"Praying at Ground Zero"

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A pristine village we might call it—Rensselaerville, teeming with charm, modest in populace, and rife with stories fabled and documented of indigenous settlers and the early *chutzpah* of Dutch patroons who would claim this space for themselves and their heirs. Here we are, nestled into the pews of this lovely old church in the heart of the village, on this summer Sunday morning. Some of us know that it's not easy to find your way here, though we're not so far from that four-ribbon highway that connects with New York City to the south and Albany to the north. We're not so far from that majestic river bearing the name of that early 17th c. English explorer and navigator, Henry Hudson.

We call it simply "The Hudson". It flows from a humble lake in the Adirondacks to over 300 miles south, emptying into the swells of the ocean at New York Harbor. As a tidal river, the Hudson flows in two directions. The waters flow north; the waters flow south, with cross-currents along the way. How this river bears witness to the tidal flow and cross-currents of life at its edge, from the early settlements of the Algonquin and Iroquois to the arrival of French and Dutch settlers in the late 16th and early 17th centuries on into our present day. Tranquility and violence have marked the course of nature in geography and in human behavior as we who are human have succeeded brilliantly and failed phenomenally to honor the sanctity of the beauty of this space and the dignity of one another, indigenous and invasive. Our tides flow in both directions; our currents commonly cross. The Hudson runs through it, a silent mirroring witness.

I first arrived in this state at that point on the river that is New York City. It was the fall of 1964 when I came east to attend seminary, earnest in my hope to become a campus minister during that period that campuses were in timely turmoil. I was equally eager to explore the metropolis that we sometimes simply call "the city." That reference doesn't work so well when you mean New York City and reside in a tightly knit neighborhood of Boston or Washington or Philadelphia, but for me "the city" will forever be NYC. It was sacred space long before I beheld a gouged out segment of Southern Manhattan as sacred space.

Some of us remember when the World Trade Centers were rising. My jaw was still agape at the Empire State Building, as the towers on the tip of Manhattan were going up in the early 1970s. What a thrill it was to take the elevator all the way to the top. How exciting it was to have even a cup of coffee at Windows on the World. (I couldn't afford anything else on the menu!) The twin towers felt invincible, and for almost 40 years were home to the daily jobs of neighbors from this country and over 80 nations of our world—like the UN in corporate mode.

Where were you on that morning when you first found out? How did the shock that rippled through you mirror the shudder that moved through the first plane as it hit the North Tower?

I was coming into the city from New Jersey for a meeting at All Souls, the Unitarian Church on Manhattan's Upper East Side where I was Assistant Minister. Rushing down the steps of Port Authority, I glanced up at the CNN monitor to see that first plane hit. "Oh my God, what an idiot!" I blurted out. On to the subway; I had a meeting to make.

By the time I reached All Souls, the second plane had hit the South Tower. Everyone huddled around the TV in Forrest's office – Forrest Church, then Senior Minister at All Souls. I rushed to the phone to check on my daughters. Each was working in the city that day. Sarah commuted from Brooklyn via the subway to the PATH train, making connections at the World Trade Center. She always surfaced for coffee in the plaza before continuing on to Jersey City, where she taught at a charter school within eye view of the towers. I was terrified. Was she okay? I finally reached her, heard her voice, knew she was okay. I reached Lisa, who was then working at Nickelodeon in mid-town. Their building had been evacuated. She was walking through Central Park with friends, aghast at what might happen next before she made her way across the Hudson to Jersey City in one of the many ferries that carried folks to "the safe side of the river." I reached Shana, who was working as a temp in the Empire State Building that morning. Of course, it was a logical next target. She evacuated immediately and walked uptown to All Souls at 80th & Lexington. We spent the next three nights in the city.

So many walked uptown, like a procession of refugees—shocked, sweaty, exhausted, and covered in debris that was ash and more.

You know the specifics of what happened. Yet each of you harbors your own sequence of specifics, your own stories. We remember with our hearts, and we remember viscerally.

"Shall we gather at the river?" I still can't hear this without my throat tightening. The choir of All Souls sang this as an anthem on 9/12/01, when 700 souls gathered in the sanctuary, as hundreds of others wound around the block onto East 80th Street.

It would be another two weeks before I finally got clearance to be at Ground Zero as a chaplain. We who are Unitarian Universalist clergy didn't yet have clearance for entry to national disaster sites which our friends the Baptists, the Lutherans, and even the practitioners of Scientology were savvy enough to attain long before that day. Not until later that year did we form the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry.

