

2005-11-13 On Terror

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Opening Words

We are here
after a week of balmy breezes
and sudden storms
to worship, to sift the healthy from the hurtful,
and to turn once again toward the high principles
which illumine our lives like the sun does roses.

And so, with gratitude, we say:

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Sequence

Now, says Hafiz, is the time to know
that the sacred nests in everything you do.
So why not consider a lasting truce with yourself and with the Sacred?
Now, says Hafiz, is the time to understand
that all your crisp either/or ideas
of right and wrong
were just a child's training wheels.
You lay such things aside
when you finally grow up
and tell the truth completely,
and love without apologizing.
Hafiz says, your life, like mine,
is a text, a sacred scripture.
So why, I wonder, do any of us
continue to throw sticks and stones?

What is it in that sweet voice inside of us
which incites us to such fear?
Now, says Hafiz, is the time to know
that the sacred nests in everything you do,
just as the rose is sacred when it buds,
just as the rose is sacred when it opens,
just as the rose is sacred when it closes,
just as the rose is sacred when its petals fall
in the autumn of the year.

silence

Now is the time, says Hafiz, to know that your life, like mine, is a text, a sacred scripture. Full of tears and full of thanks. Full of broken hearts and full of dancing. Full of opening and closing, falling and budding. The text of our lives is written in the book of names, the names of those who are our companions along the way, our challengers and lovers, our families and circles, our memories and hopes. Naming them in a free litany of word and silence, we speak the sacred scripture that is our lives.

naming

Now is the time, says Hafiz, for fears to wither,
for confidence to thrive, for the rose to open to the light of the lowering sun, and
for mouths to open and shine forth the light of music.

Readings

The First Reading comes from the book Terrorism In the Mind of God by Mark Jurgensmeyer, the single best professor I had while in graduate school.

Terrorism is seldom a lone act. When Dr. Baruch Goldstein entered the Tomb of the Patriarchs carrying an automatic weapon, he came with the tacit approval of many of his fellow Jewish settlers in the nearby community of Kiryat Arba. When Rev. Paul Hill stepped from a sidewalk in Pensacola, Florida, and shot Dr. John Britton and his security escort as they prepared to enter their clinic, he was cheered by a certain circle of militant Christian anti-abortion activists

around the country. When the followers of Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman drove a rented truck to the underground garage of the World Trade Center, igniting it and its lethal cargo, they came as part of a well-orchestrated plan that involved dozens of co-conspirators and thousands of sympathizers in the United States, Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere throughout the world.

As these instances show, it takes a community of support for an act of terrorism to succeed. Even behind the two high school students who killed themselves and thirteen of their classmates in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, was a quasi-religious “trenchcoat” culture of gothic symbolism. In all of these cases, the activists thought that their acts were supported, not only by other people, but by a widely shared perception that the world was already violent: it was enmeshed in *great struggles* that gave their own violent actions *moral meaning*.

The Second Reading is a riveting and even terrifying poem by my beloved Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska. Note the date of the poem: 1977. It's called The Terrorist Watches

The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen twenty.
Now it's just thirteen sixteen.
There's still time for some to go in,
And some to come out.

The terrorist has already crossed the street.
The distance keeps him out of danger,
And what a view—just like the movies.

A woman in a yellow jacket, she's going in.
A man in dark glasses, he's coming out.
Teenagers in jeans, they're talking.
Thirteen seventeen and four seconds.
The short one, he's lucky,
he's getting on a scooter,
But the tall one, he's going in.

Thirteen seventeen and forty seconds.
That girl, she's walking along

with a green ribbon in her hair.
But then a bus suddenly pulls in front of her.
Thirteen eighteen.
The girl's gone.
Was she foolish? Did she go in or not?
We'll see, won't we, when they carry them out.

Thirteen nineteen.
Somehow no one's going in.
Another guy, heavy, balding, is leaving, though.
Wait a second, looks like he's looking for something in his pockets and at
thirteen twenty minutes ten seconds
He goes back in for his crummy gloves.

Thirteen twenty exactly.
This waiting, it's taking forever.
Any second now.
No, not yet.
Yes, now.
The bomb explodes.

Sermon

It's been a week, hasn't it?

I keep on thinking of the people at that wedding in Amman, Jordan, and how completely undone they must be. The terrorists blew up a wedding. I am not sure how they were their foes, but they killed folks as dead as if they were. It's really hard to imagine anything comparable, except perhaps the destruction of this terrible hurricane season. So many people without so much as a photograph to remind them of all their former life.

