

There is an accepted form
for these ten-years later reflections.

I've been reading these memories and essays and observations,
and they all seem to follow a similar pattern.

They begin with recounting the day.

Where they were, how they first heard the news,
watching it happen.

Then the writer will make some point about what it means.

But I get stuck in the first part.

The recounting of the day.

For ten years, I have worked very hard not to watch it again.

Once was too much.

Even to have it described,
it's too much.

I know I'm not alone.

A friend of mine put it this way:

“I know we are supposed to “never forget”
but remembering is hard.”

Remembering is hard.

We were all wounded that day,
witnesses to murder and pain.
We saw it happen.

Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, the Challenger—
typically, we heard about it before we saw any pictures.
We knew what we were about to see —
We prepared ourselves.

Not ten years ago.

We did not think they would fall,
and the trauma of it is amplified by the shock.

Now 10 years later,
a lot of the work of grief remains undone.
No one I knew personally died that day.

For some of you, maybe, that isn't true.
And today, you remember them.
And we honor that memory.

For those who lost a loved one, I suspect,
their grief work was more direct, more personal.
More tangible.

You never really stop grieving a big loss,
but you do move along in a process towards integration and acceptance.
You remember, you miss, and you make a new life in the new reality.

But for the rest of us,

I wonder if we've gotten there or if we are still working out one of the other
steps: bargaining, maybe –

thinking to ourselves,

well, if we make Afghanistan into a peaceful and prosperous democracy,
then they will not have died in vain – those 2,977 people

they will not have died in vain if
if we win the war
if we remake the world
if we take out the masterminds
if we learn the lessons and change our ways
if we are brave
if we love one another

then, we bargain with ourselves, with the God we do or do not believe in,
with history,
then their deaths are not in vain,
then it's OK, or at least not so bad.

But this talisman, this hoped-for-absolution –
it will not, it cannot, take away the pain.

Their deaths are a tragedy,
and though their lives have much meaning,
their deaths do not have intrinsic significance.

Some religious traditions believe in “redemptive suffering” –
that suffering redeems our lives or the world.

The doctrine of sacrificial atonement is a particular species of this genus.

Generally speaking, Unitarian Universalists do not agree with this thinking.

People are worthy and sacred,
and they need not suffer to be redeemed.

The death of others, in no way, improves our lives or spiritual position.

If we will stop trying to make it better,
then we might grieve with more integrity,
we might realize that nothing we do –
no memorial, no war, no insight into peace,
no act of bravery,
nothing is worth their death.

Not to us.

For the terrorist, death is a means to an end,
a justifiable act because the goal is greater.

We cannot agree.

We don't want their death to be for naught,
but we cannot agree,

cannot, if we are to keep our humanity, agree that any death serves a larger goal.

Not those who died that day,
not those who have died in the wars since –
be they soldiers in any uniform or civilians of any color or creed.
Their death is a cause of mourning and sadness.
It serves no larger purpose.

What, you might say, of the brave ones?
The soldier, the marine, who sacrifices for the cause?
What of the firefighter who comes up for the rising,
runs into the building to save others?
Does not their death serve the good?

No.

It does not.

Their bravery serves the good.
Their helping people to safety serves the good.
Their life served the good,

but had they been brave and good and helpful,
and lived, that would have been better.

What about the liberal point,
that the death of that day should have taught us
to end our imperialist ways,
that it was punishment for our nation's hubris,
and dependence on oil?

the hope that we might learn that no kind of bomb can extinguish hatred.

Yes, many hoped that day that our grief would teach us more humility,
more reverence for life.

As a pastor, I see often that loss – be it death or something else –
that loss often leads others to be more grateful and purposeful about their lives
–

so I said yes to the hope that this national grief might make us better citizens
and neighbors.

In some ways it did, and some ways it did not.

I remember 1991, when the first Gulf War began,
and I remember the cheering which so offended Kingsolver.

I also remember a Sunday afternoon, Oct. 7th, 2001.

I was taking the bus home from church when the radio announced the beginning of the air campaign in Afghanistan, what we knew was coming from the moments the towers fell, and no one on that bus cheered.

