

STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
September 11, 2011

Good morning, again, everyone, and thank you for being here today.

Someone once said “there are two kinds of tragedy: the ones that we can anticipate, and the ones that come suddenly without warning.” We are all familiar with both types. Tragedy from Hurricane Irene and now Lee has wreaked havoc in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic States. Our sister congregation in New Bern, North Carolina had its roof torn off when Irene went through. People in Pennsylvania and New York have evacuated their homes as the floods from both storms ravage the area. In our own personal lives, we worry about the tragedy of illness and death or the concerns of lay-offs. We prepare as best we can to face whatever comes.

The second type of tragedy forces us to instantly react without warning. An earthquake strikes in an area where they are rare and tragedy is upon us. A fire burns in Central Washington State this morning that suddenly burst into life and has burned many homes with little or no warning.

And 10 years ago this morning, 4 airliners were transformed into weapons and came out of a clear blue sky to change our feelings about security and what it means to live in a violent world.

Our administrator Julie and I looked to see what the bulletin for that first Sunday after 9/11/2001 was like. We couldn't find it so I want to share a few words about what we did in Springfield, Illinois where I was doing the first year of a two year interim ministry.

The church did a memorial service that Tuesday night of 9/11. We worked rapidly to change the whole focus of the service for the following Sunday. We emailed and contacted people to ask them to bring candles to the Sunday service. My plan was that they would bring candles to the front and light them as we played music from CD. I chose Dvorak's Largo movement from the New World Symphony as the background music.

The service was going well and people brought up their candles to light and put on a table in front of the darkened room. Something quite eerie happened I have never forgotten. As the last person came up and lit their candle, the last moments of the Largo movement ended. The sanctuary became completely silent amid tears, snuffling, and sighs. I couldn't have planned that spontaneous moment of grace in a hundred years.

Now, of course, it is 10 years later. I don't need to share the history of that decade. We know some of the story but not all of it. There are still

conspiracy theories that refuse to die. Across the world, people do die from the repercussions of that day. And of course the genesis of the 9/11 tragedy began generations and even millennia ago.

It is tempting to remain to dwell on past tragedy such as the public service this morning in Pendleton with a bell rung 2799 times for those killed on that day, the flag lowered to half staff and so on. Other public events occur this morning in New York, Washington and elsewhere. Such ceremonies are important but they can hold us back from the future.

This morning I want to ask this question of us: **are we at a tenth anniversary of a tragedy to mourn, or are we half way to a new generation that has gained insight and compassion?** Please note there'll be no conversion time this morning. I removed it because sometimes conversation is less useful than inner reflection. This is one of those times.

Another way to ask the question I just posed is to ask whether we continue to create new cycles of violence with our thoughts, words or deeds; or whether we will learn how to break those cycles.

The human tendency to cycle violence and counter violence is very much with us today. Just look at the extreme partisanship in politics here in America. Watch how news outlets fan the flames of verbal violence and extreme views on all sides. Note the general level of stress in the world as we all without exception are on a rollercoaster of economic turmoil.

Is it any wonder that we might mourn for a world suddenly changed ten years ago when the blue skies of peace became the smoky skies of war without end. We could say that America and the world have lost its way as columnists Kathleen Parker and George Will noted yesterday in the Washington Post. Others of a religious bent might argue that human beings are inherently broken and so we are reaping the results of our sinfulness.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I beg to differ with those assumptions. I believe that we are halfway to an awakening of deeper and broader compassion as Americans and possibly as a species. This is why.

The Dalai Lama had spoken in the earlier reading about why he believed tragic or bad news always seemed to come at the top of news stories. Consider for a moment how we respond to tragedy whether it's expected or sudden. We are filled with shock and disbelief. We might be filled with fear or anger or reactive feeling and reasoning. We seek out others or isolate ourselves to be safe.

There comes a time when the inherent connectedness and compassion of human beings awakens. We see it after the tragedy in Japan or the kindnesses of strangers during an accident on the highway. You may remember that countries and people around the world offered their sympathy

and support for this country after 9/11. One wonders what other options this country had to lead the world a post-fossil fuel future.

That opportunity passed for good or ill and we cannot go back and change the past. However, it is incumbent upon us as religious liberals to consider the Dalai Lama's words and ask ourselves what we might do for the 20 year anniversary of September 11, 2001. If our Universalist ancestors were right, every person in the world living and to be born will someday be welcomed to the heaven of wholeness and wisdom.

How can we as Unitarian Universalists in Clemson, South Carolina do our part to help all people find that place of wholeness? How might it be expressed more fully by September 11, 2021?