Of course, other things were haunting me too. My mother has been in the hospital all week long, up at Beaumont in Troy, Michigan. She collapsed in the garage and reflected horrific pain on her face, a face that my sister said was different than anything she had ever seen before. My mother is home now, and the solutions to her several problems are in the works, including some special

shoes and a brace. But it was touch and go for a while, since like so many people her age, she was overmedicated, and she had an episode of irrational behavior which scared everyone good.

During this week, I also spent time on the phone with the son of my old friend John. A week and a half ago, John, Mr. Exercise, Mr. Health, had a massive heart attack, and had a triple bypass. He still has not really come back into our shared world yet, and this could turn out to be terribly sad, and after I said goodbye to his son Ian, I put my head down on my desk and wept.

On top of all this, my friend John's grandma, the woman who raised him, died this week. My neighbor Todd came pounding at my door to tell me that his mother had died...he wanted a hug. My dear Dan called me from Texas to tell me sadly about his mother's memorial last week. LaMont's 32-year-old sister dropped over last week from an aneurysm...the funeral was Monday. And to frost the cake, my friend Doug moved out of the country to live in Spain.

It was a very intense week.

Lots of fear and loss in my own life. Lots of fear and loss on the other side of the globe at a wedding...and in many other places as well, which the media didn't stress.

Although I was worried and even terrified about my mother's condition this week, as well as my friend John's, I really didn't use the word "terror" while talking with my sister and brother this week. Terror is a word that most often seems to apply whenever there is some sort of explosion going off, fire, smoke, that sort of thing. Terrorism is a by-word these days. The media and the government speak as if we were living in a new age of terror.

I'd like to point out that the date of the second reading by the poet Szymborska is 1976. Thirty years ago. Yet our poet was not writing a predictive poem about the terrorism in our age, but about terrorism in her own. It's hardly a new concept, terrorism. Even the idea of people committing suicide as a means to call attention to their cause, or further their cause along, is hardly new. Granted, taking one's own life is a bit different from taking one's own and many others besides, but a solo person's death is still a death. Gentle, but strongly convicted,

Buddhist monks set themselves on fire to protest the war in Vietnam, or even the first Gulf War. I saw one of these suicides when I was on the Hymnbook Commission. While at one of those meetings in Boston, I actually watched an orange-robed monk calmly burning right in front of the gold-domed Statehouse, right there on the sidewalk where I was walking. I certainly felt a sense of terror and dread as I watched this amazing and horrific event, even though his point was to call for peace.

And the Second World War offered us the kamikazes, who terrified the Pacific. But they weren't the first either. Throughout the centuries, we have terrified each other with threats of execution, war, retaliation, revenge, and witch hunts, from the actual witch hunts of the late Middle Ages, to the McCarthy Era in this country, an age of unbridled terrorism, if not of the fire and brimstone kind.

In fact, the commonly preached religious doctrine of Hell, often associated with fire and brimstone literally, is itself a form of psychological terrorism, the promise of eternal torture taught to children in some families as if the idea was no more horrific than a Dr. Seuss book. The very idea that this doctrine is accepted and taught by over a hundred million people in this country alone is a source of private, and now public, anguish for me. Those poor children.

On the other hand, many of us moderns have taken to actually domesticating terror...with Hollywood films churning out slasher movies by the dozen per year, films where a few teenagers are killed by some fool in a hockey mask, and others escape to make both the moralistic point and a few too many sequels. These are exercises in controlled fear, and ritual terror, like some infernal roller coaster at Cedar Point. After all, no one gets killed for real in a movie, or on a roller coaster...at least usually. The sinking feeling in your gut goes away a few minutes after the ride comes to a stop or the credits roll, and everyone can have a good laugh. This translates terror into a mere rush of excitement, something that is somehow almost akin to fun.

But I would like to suggest this morning that although terrorism has been with us a long time, and although I cannot believe that the sources of all terrorist acts are either the same or simple, I do think that one of the major reasons that terrorism has the effect that it does is that it pushes human beings up against

their own lack of control over their lives. In short, acts of terror confront us with the realities of the universe: things happen unfairly. My friend LaMont's sister simply dropped dead at the office one day. At age 32. Veteran's Day reminds us that young men and women in their twenties perish. Others live till they are 99, or like one person I met once, 106.

I once worked with a 15-year-old kid who was born with cancer. I wasn't born with cancer. Was this kid paying for something he did in his past life? Sorry, that makes no sense to me. People assert that all the time in my presence, but, for the life of me, I don't see how simple assertion makes something true. Was this kid paying for his parents' mistakes, their "sins"? According to the storyteller we call St. John, when some theologian tried to foist this very same idea on the teacher Jesus, he totally repudiated it. Same with Buddha, when someone tried to explain the unevenness of suffering in a similar way. He simply replied like this: (and yes, I'm translating) "Suffering and unfairness are part and parcel with life. You don't either deserve or not deserve to suffer. You just do. Trying to find meaning in the randomness of things will wear you out. Your most helpful spiritual practice is to stop asking 'why does this happen to me?' and instead ask yourself 'why shouldn't this happen to me? I am no better nor worse than anyone else.'"

