

# Homily On Hope

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How long do we remember someone we have loved? How long do we remember so many we didn't even know but whose lives we glimpsed as snapshots posted and vignettes published during those leaden days following the harrowing events of that day?

Many years ago, decades in fact, I lost someone I loved to violence that was also massive in scale. Shortly afterwards, a friend visited me in my apartment in the East Village. As we sat over coffee, he looked straight at me and told me what he thought about it, this nasty business of losing someone you love. "I don't understand it," he said. "I don't understand it at all. We used to spend a lot of time together. We used to laugh together and we argued too. We were close. I counted on him being there forever. All I know now is that I haven't seen my friend since he died. I don't know where he went or what happened in that instant of death. I just know I haven't seen him and I still miss him."

I still miss my friend too, and I still miss those women and men whose lives I barely glimpsed in the photographed faces that stared back day after day on the streets of this city, and at Ground Zero, and at the Family Assistance Center at Pier 94 and in those unforgettable Portraits of Grief offered by the New York Times. We miss them, and we remember them, the 3,016 women and men who were our daughters and sons, our sisters and brothers, our fathers and mothers, our husbands and wives, our lovers and friends, and our neighbors. "In the rising of the sun, and in its going down, we remember them." And "in the blueness of the sky"—oh, in the blueness of that sky as it was today and then—we remember them.

How long do we remember?

I don't think there's a timeline. I don't think there's a timeline for memory or for grief. Have we smiled since then? Yes, we have. Have we laughed since then? Sure, we've laughed since then. Have we gone to the movies and dined at sidewalk cafes? Yes, and some of us take the subways every day and even board planes for business and pleasure. There are those among us who have passed through entire days without thinking about them, about it. But for many among us, for so many, there's a hole in our heart where the winds still blow with longing. Memory and grief just don't come packaged with timelines.

This evening we all remember and are perhaps once again transported to the specters of those "birds on fire", to that fierce cloud of dust and ash, to the shrieking silence that followed, and to the knowledge that New York City was not the only site visited by terror and death that day. But the "hour of lead" as we knew it then is hard to sustain. We're life breathing souls, so we walk that tightrope of memory and of new life, of poignancy and of possibility, of marking that time and embracing those lives while moving on with our own, however halting our steps might be.

The immediacy of the violence that visited us and the magnitude of grief that rent our hearts just cannot be sustained. I believe that at the core of our souls and in the soul of this city and this

nation and this world, is the will to peace. It is a will to peace that can be molded out of the memory itself, and yes, out of the direct experience of the violence of that day.

I take heart from the words of two Pauls, our own Paul Bennett, who opened our service this evening, and that evangelist of early Christianity, Paul of Tarsus. The latter Paul had committed his own share of violence, relentlessly tyrannizing all with whom he disagreed. Then something happened to him that stopped him short. Something happened that brought him face to face with the lesser angels of his mortal self and the better angels of his nature. He came face to face with a personification of profound love.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,”  
wrote Paul,  
“I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

They're words that echoed in our first hymn this evening:

“Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gift to all inspire, and have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.”

We heard tonight the words of our own Paul and know that what happened to him shook him to the core and mobilized his commitment to peace. Now the word “conversion” doesn't often sound from this pulpit, but I do believe that by our complete openness to earthshaking events, we can be veritably converted by the power of love and acts of compassion to the promise of peace. I believe this is possible if we take in what's happening and yes, if we return by memory's highway to the events of that day and the days that directly followed. Again and again we saw the power of love in the deeds of ordinary men and women. Again and again we witnessed acts of compassion throughout this city and nation.

It was two weeks after September 11 that I spent a night at Ground Zero as one of the many chaplains there. Now there were several weeks that I frequented the space of the Family Assistance Center at Pier 94 and heard story after story after story. But there was something about standing, even if for a night, on the edge of the pit with the firefighters and the police and the crane operators and the sanitation workers as they searched and waited and hoped against hope, that brought home to me the will to do all possible to work for peace. I stood there, and found myself asking, “How could I, how could we, possibly wreak the havoc on others that lay before me?”

Now I'm not here tonight to chart an agenda for global peace, but to suggest that we return to those moments when we were hard put to believe that what had happened was real. We would wake up the morning after convinced that it had been the worst of all nightmares, shaking our heads, wiping our eyes, knowing that yes, it had been a horrific nightmare, but it was also real.

I believe that if we moved through that reality fully and bared ourselves to the depths of that grief, we would not, could not, visit like violence on others. But events have unfolded since that day that tell us otherwise. The terrorism has continued and the fear of terrorism has become such a part of our psyches that if a blackout hits us for reasons having nothing to do with what we might suspect, we suspect nonetheless that it's a terrorist attack. Yet in the aftermath of the blackout as in the aftermath of that autumn day two years ago, we came together as friends and neighbors, and we practiced peace. These were times when we learned one another's names

and became part of one another's lives and didn't have to talk about how we're all connected because we all connected.

"War is terrorism, magnified a hundredfold," writes a contemporary historian. The terrorist attacks on America are being duplicated as if in a global hall of mirrors. Where is the will to peace that enters us as we stand in memory on the edge of horror? Where is the will to peace that we yearn for as we remember him or her or them? How will we find peace in our hearts without waging peace in our larger world?

Life will never be the same, not just after September 11, 2001. It's not been the same since Creation's first breath. So shall we convince ourselves that everything has changed to make sense of the senseless, to whip ourselves into a frenzy of violence begetting violence? Or might we return to that day in our memory's heart and feel the grief once again, know it deeply enough, stay with it long enough, to hear the call that brings us to the surface. It will come. The chill winds of grief and understandable fury need not freeze our hearts. Rather the warm tears shed by so many nations can bathe our wounds, melt our hearts, and nourish the soil of our common ground so that peace is possible. It begins with deep grief and continues with honest remembering. Doing unto others what we would have them do unto us and not doing unto others what we would not have them do to us is a tall order. But love makes it possible, love for those we have lost and love for one another whom we have yet to recognize as our neighbors and friends.

Life is uncertain. It may be brutish. It may be brief. But when I stand again at the edge of that ground rendered sacred and profane, I can only say, peace at all costs, peace at all costs. How better can we honor those whom we loved?

Amen.

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Sources:

The Bible, Revised Standard Version.

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Howard Zinn, Introduction to *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2002