

Personal Reaction to Terrorism
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I have written several times now about my personal reaction to terrorism, and each time, something different emerges. What stays constant, however, much to my surprise, is how difficult it is to write about, and how often the things I write seem to be contradictory. I write from the perspective of a New Yorker who lived through the events of Sept. 11, 2001 as a newly settled minister whose first sermon to the congregation had occurred only two days earlier. When I have cause to mention my ministry during that period to people I don't know, they respond that I am brave. I'm not sure that's the case. I simply had nowhere else to go, and I was needed where I was. I also know that I have a large tolerance for events and circumstances that freak out other people.

Most likely this tolerance is a legacy of my childhood, having spent the first 17 years of my life enduring years of domestic terror as the object of my father's considerable rage. Though he thankfully was not sexually abusive, he was abusive in every other way; at the same time, it is clear to me that he loved me a great deal. My clarity on that point is the result of his being dead for almost thirty years, combined with having my own children and realizing some of what he must have felt about me, his first born child. As a result, it seems as though I have spent my whole life managing all kinds of terror, uncertainty, insecurity and change. As a result, I resist being afraid of anything, and my response to fear is likely to be to run headlong toward whatever it is that's scaring me. In addition, after reading *Trauma and Recovery* for the second time, I see things in it that I was incapable of seeing the first time, including my ability to completely forget things I don't care to remember. I'm sure I learned to do that at home.

I say all this to note that during the first few days following the attacks in New York, I have very little memory of being afraid for myself, but persistent fears for my children, and anger about believing I had to be afraid for them. I remember picking them up from school, determined that if we were going to die we would die together, and spending the entire day at the church with them as we

welcomed hundreds of stunned people looking for water and bathrooms and human contact. I'd arranged for my husband to pick them up so that I could do an evening vigil for my stunned congregation and neighbors. When Bob got to the church, we hugged each other for dear life, and then he gathered up the kids. I kissed everyone good bye and told them I'd see them at home later.

As soon as the words left my lips, I felt my stomach clench, and realized that I didn't really know if I was telling the truth. Perhaps the terrorists would attack New York again, perhaps we would be separated and unable to find each other; perhaps one or all of us would be killed in some random act. Certainly, those things were possible. But I also had this sense that there was no time for melodrama, and I had such a clear sense of what needed to happen at church, how to be available to my people. I also knew that I wanted to work downtown, and though it took three weeks to get into Ground Zero, I did get there and I did work as a chaplain. And I knew that I had to speak honestly to my children, who had only been in New York for a month and in school for four days, about what had happened and whether they would be safe. And I knew I had to calm my husband, who was enraged that I went to volunteer at Ground Zero because he was afraid I would be hurt or killed. So I had a kind of checklist, and a set of functions to perform that kept me separate from what I eventually recognized as a deep sadness and a deep anger about the city I love.

I would be lying if I said that, amid all my wariness and concentrated effort to do what needed to be done next, that I didn't feel a great energy welling up in me, keeping pace with the horror of what was going on. I'd worked hard enough in therapy earlier in my life to know that I was having a catastrophe rush. Things were falling apart, and I was fine, because I was used to over functioning at moments of high drama and great chaos.

By the time I'd gone to work at Ground Zero, I'd come home angry all over again for several reasons. It was bad enough to feel the sense of violation that resulted from the terrorist act—who did these maniacs think they were? In addition, though, there was the outrage of watching conservative and evangelical Christians use the tragedy as a recruitment tool for their faith traditions. As ConEd workers were finding body parts as they dug through rubble in an effort to

restore power, and as all the landmarks of lower New York City were covered in a fine ash, to have people waving Bibles in the faces of survivors and praying a single kind of prayer over the remains of the dead was the outside of enough for me.

I wanted to know why there weren't liberal religious people doing this kind of trauma and disaster work in a more organized way. We didn't make assumptions about what dead people believed when they were alive, or where their souls were going or not going. Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay people, it seemed to me, were the perfect people to provide a spiritual response in the middle of such a nightmare. My work at Ground Zero, along with the work of other UU clergy ministering "on the edge," as fire and police chaplains, inspired a group of us to create such a spiritual response team, and the UU Trauma Response Ministry was born in the wake of these terrorist acts.

Though my desire to work on such a project had honorable motives—our group meets a real need—I quickly realized that it also served to channel my feelings about the attacks into a constructive outlet, a familiar pattern for me throughout my life. My home was chaotic, but school was cool. I learned to soothe myself through the acquisition of knowledge, as though what I could cram into my head would protect me from a world I could not control. Within six months of the attacks on New York, I'd begun attending critical incident stress management courses so that I could become certified in pastoral critical incident care. Though my pace has slowed in the last couple of years, my desire has remained to know more about terror and terrorists, and to learn ways to combat the effects of their deadly work. I suspect that for as long as I live in New York City, which remains on orange alert, I'll continue to take more courses, get more certifications in emergency management. I continue my work with New York Disaster Spiritual Care Services and I'm on-call for a week every two months as a lead chaplain in case of emergency. So far, those weeks I carry the Red Cross beeper and phone have been times of blissful silence. But I have to believe that one day, those of us who do such work will be called on again.