On an afternoon in late September, I ducked under the coattails of Bob Ossner, a tall strawberry-blond fire chaplain from Chicago, who unapologetically described himself as fundamentalist Christian, to make my way as a chaplain into the surreal ruins that were Ground Zero. Bob's broad smile and ready bear hugs undermined the stereotypes I brought to his religious identity. He got right to the point with his on-site orientation: "Anything that's found that says a life was here…anything," he said, "is a blessing. It's closure for one more family." We would pray around such discoveries, in arms over-shoulders huddles, we would pray.

In my hardhat with "Chaplain" inscribed in magic marker on the side, I stumbled my way into a long night of trauma ministry.

As my night at Ground Zero wore on, I found myself standing with firefighters and police waiting and crane operators and structural engineers and FBI agents taking a break. We commonly didn't bother to don our masks, as we inhaled the un-inhalable. There were more important things to tend to. I checked in with so many firefighters, stunned and wanting only a miracle. Mostly I listened to dazed silence. As I walked up to one among the perhaps 40 firefighters in my sector on the edge of "the pit" as it was called, I put my hand on his shoulder: "How're you doing? It must be tough to be here day after day." "Yeah," he said, "it is." And then, "Reverend, please pray for my cousin, Richard Allen. He was a fireman; he's in there."

As reported later in the *New York Times'* "Portraits of Grief:"

> Summer after summer, Richie Allen stood watch along the beaches of the Rockaways, keeping swimmers out of danger….He was the much-adored oldest of six children, and his siblings trailed him into lifeguarding…. He got other jobs…before the Fire Department called him to work in May of [2001], when he was 31. …On September 11, he rode with the engine company to the World Trade Center, even though he was off duty after having worked all night. The Sunday before he [had spent the day with his family] on the beach…. "He said how much he absolutely loved the job," said his mother, Gail. "It was part of his breathing, almost. He was saying he couldn't wait for his first fire."

So many names, each personal, each a story of a life promising and hopeful. By then I had heard that Josh Piver was also "in there." Josh was a 24-year-old trader for Cantor Fitzgerald. He lived upstairs from my daughter, Sarah, in Park Slope. They listened to Beatles music together and shared an occasional beer, with no inkling…no inkling.

I stood on the edge of that crater that was Ground Zero, wondering, waiting, humbled by the perseverance and commitment of these firefighters and police and crane operators and others who all but hung on the edge, hoping against hope; and I prayed. I prayed desperately: "Please God, as horrible as this is, let my country not act in revenge." Was I angry? Yes? Did I feel in my gut a desire for retribution? Yes? Was this what I really wanted? No, absolutely no. I stood there and searched my soul: "How could I, how could we, possibly wreak on others the havoc that lay before me?"

Just a few days later my husband Dan and I would hear the Buddhist Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, speak at Riverside Church. We huddled there with a thousand other New Yorkers. The service was billed as "An Evening of Peace: Embracing Anger." In the 1960s Thich Nhat Hanh's village of 300,000 had been decimated by US troops. His words echo into the space of this morning:

> "I feel that I understand deeply the suffering of New York. There are ways to look deeply and understand the real cause of the suffering and not to do what could be harmful to others."

Six months after 9/11/01, author and journalist Farai Chideya was enjoying post-dinner conversation with some of her colleagues and a Stanford professor, whose six-year-old daughter was present.

> "As the grownups talked about war," reported Chideya, "she and I sat on the floor drawing with crayons. I asked her offhand, 'What does freedom mean to you?' Without hesitation she said, 'Freedom means not having to fight, and Americans aren't free because we have to fight.'"

This six-year-old is now 16. Richie Allen would be 46, the same age as our eldest daughter. Josh Piver would be 41, the same age as our two other daughters.

So many names, so many nations, so many options. We know the course we have taken. We know how rough the cross-currents have been on the banks of the Hudson and the Tigris and the Euphrates. Five hundred sixty more troops to Iraq this week? Why not? Have the actions undertaken by this nation in the aftermath of what we call simply "9/11" borne the desired outcome? It depends perhaps on what it is we desire and what it is we hope for.