First, I draw your attention to the banner we purchased some weeks ago. It's on the infamous 'blank wall' outside the building. The "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign began as a Unitarian Universalist initiative in 2009. It started as a response to tragic killings of people at our Knoxville Tennessee church. The goals included forming **"local groups to address discrimination in their own communities. This might include lobbying for same-sex marriage, calling for immigration reform, or protesting hate crimes."**

Such Unitarian Universalist groups were encouraged to form coalitions with other religious or secular groups to face violence together and stand on the side of love and compassion for all.

That work continues all over North America.

We hold that banner up for many reasons here in Clemson.

One reason is our history of being an official Welcoming Congregation for people who are gay, lesbian, transgender or bi-sexual. Getting a plaque or official certification doesn't end that journey toward wholeness. Kathy Crain, Pam Melton, Cindy Burke, Carol Ward, myself and others are planning the next stage of the Welcoming Congregation program. We work in coordination with Peace Church UCC that meets here each Sunday. Our premise is that reaching out to others as equals and standing with them on the side of compassion and shared justice is never done.

Another aspect of our work is to give people here and in the larger community ways to deepen and grow their spiritual awareness of a world beyond ego and self-centeredness. Marguerite Kirsch and Meg McArthur are leading two proposed programs that admirably show us paths toward wholeness and compassion starting with ourselves and going beyond. One class is a beta testing program called Quest. It was started by the Madison, Wisconsin UU church and is a dedicated two year program of classes and retreats to lead us into deeper spiritual practice. The second program is a

workshop is called Ira Progoff Intensive Journal Workshop. This focuses on how our unconscious awareness can help us grow into greater wisdom. Please see Marguerite or Meg if you have questions or would like to join these great offerings.

These projects and many others are spiritual practices to lead all of us forward into an unknown world that requires compassionate thought, word and deed to survive.

But back to 9/11. A number of months ago, I speculated what our Unitarian Universalist communities were going to do on this 10th anniversary. I wondered also what might be done here in Clemson. I started to get some folks together from this congregation, Peace Church, and the University community. To be honest, I mostly spun my wheels and didn't get a lot accomplished. I had to leave for a time this summer and left hoping that wiser people than me would continue.

I was filled with gratitude when I returned and found out what has been accomplished. It's been a huge amount of work involving folks like Pat Zungoli, Christine Prado, and others from this congregation; along with Rev. Susie Smith and Cynthia Warner from Peace Church, Peter Cohen who is Reform Jewish Rabbi and faculty member at Clemson, people from the Clemson Islamic Society, and so many others.

They put together the program this afternoon called **“Remembering September 11, 2001: Looking Back, Looking Forward Toward Compassion, Peace and Reconciliation.”** It will be at 4 pm today at Brooks Center on campus and I hope we can all attend.

There are many reasons I am grateful to Pat and all the others who got this together. Here are two of them.

One is that we Unitarian Universalists showed that reaching out to other religious and cultural traditions is not idealist nonsense. It is hard work and takes perseverance. The end result can be an event that says the past cannot be changed but the future is open to new insight. Or to put it in the opening words from Robert Kennedy, **““Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom, not a guide by which to live.”**

There's one more reason why I appreciate what UUFC and others have done to make this program today come to pass. It's a bit selfish but here it is.

Just imagine ten years from now. You and a lot of other folks are sitting together in this sanctuary. Your minister that you pick soon will have been here for some years of shared ministry. Your numbers have increased; your children have grown up and speak of your courage during hard times.

Your minister in 2021 might mention sometime that they were totally impressed by Clemson in 2011 when they happened to go to a website that showed many of the 9/11 events at Unitarian Universalist churches and interfaith events. They were excited that such a gifted group of people from several religious communities were able to reach beyond their faith statements to include others. And by the way, a group of my colleagues and I set up just such a website and included resources and events on it.

The minister might stop for a moment and say that they were really impressed that a so-called small fellowship in the South was able to help create a gathering that said “**the sum of us is greater than the parts**”.

Perhaps that minister or others will express their delight that the cycle of violence began to end here and in other places where UU congregations stood on the side of love...not the romantic love that ebbs and flows but the deeper love that has a backbone of courage and a heart that is heard all over the world.

These are your hearts and I'd ask us now to hear them.

Let us take a couple of minutes from the business of our lives and rest our minds.

Remembering the shock of a great tragedy is important.

Moving beyond it to shape a world based on compassion rather than hatred is essential for all our generations.

Rest for a time and consider what your role as UUFC will be for that 20th anniversary 10 long years from now.

Can you make it so?