I don't know, and I'm not sure,
but maybe we did learn something about grief and pain.
For a little while.

But then we forgot, or enough of us forgot,
and our still-unresolved grief and our fear –
our what-might-happen, which looks so scary from far away,
took us back to the sands and hills of Babylon,
andand . . .

I need not tell the story. You know what happened.

We all know it.

Our fears, our pain, our delusions, our understandable but wrong-headed desire for clarity and assurance –
like the Mullah wielding the knife in the cave of the Dervish,

like the townspeople cowering,
this fear and pain led us to war, to torture, to intolerance and discrimination,
to a security state and reduction of liberty, to debt,
to more fear and pain.

All that has come to pass,
all this pain which is now and forever tied up as one tragedy,
these lives and deaths connected,
violence and its echo,
all this which has come to pass,
it cannot be undone.

We cannot go back to Sept. 12th and summon our better angels,
take that spirit of sacrifice and community
and turn it toward the good as it could have been.

We cannot go back to Sept. 10th and arrest Atta and the other 18 hijackers as
they were sleeping in their beds.

We cannot go back to 1988 and decide to stay in Afghanistan after the Soviets
leave, and build there a peaceful paradise.

We cannot go back.

We can only take what we have learned and go forward.

Begin again, better this time.

We cannot go back.

We cannot undo what is done.

But we can begin again.

10 years after Tuesday, we can start anew.

Kingsolver says, in the face of loss, you can make the choice to say yes to life:

You bear this world and everything that's wrong with it by holding life still precious, each time, and starting over.

Starting anew isn't easy.

We will need to let go of our bargaining selves,
and need to sit down and weep for the dead.

We need to forgive –

which is very hard –

but we need to forgive.

Forgive those who came to believe that violence would serve good.

Forgive those who should have done better but didn't.

Forgive those who did the best they could and it wasn't enough.

Forgive ourselves for all we did and did not do.

Forgive those who had evil in their hearts,

and forgive those who had good in their hearts but did evil without knowing,

Forgive the God we do or do not believe in for letting it all happen,

Forgive the dead, who cannot now change.

Forgive the living, who sometimes have and still can change.

We need to grieve, and we need to forgive,

and then we need to resolve ourselves to see the path and keep to it.

To see the path:

the path of peace, the path of building bridges, the path of love and courage.

the path of life and human dignity.

The path isn't easy,

there are no magic fixes, and tragedy and violence will still happen.

The question is how we respond:

do we return injury for injury,

do we seek healing through horror,

or something else:

do we sit in compassion and cry with the mother who sings to an empty bed?

are we humble – really, truly humble – about what we can do through our own will?

do we love life and each other as much as we can?

can we show the courage of the brave ones

without the dangerous bravado of mythical meta-narratives?

The path isn't easy, but it is the path forward.

It is what our faith calls us to,

it is what our humanity calls us to,

it the hope of our lives and our children's lives.

How do we take the path?

How do we make this remembrance, 10 years on,

a chance to begin again and build better this time?

This is the real and ultimate question, isn't it?

This is the question we struggle with and work on and reflect on every week here,

and the question that religion,

for better and for worse,
has sought to answer for at least 5,000 years.

So part of my answer is, stay in the conversation.

Come to church.

There's a saying that after 9/11 a lot of folks came to church
for the first time in a long time,
and then they remembered why they left.

But some folks came then, and stayed.

They recognized their need for community, for connection,
for a place that you could go and sit and cry and hold each other.

Some of you came here because you needed that,
and are still here.

So that's part of staying on the path –

Another part of my answer is this:

when I breathe in,

I breathe in peace.

When I breathe out,
I breathe out love.

Sarah Dan Jones, the Unitarian Universalist musician who wrote that,
wrote it after the attacks 10 years ago.

It was her prayer and hope and resolution.
Her way of staying on the path,
and it can be your way.

It's such a simple thing:
breathe in, breathe out,
breathe in peace, breathe out love,
but it is what is necessary to stay on the path.

