

## Pastoral Response to 9/11 Frank Hall

It was such a beautiful September morning I decided to take the motor cycle to our monthly clergy meeting at the Unitarian Church in Mt. Kisco, New York, a 40-minute ride through the rolling hills of Westchester County.

Before hitting the open road for Mt. Kisco, I stopped by the office. Our sexton, Bobby, knocked on my door and said, "Did you hear about the plane hitting the World Trade Center?" I thought he was about to tell me his latest joke, "Did you hear the one about.?"

He could tell that I was waiting for the punch line, so he said, soberly, "No joke. I just heard it on the radio."

'A tragic accident,' I thought. After all, those buildings are in the midst of lots of air traffic and they stick their necks up a quarter of a mile.

I got on the bike and drove to the meeting, thinking about what Bobby had told me. By the time I got to Mt. Kisco and gathered with colleagues the news was in. We huddled by a radio and listened, then our convener suggested we have a prayer, which he led, and we went back to our respective churches.

The ride back through those rolling Westchester Hills was not pleasant-I would have preferred to be in the car so I could hear the latest news. By the time I got back to the office several congregants had gathered with the staff and said they were glad I was there: that was the moment I felt some 'professional responsibility' to do something, to say something, and the sense of not knowing what to say never left, though I did make some decisions about what to do.

I got together with the other ministers-several congregants had called and asked if we were going to provide some sort of service to anyone who might need or want a place to come. We decided to have a candle light vigil at noon and another in the evening, taking turns being there.

I got a call from the First Selectwoman, Dianne Farrell, who asked me to come to a meeting at the Emergency Planning Center. I arrived just as the meeting was getting underway-the Chief of Police and Fire Departments and various town officers. A television was on, without sound; over the Police Chief's shoulder I saw, for the first time, the haunting image of a plane hitting one of the towers.

Diane was explaining the emergency plan, which included setting up a morgue at a State Park located on the shore of Westport, where bodies could be

brought by boat across Long Island Sound. Clergy were asked to accompany police officers who would be dispatched to the homes of victims to inform them of a death as they became known.

As the meeting was being brought to an end Diane asked me to offer a prayer to the group of forty or so. It took me by surprise: we gathered in a circle, held hands and I began by saying, "We begin in silence, acknowledging that there are no adequate words." I have no idea what else I included in that impromptu prayer, but, once again, I felt inadequate to the task.

Before leaving the Emergency Planning room I spoke with Diane about putting together a town-wide memorial service, which she asked me to organize. I contacted each of the clergy-everyone agreed to be there, and I included some part in the service for everyone.

When I returned to my office following the planning meeting with town officials, our Minister of Music, Ed Thompson, took me aside and said, "The Coleman brothers worked at Cantor Fitzgerald on the 101st floor."

Scott and Keith Coleman, now in their early 30's, had grown up in the church. Just a few months earlier they had served as 'best men' for their brother Todd, at whose wedding I had officiated.

Ed and I drove to Neil and Jean Coleman's house together; both were choir members, and both had served on various committees over the years. They invited us to sit outside with them; Neil was quiet and Jean talked. She kept saying that she knew that they would be okay-they had to be. She talked about how they would stick together and find a way out, together. Neil's face said otherwise.

Incredibly, Jean kept up hope for several days, long after it was clear that her two sons would not be found alive in one of the local hospitals, as she said they might. Keith's wife stayed in denial for weeks, so we had to put off planning a memorial service, but she finally relented and we had the service, setting up closed-circuit televisions in every available room-over 800 mourners gathered that evening.

Neil Coleman and his son Todd brought DNA samples from Keith and Scott into the City. After several weeks I got a call from the Westport Police that remains of Keith had been found, and, as planned, I drove to the Coleman's house, arriving at house as the officer pulled in to the driveway. We walked into the house together and he informed Jean that a small portion of one of Keith's ribs, the size of a small finger, had been found.

Eventually we buried that tiny bit of his remains in our memorial garden and the Coleman's arranged to have a memorial bench installed. We talked several times about the memorial, and what would be inscribed on it. They decided on a passage from an Emily Dickinson poem:

Unable are the Loved to die

For Love is Immortality

In the spring the Coleman family arranged to plant 3,000 daffodil bulbs around the church grounds, in memory of each of the victims of 9/11. They invited folks to participate in the planting, with a lunch to follow. About 75 of us came, and each spring we anticipate the explosion of blossoms at Easter time.

Not long after the memorial service for her two sons Jean came to my office with a large envelope and a magnifying glass-she wanted to show me a picture from a Associated Press photographer, showing victims sticking their heads out of the smoking windows of the tower where her sons worked. She said, "I found the boys. They were together."

Using the magnifying glass we looked together at the photo of her two sons sitting on the windowsill on the 101st floor of the North Tower, and she told me how important that picture is to her. It was like standing beside a coffin with a grieving family as they acknowledged the death of their loved one.

These are some of the things I experienced after 9/11-a tip of that iceberg, at least. What I haven't done, and don't feel able to do, is to describe the terrible sense of inadequacy I felt, and still feel about that tragic event.

Several other members of the congregation told me their stories: one woman who worked high up in the South Tower took the day off from work to interview for a job in another part of Manhattan; another man who worked on the 35th floor of the North Tower told me about getting out; a woman who worked in a building next to the towers told me about seeing the first plane hit, and the trauma she felt and still feels.

One day a man knocked on my door and asked if he could talk with me. He told me that he was not a member of the church but had been at the town-wide memorial service at which I'd officiated. He said he wanted to remain anonymous, and if that was okay with me he wanted to tell his story. "I haven't talked about this with anyone," he said. Then he proceeded to tell me in anguished detail about getting to work a little later than usual on

September 11, walking up to the door of the North Tower at the exact moment when the plane hit. He said that New York is loud at that time of day, and he didn't realize what had happened, but he saw people running and screaming, so he stepped back and saw paper flying from the building, then watched in horror for several minutes as people began to jump to their deaths. He told me about helping a woman who was standing in the middle of the street in front of the towers in shock, and he told me about his recurring nightmares.

Then, abruptly, he left. I've never seen nor heard from him again.

On September 16, the Sunday after September 11, I closed the service with this poem from Pablo Neruda: Keeping Quiet

Now we will count to twelve  
and we will all keep still  
for once on the face of the earth,  
let's not speak in any language;  
let's stop for a second,  
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment  
without rush, without engines;  
we would all be together  
in a sudden strangeness.

Fisherman in the cold sea  
would not harm whales  
and the man gathering salt  
would not look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,  
wars with gas, wars with fire,  
victories with no survivors,  
would put on clean clothes  
and walk about with their brothers  
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused  
with total inactivity.  
Life is what it is about;...

If we were not so single-minded  
about keeping our lives moving,  
and for once could do nothing,  
perhaps a huge silence

might interrupt this sadness  
of never understanding ourselves  
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the earth can teach us  
as when everything seems to be dead in winter  
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve  
and you keep quiet and I will go.