In the months that followed my night at Ground Zero, I extended my ministry at All Souls to the Family Assistance Center, set up in a hangar-like structure on Pier 94, stretching out into the Hudson. It housed the array of service providers for surviving family members and New Yorkers numbering in the thousands who had been displaced from job or home or both. The Red Cross was one of many service providers that took up residence there.

As a Red Cross volunteer chaplain, I served as a receptacle of stories, stories that needed telling again and again if hope was to be restored in lives and neighborhoods and a city.

One morning in mid-October, I was wandering about the formidable expanse of this site and sat down next to a young man in his mid-20s. Let's call him Chad. He had worked in the South Tower, the first tower hit and the last to collapse. Chad was high enough up so that escape was the upshot of a heartbeat decision and was narrow. He had lost friends and co-workers, many of them. While shaken, he wasn't shattered. While reflective, he didn't allow himself to freeze into the terror of those unforgettable moments.

In the high-tech high-rise world in which he had worked, this young man—handsome, articulate, tired-eyed but with a residue of sparkle—had made it a habit of bringing his guitar. And Chad played. He played his guitar during lunchtime and coffee breaks. His colleagues had loved it. As his story continued to unfurl, so did his smile. He spoke of his desire to write music. What genre he wasn't quite sure, but he wouldn't be boxed in to pop, hip-hop, whatever. Chad would name his own genre. Then his voice dropped. "In the last weeks," he told me, "I just haven't been able to write anything." "And now?" I asked. "What about now?" "Most of the time I can't even play," came the reply. "Hmm," I murmured. "I'm guessing, Chad, that everything you've seen and heard and felt is stirring inside you into songs that will remind us, as only music can, of what happened." "Really," he said. "You really think so?" "Yes," I replied. "I really think so, and I'll be waiting to hear them." His smile settled into a mellow glow and an unspoken promise that we all will hear those songs.

I have no idea what Chad is doing, what kind of job he found, if he's playing his guitar in his new workplace, or if the notes stumbling around inside him have coalesced into that first song. I just held hope that there were songs stirring inside him, songs that would carry haunting echoes of that time before easing their way into the rest of his life.

Yet I wonder. I wonder if Chad has been downwind of what we have witnessed in seeming acceleration in our nation over the past several years. I speak of the brutality that has been visited upon those among us who are brown and black. Chad is one of our beautiful brown brothers. Did Chad survive that horrific blue-sky morning only to become yet another reason to proclaim, whether we're brown, black, or white: "Black Lives Matter!"

Did Chad become a not so widely publicized Michael Brown or Eric Garner or Scott Walker or Alton Sterling or Philando Castile? We grieve and pray for these young men and their families, downwind of a different kind of terrorism. We grieve for the forces still in horrific play, forces that emanate from the fault line of this nation, the fault line of racism, forces akin to those that displaced our indigenous ancestors from the space we now occupy. And we grieve for the five police officers, five white police officers, felled by a brother of color who projected his own inner voices onto a movement for healing—that is the movement of Black Lives Matter. We grieve for people who buy into that projection.

Let us all pray at this newest and rawest Ground Zero. And let us hear the plea, the public prayer if you will, of Michael Eric Dyson, Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University, who spoke in last Sunday's *New York Times* to those of us who are white. He began:

> "We, black America, are a nation of nearly 40 million souls inside a nation of more than 320 million people. And I fear now that it is clearer than ever that you, white America, will always struggle to understand us.
>
> Like you, we don't all think the same, feel the same, love, learn, live or even die the same.
>
> But there's one thing most of us agree on: We don't want cops to be executed at a peaceful protest. We also don't want cops to kill us without fear that they will ever face a jury, much less go to jail, even as the world watches our deaths on a homemade video. This is a difficult point to make as a racial crisis flares around us."

And he concludes:

"We cannot hate you, not really, not most of us; that is our gift to you. We cannot halt you; that is our curse."

How to halt, not hate. The actions of September 11, 2001, touch us all. So too do the actions that leave black and brown men and women and children bleeding and dead in the streets or in the front seat of a car with lover and child bearing witness. So too do the actions disrupting a peaceful protest, actions that leave five white police officers bleeding and dead while protecting our right to protest.

What Ground Zeros call us to pray? And how will we pray? How will we act on the hopes held in our praying? How will we embody love whose justice is compassionate? To what new songs will our hearts open? How can we keep from praying? How can we keep from singing as that river flows on, bearing witness with its own tidal rhythms?

Amen and let us sing.

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