We are talking about our actual bodies.
Grief and fear and anger – you feel it in your bones and in your breath.
Peace and love and healing – you feel it in your blood and in your breath.

To breathe, to pause before reacting,
to realize and remember that the breaths you take

share the air with every creature, every person, who has ever lived or ever will,
to remember we all are connected in this and so many other ways,
this is part of the path forward.

To remember.

To re-member . . . is part of the path.

We wish their death had not come,
and it does not redeem us,
but if we are to stay on the path of peace and justice,
and avoid the path of fear and revenge,
then it is the memory of the dead
which might help hold us to account,
which might help us be faithful to them.

A liberal Catholic priest, just the other day,
wrote a lovely essay about The Rising,
the Springsteen song that was one of our readings today.

He – Christopher Pramuk is his name, he wrote, in part,

Here the poet opens a window in space and time for communion with the dead
themselves: ... who alone, perhaps, can transform the rage of the living and
awaken in us a vision of something more than more of the same.

If the dead [could,] what would they say to us? Would they haunt our waking
and sleeping hours with the demand for retribution? ...

Or would the dead... urge us to pause in the deep silences of our national pain and grasp there another possible future, one too seldom imagined? Might not the dead be beckoning us even now to gaze on the faces of our enemies and find there a haunted reflection of our own best and worst selves: the same urge for justice and peace; the same righteous anger when peace is senselessly robbed; the same desire for freedom and fullness of life that we feel rising up on our most human days; the same bitterness and temptation when death seems to frustrate and mock our better angels?

Indeed.

Memory, like all abstract things:

values, technology, courage –

memory can be put to so many uses.

For the last ten years,

it seems we too often used the memory of the dead to encourage action,
instead of letting those memories guide us in awe and mystery and peace.

To say, we remember you,

and we recognize the dream of life,

the power of life,

and we shall hold life sacred.

We shall not cheer for death –

far away, or here at home.

We shall not be people who cheer for death.

That is not who we are.

That's part of what it takes to stay on the path –

to remember with honor and mystery.

Sarah Dan Jones and Bruce Springsteen wrote

Meditation on Breathing and The Rising just days after that horrible day.

That's also the case with the choral anthem today,

We Will.

It was created by the members of the Miami Children's Choir

in a song-writing workshop just a month later.

As we walk away from fear, they sang,

they sang, we'll grow stronger, we will sing another song,

forever in our hearts we will remember,

and we will move on and dream a brighter day.

The children knew.

We remember, we grieve,

and that's not the end of the story.

Moving on sounds harsh,

but that's what the integration, the acceptance stage of grief is about –

remembering and living your life.

10 years later, it's time.

These songs:

breathing, rising, we will,

these songs were written just days later.

I choose them today to make the most important point:

we've always known what was required of us.

Even just after tragedy,

we knew the path –

spiritually centered, honoring memory, dreaming a better world.

we knew the path,

and though many, individually, took it,

as a nation, we missed the turn.

But that path doesn't go away.

Not for our society, our world at large,

nor for us as individuals,

the path is always there for the taking,

and always has been,

and always will be.

This path lives in our hearts, and in our eyes, and in our breath.

We can always walk away from fear and sing a new song.

We can always come on up for the rising.

We can always breathe out love.

Moments of tragedy and loss and change
often remind us that this path is there for us,
but it's always there,
and it shouldn't require an attack to bring us together,
or to remind us that life is sacred.

The occasion of remembrance is more than enough.

We don't even need to see the pictures.

The way of peace and hope and real courage –
this way is right before us,
and we can take it.

It is hard to do alone,
and so it is good to have friends and colleagues and churches
to remind us and help us follow our best selves.

But that way, that best self,
it is always there for us,
and for the world, which needs it now,
as much as it ever did.

So this fateful day,
this day of memory and shadow
this day of love and tears,
we are called
we are summoned
we are called
to honor their memory,
to show kindness and mercy,
to reach out and cross borders of division,
to love peace, to work for it, to live it.

This is our calling –
this day.

And every day.

May we have the courage, the wisdom, and the passion
to say yes, we will.