

## **Hearing the Call—Again**

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One can hardly forget the date this morning. Ten years after the attacks on New York, Pennsylvania and Washington DC, and we still cannot forget that date. Nor should we. While time has perhaps recontextualized that date, we have come to associated it with so much more than merely the events of 2001. A decade after September 11 it is hard not to put the events of the past ten years next to that date. For surely the two wars we have fought since, as well as the “war on terrorism” are inextricably tied to that event. However it is good to pause on this tenth anniversary and remember the terrorist attacks which affected us all so deeply if not directly.

All of us have a story to tell of how we experienced the events of September 11, 2001. I was living in Omaha Nebraska and just beginning my second year of ministry. In those days my schedule was more leisurely than it is now, and I was not scheduled to go into the office until noon. Not being a morning person, I slept in, so I first heard

of the planes flying into the World Trade Center when my alarm went off and the announcer described the scene over the radio.

I spent the rest of the day alternately watching the news on TV and fielding calls from folks at church. I am afraid at that moment I didn't have any particularly profound spiritual insight as to what was going on. I was just as shocked and confused and scared as everyone else who called me. But you know looking back on it, it was our shared shock, confusion, and fear that really united us as a church, and especially as a nation.

The other thing I remember about September 11 are the days after the attacks. Although the best recommendation George Bush had at the time for the American people was to go shopping, fortunately most people had more philanthropic ideas. Small towns in the Midwest held fundraisers to send money to New York City! Blood donations were beyond capacity in New York. A bitterly divided congress sang together on the steps of the Capital building. For a moment the whole nation, indeed the whole world, was united together in a way I have never seen before or since.

People reached out to strangers. For that moment we realized that we are really not strangers to each other. As the mystics tell us we are all connected one to the other, and all to the whole. Sadly it seems that it takes great tragedies like September 11 to reveal this basic truth to us.

I lived in an apartment complex at the time, and people would talk to each other in the hallways. We were all united in our grief, and that stranger you would normally pass by without saying a word on the way to the laundry room was now like a member of the family. You had both lost something and were dealing with it at the same time. There was a warmth and camaraderie to be found amidst the terrible pain and confusion.

The story that Stephen Jay Gould relates in our reading this morning captures this feeling well. Events like September 11 raise the problem of evil. How can someone do this to another human being? What lead someone to commit such atrocities? Are we inherently good or inherently evil or are we so complex as to be a combination of both? Gould's story implies the latter. For one incredibly damning tragedy there are countless acts of selflessness and compassion done invisibly by hundreds and thousands of people. These are small acts, like taking a dessert to a firefighter. They don't often make the news. But they are symbolic of our unity, our interrelatedness, and our concern for one another. While we can never forget the terrible evil that was committed on September 11, it would be just as tragic to forget how we reached out and showed compassion to each other as a result of that day.

There are spiritual lessons here that we would do well to revisit ten years later. In our grief following that tragedy our heart naturally broke for everyone we met. Who does your heart break for now? I know it

isn't for everyone, even though arguably it should. Most of us are not Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama where we can live with that much compassion for everybody all of the time. But the question is still a good one, "Who does your heart break for?" It is actually a question the Board and the Executive Team has been asking ourselves for at least six months now. In the year to come we will be asking all of you the same question in various ways: Who does your heart break for?

The answer to that question is very revealing. Because how you answer the "Who does your heart break for?" question tells you something about what you are called to do. Who are you called to serve? Who should we be reaching out to in these difficult times? We knew instinctually the answers to these questions ten years ago. How would we answer them today?

In a recent Board meeting where we tackled these questions with a good deal of intensity, one of the themes I heard coming out as each person spoke was that their heart broke for children and families; particularly those who were facing hard times or who were in pain or grief. This was by no means the last word on the subject, but it is an example of an answer to the question Who does your heart break for? It breaks for kids and families. Good. What then are we called to do about that if it truly is our heart that breaks? Notice that this is not an intellectual exercise; it's not about doing some kind of detailed sociological analysis about this group or that. Such things may have

their place later on, but for now we are talking about a heart thing—what moves you? What compels you to take some action? That is what you are called to do.

In our Ancient Reading this morning, we heard about Isaiah’s call by God to be a prophet to the people of Israel. Now your call is probably not going to be as dramatic as his was! Few are. I mean who sees angels floating in front of God sitting on a throne talking to them? Rarely is it that obvious what you are called to do or to be. More often it is clothed in an uncomfortable murkiness; more like the latter part of the reading: “Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Part of what makes UUs uncomfortable with the notion of calling is that it isn’t rational. It is not a matter of the mind to be figured out. It is a matter of the heart, a broken heart that yearns for justice and goodness to be restored, and it may actually take us into some places that don’t make sense. Yet ignoring that gnawing feeling that compels us to reach out to our community and make a difference for the better in the lives of the men and women and children we find there would be to fail at the entire enterprise of being a church. How you conceive of your calling, what you think about it, whether it comes from God or not,

whether it is a squishy sentimentalism or not, does not particularly matter. What matters is how you respond to that call. How do you go about the business of your life once you have heard your call? That is the key question.

