many of the First Responders ten years ago, or the many volunteers in the following days, this young Marine was really impressive, and I wonder: how I would have been in his place. As good, or less well? How am I in a crisis, major or minor? How are we, as a congregation, or how would we be?

It has been said over and over, and correctly so, that the terrorists of 9/11 picked their targets well – the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and apparently the Capital – the centers of power – of finance and the military and that institution that does the bidding of money and war, the Congress.

And our response was – well, it was to go to war and to become even more of an economy. Auden says in his poem: 'Those to whom evil is done/Do evil in return.' Almost our entire focus, in these past decades, and especially in the last, has little to do with being a society, or a nation, but rather an economy and a power. Rarely do we ask what kind of nation we want to be – rather the focus is on the bottom line and on our 'status,' our exceptionalism. When values come into play, it is most often about the denial of freedom and equality – the simply appalling campaigns against marriage equality and against a woman's right to make decisions about her own body, the campaign against Islam, the readiness to give up civil liberties, the vilifying of the poor, the demonization of immigrants, the destruction of public education, the anti-intellectualism ...

Ooops, there I go ...

So here is the point. There is no inherent meaning to what happened on 9/11 – no meaning that wasn't already present in our world. 9/11 was a reminder of how the world is and has been. The reminder that some are evil and some are good; that religion is a force both for great evil and for great good, that religion is an invention of humans, that there is no God or cosmic force that intervenes in the world, that fundamentalism is the enemy, whether it is of the right or the left, whether Christian or Muslim. – these are all things we knew.

Good Lord, read Homer or Shakespeare or Melville or the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran, the Bible – all those great works of fiction and philosophy. We were already a part of the world; we are a global village. 9/11 did not change anything. If anything it made us more of who we already were.

Oh, yes, it is more inconvenient to fly on an airplane, but what else, really.

It is what we make of it that matters, what are the bits of light or the light coming in from the corner that illuminates what we should learn. What about us? What can we do? What bits of light shine through us? Its meaning will be found in how we live.

Our light, I want to suggest, exists in those three great principles that have guided us from the beginning: freedom and reason and tolerance. This matters. Our national government, our state government too have become dysfunctional, perhaps hopelessly so, and so our salvation may lie in communities like ours, in places like Neighborhood Church.

It is the building of a strong community here where the re-building of the world can happen. Just as in New York where new structures are being built from the ground up, so are we the ground of society – build this community and the world will be better.

Freedom, reason, tolerance. Free - we are best when we are free. And reason – we have staked our claim on reason over revelation. If it does not make sense, then it probably has no sense. Doubt lies at the heart of our faith because we insist on thinking about the deepest things.

And tolerance – this may matter as much as anything in these days of fundamentalisms. Our outreach to the Muslim community is exactly right – we need more tolerance, not less.

The lessons to be learned, and the meanings behind 9/11, I think, are that hatred begins and violence has its cultivation when we start to think we are better than someone else, when we think of others as less than we are. It begins when we no longer doubt ourselves; when we are so sure we know what is right; it comes when we think what we believe is so much better. It begins when we turn our heads from poverty and suffering; it begins when we are indifferent; it begins when we no longer look closely at the world and see what is and just see what we want.

I believe, from the center of my soul, that good will triumph over evil. I believe that this world is ours to make and re-make, that the creation of the world is our task, that we build it day by day through the countless acts of our living. I believe that we need to be God's hands in the world. I believe that we can triumph over evil, that love can be stronger than hatred.

I know that sorrow will always come and that tragedies will happen. I know that evil is real and present. But I also believe in the human spirit, that it can always, always rise from the ashes and see a better dawn.

This is where the voice of faith calls to us - to understand that our salvation is not in abundance or in things but in our recognition of our common humanity. In being free and in using reason and practicing tolerance. The voice of faith calls us to justice and to mercy and to humility, to knowing that people matter more than things and that we are more alike than we are different.

We can have courage to do just what our faith calls us to do - grow spiritually, support one another and transform the world through acts of love and justice. We have always believed in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Every person. That means not thinking ourselves superior; it means treating all humans with respect, with compassion and in the spirit of justice. We have always believed that our job is to engage in acts of love and peace and justice. To be tolerant, to accept the stranger, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, educate the ignorant, free the prisoner, house the homeless.

This is what we stand for. We have always affirmed a transcendent sense of wonder and mystery; we have always affirmed that this world is holy, that it is all one.

That Vermeer – the light that shines in on us, the light of freedom perhaps, highlighting the details – the acts of love and of justice we practice here - that is what we need. Light, the light of freedom and the light of reason and the light of tolerance. And then like Naomi Shihab Nye we can say: This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Yehudi Amichai

The Place Where We Are Right

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

Readings

From 'September 1, 1939' W.H. Auden

'Try to Praise the Mutilated World' Adam Zagajewski

'Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal'
Naomi Shihab Nye