The terrorist comes into our lives like the mindless randomness of everyday life. A reckless driver survives...a really safe driver is killed. One person survives cancer, another doesn't. One family is decimated by disease, the next family lives, all of them, to a hundred each. The terrorist blows this fact up in our face, no matter whether their concern is territorial politics, as in the case of some, or abortion, in the case of others, or some other cause. But the reason a person is terrorized by this is that the terrorist is claiming control over this randomness. I am convinced that a spiritually mature person knows that control at this level is largely an illusion, and yet here is someone taking the power of fate itself in his or her own hands.

Mark Jurgensmeyer interprets this spiritual aspect of terrorism by reminding us that these acts are seldom the acts of deranged, impulsive individuals, but are orchestrated within the contexts of groups. And that these groups, no matter what their religion or irreligion, share something in common, namely that "the activists thought that their acts were supported, not only by other people but by a

widely shared perception that the world was already violent: it was enmeshed in *great struggles* that gave their own violent actions *moral meaning*.”

In other words, the terrorists see themselves as fitting into a huge cosmic drama of violence versus violence. This is why so much terrorism is associated with fundamentalist thinking, or at least the kind of thinking where people are absolutely sure of what they are doing. No self-doubt. No self-questioning. Only certitude.

But there is no ultimate certitude. Sure, we have to live with some reliability, some provisional certitude, just so we can get out of bed in the morning. We have to have some provisional certitude that we can go through green lights without folks smashing through red lights. We have to have some provisional certitude that “I love you” actually means something. We have to have some provisional certitude that we are going to get a check at the beginning of the month. But each of us knows that our reliable patterns can be disrupted at any moment. There are accidents. “I love you” sometimes fades. And sometimes we get downsized and don’t get a check.

What the terrorists in our day and age are trying to do is what they have been trying to do in every age and era...to convert our world from a home into a threat, from a solace into a source of fear. By blowing up tombs, workplaces, airplanes, restaurants, houses, cars, houses of worship, and trains, terrorists seek to make us afraid of everything in our daily life. They seek to throw us off balance, so the rest of us, like them, suddenly dream only of certitude and being in control. So we give up our lives and push everyone through metal detectors, reduce ourselves to stereotyping, and imagine that ten billion dollars will clean up the world and make everything safe again.

But it won’t. There is no such thing. Life is life because it isn’t safe, ultimately. Only the dead are safe; the rest of us can only have provisional safety. At any time we could drop because of an aneurysm or some disease we don’t know we have. At any time we could have an accident. At any time we could have a week like I had, or the hurricane victims had. Or even a week like the wedding party had in Jordan. A bad week. A terrible week. A hard week.

That is why life is sweet to me, because it is precious, right now, right now, and never certain, tomorrow, ultimately. This is why every single minute of life...at the workplace, school, house of worship, train, plane, and even at the tomb is precious and beautiful.

And I say that although there are many things which engage our fears, as the children's story makes so clear, the way to respond to terrorist acts is not with terror and fear, but in the way we best respond to mindless hurricanes and medical emergencies. With grief. With skill. With copious tears. With reasonable organization. With effort. With rebuilding efforts. With comfort. With solidarity. With wisdom. With hope that refuses to be terrorized. And with the great privilege of our only provisional certitude.

Terrorism will never fade away. No war on terrorism can ever be ultimately successful...for as the Galilean reminded us long ago, the weeds and the wheat always grow together. They always have, they always will.

But we can at least, each of us alone and all of us together, refuse to attach the puppet strings of the terrorists to our shoulders, refusing to dance to their tune, play their song, or worst of all, to become exactly like them, imagining ourselves as caught up in some cosmic war between good and evil with ourselves always counting ourselves on the side of the Good.

Nothing wrong with being afraid. All courageous people are. Really! But to live controlled by terror, and yearning for certainty is another thing entirely. It is to give up on the qualities that enable us to be humane at all. And who wants to live on a planet where the people who live there have given up on themselves?

Litany

Now light is less, moon skies are wide and deep

And the last gold leaves float off the poplars and
carpet the earth which is our home.

Now light is less, moon skies are wide and deep
and deep too is the confidence, the reason, the

power of love and learning which can fence our fears

Now light is less, moon skies are wide and deep!

How wide our heritage, embracing, not throwing
sticks and stones, blessing, not cursing.

Now light is less, moon skies are wide and deep How deep too is our heritage!
Questioning, not bullying; courage our being, not our achievement.