It is just as important for us to ask this as a congregation as it is to answer it individually. Who does our heart break for? Who are we called to serve out there? Serving each other is a noble and good thing, but it is not enough. Too often churches are sucked into an inward focus. This is quite understandable actually. Inevitably we need to talk about recruiting RE volunteers, the committees to do the work of the church, staff evaluations, Board agendas, budgets that need funding, classes to teach and attend, sermons to write, and worship. I do not expect us to neglect these activities. But sometimes we can fall into letting them distract us away from that yearning within our heart. The yearning that says to us we could be more, you could be more, than just getting by. Who will be sent to fulfill that yearning, to satisfy the hunger in our souls? I say send us.

This year at First Unitarian Church we are going to spend at least this year and perhaps longer asking ourselves again and again, in various ways and forums, that simple question: who does your heart break for? Perhaps some of you know already. Perhaps some of you are still confused by the question. Either way that is alright. We don't have to figure it all out in one day. This isn't the SATs here. This question is

like a koan; a spiritual question that you keep asking over and over and going deeper and deeper with your response. I will give a little hint. If you answer to the question is someone in this room already, then you need to keep asking. Who does your heart break for? Open your heart a little wider to places you dared not imagine before.

Consider the events of another tragic date: April 14, 1912, the day the Titanic sank. Rick Rusaw relates this story:

“By the time the lifeboats were deployed, it was clear that the ship was sinking. Passengers were loaded into lifeboats, and the lifeboats were lowered into the icy waters. Of the twenty lifeboats lowered into the water, most had room for more people. Despite the cries for help, those in the lifeboats were afraid to return to the drowning people lest the boats be swamped. Resisting the cries for help, the people in the boats rowed away from hundreds of people floating in the water.

In Lifeboat 14, Fifth Officer Harold Lowe thought differently and acted differently. He transferred many of his passengers to other lifeboats and returned to the sinking ship to pick up more survivors. Though he could not save them all, he could save a precious few from death in the icy sea. Survivors rescued survivors.”

Like Stephen Jay Gould’s story of compassion in the wake of tragedy we see Harold Lowe emerge as a hero. The story of Lifeboat 14 is a kind of metaphor for the church isn’t it? Instead of a call coming to

him from God, Lowe's call literally came from drowning desperate people. There was no question to him or to us who his heart broke for and what he had to do about it. He could have maintained the inward focus on those who were already in the lifeboat to ensure their own well being. But instead his heart was moved by those who were not yet in the boat. He was externally focused, you might say. His mission was to help them. One wonders what that conversation was like among the other people in his lifeboat. Were there committee meetings, SWOT analyses, strategic plans developed, or focus groups conducted? Oh I am sure there was some sort of debate, but inevitably it came down to a gut feeling to act and act with urgency.

Ultimately that is where we will be trying to get to this year as a church. What is our mission, that thing which inspires and compels us at a deep gut level to act with clarity and with urgency? What is our vision for a world transformed by our response to our call, both collectively as a church and individually as members? I believe that the mission of our church is accepting all people where they are and moving them to where they need to be. If we can do those two things, then we are living out our calling as a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Barbara Pescan puts it so well in her usual poetry: "It is more than time to put aside semantic wrangling over differences so we can pay attention to the similarities among us. We need to move toward what resonates and harmonizes among us. Lest our unitary and universal ideas

become quaint anachronisms, it is time to relinquish our closely held and vaunted differences and look across religions and cultures for what unites us.” That was the challenge to us following 9/11 and it still holds up as the challenge that our liberal religious tradition places before us now.

Where do we start? Remember that our vision is not about where we have been or even where we start the journey, but it is all about where we end up. We start with responding to our heart’s call to serve others, particularly those beyond our walls. These can be acts both great and small. The spiritual homework you will see every Sunday in your order of service is designed to give you a set of spiritual practices and some direction on service beyond our church. These change every month and are tied to our theme. This year a group of us will be committed to doing these small acts of service and discovering how serving others builds up and strengthens our own spiritual understanding.

As a congregation we will be renewing our connections between our social justice groups to deepen and widen our efforts to make a significant difference for the better in our community. No one can do this alone as an individual. We reach maximum effectiveness when we respond to the calling of our broken hearts together as a congregation.

Although we may be a diverse group with lots of differing theological ideas, on the question of our mission, we can and should be

united. May the calling of our heart, and the bond of our covenant, move us to reach out beyond ourselves, our pain and confusion, and relying on each other, seek to heal the world around us. For in that effort we will discover spiritual healing for ourselves.

Here is to making 2011-2012 the best and most memorable year that First Unitarian Church has ever known. Amen Blessed be.