

UNDERSTANDING OUR SHADOW

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It's another early September. It is of course Labor Day, the last real hurrah of summer. All the kids are now back at school. Right behind it in our annual calendar of emotions, tones, moods is of course now 9/11. With the highest, most sober days in the Jewish Calendar just around the corner, September, particularly now with 9/11 in our national consciousness, always feels like time of sobriety. Maybe time for a good hard collective look at ourselves.

As you might have picked-up on, I like to set sermons in imaginary moments. Today I'm imagining myself at a 9/11 rally.

Now is a good time for the ushers to begin passing out to those willing to participate a few posters to hold up, a few patriotic items to display, and a few military symbols to provide some context. If you are willing or able, swipe under your seat and participate. If you are willing and able.

As I said in the intro, this would normally be a better theme for the Sunday immediately preceding 9/11, but that is our water in-gathering Sunday, and there generally is no sermon for that. Please use this moment to make a note to bring water to church next Sunday.

My speech begins predictably enough. The wisdom of nearly two decades of hindsight has not changed my view that terrorism is still evil.

When those twisted people posturing themselves as "martyrs of their faith" drove planes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and were crashed heroically into a Pennsylvania field by the truest of heroes, they were not as they conceived themselves, "freedom fighters" worth praise. They were murderers, on a self-righteous, self-aggrandizing mission.

I saw and still see them as an Islamic version of the schoolyard bully. Those men were creative in their attacks, but at their core, responding out of fear. Fearful that a changing world was stripping away their fragile power bravado, and worldview that men should rule, and violence is God's way.

The failure of the terrorists and their leaders to stop and reflect on all that motivated them caused the deaths of 2,996 people and the injuries of more than 6,000 others—265 of them on the four planes used as weapons, 2,606 people actually in or around the World Trade Center and surrounding area, and 125 at the Pentagon when it was hit.

Let's pause for one more moment of silence for them.

Looking back now eighteen years, it seems to me that if they were to bother to dig beneath the simplicity that we are "evil," beneath all their pride in destroying "U.S. monuments to greed and power," and stop for a moment in all their "freedom fighting" and "Praise be to Allah" talk, if they had stopped to listen and breathe for a minute, they would see a little clearer that what they

destroyed were thousands of people of all races and nationalities, folding napkins, and cutting deals.

It is so much easier to believe you are dying for God than doing the steady hard work of living for God.

However, laying out the inconsistency and hypocrisy of their testosterone driven, self-righteous, position and acts is the easy part. And sadly, not our part. Not our work.

As we know from being in relationships in families, and even here in Church. The light tends to shine much brighter on others underlying drives and motives than it usually does on our own.

Some of us in this country would wish to dream us up an unsullied empire they are ready to defend against attack or even critique.

But to take that position is to avoid our work.

Seeing the shadow of the terrorists' reasoning is easy for us. Seeing that for them we are a high-tech, commercially motivated, self-righteous empire which although solemn at the death of its own, is neglectful of how it feels to have drones floating too high above to see or shoot down, is harder.

Looking back now almost two decades it seems to me that the collective leadership of all sides from Saddam, to the Taliban in Afghanistan, to our President and generals, seems to refuse to see the greed and power they so easily attribute to us, in themselves.

Neither I or the terrorists, or likely you, look to see our own shadows . And that is the theme of today's sermon.

The looming shadow faced by all, particularly all who would wish to call themselves Presidents, Ministers, terrorists, tribes, faiths, or nations, is the temptation to skip the honest look at what fully lives inside them and ourselves before they act and speak.

And like the absurdity of only looking for keys where the light makes it easy to see, that is not the challenge we as a world, nation, congregation, nor as individual people, face.

I guess to summarize my view on our political life since 9/11, it is that this offered us an opportunity to reflect on ourselves that, we have passed on. And that's a shame. A shame with consequences.

I believe an honest reflection on who we are and who we want to be might have eliminated the mortgage crisis the subsequent bank bail-out, that the government listening in on our phones, that our willingness to torture people Abu-Grade, that growing economic equality, and debt-ceiling, the inability of both parties to speak to one another and cooperate on immigration and keep guns from killing so many issues.

We have issues. And honest self-reflection does not necessarily make them go away. But, it does keep ones own wishes and expectations tempered.

Sadly, and boringly, unearthing the fullest truth is hard to look for, and it is rarely, if ever, best discerned by exhausting one's attention on what swirls outside ourselves. Sadly, and boringly, the truth is the first victim when, like the reading from Sam Keen, one paints up an enemy as truth. And we as humans want to forget that. Denying our shadow is one of my candidates for humanities real original sin.

But have the leaders on any side of these debates, in all of these religious countries, used that opportunity to challenge their own people on their assumptions? No, I don't think so.

As a nation, we need to know that our shadow is seen by all but us when we accurately celebrate that we would never try to kill Afghani or Iraqi innocents and choose to forget that the citizens of Iraq, North Korea, Japan, Serbia, Germany, Somalia, Vietnam, Panama and Grenada remember American soldiers on their land, and that our weapons in the hands of others have taken lives in Chile, Algeria, Guatemala, Japan, El Salvador, Columbia, all over the last 60 years. I am sure the list is longer than that.

Maybe we should have engaged in some of those countries, or all of them.

This is not as much about policy as it is about process and conscience. The world is a complex place, and sometimes a punch in the mouth, or a stealth bomb directed by a drone, is the right choice. I don't expect perfection.

But if we are going to invade countries WE deem dangerous, or piously oppose nuclear proliferation, we at least need to do so fully aware that our hypocrisy, showing like a slip or a girdle, or men's underwear, can slide into view. If we are going to judge immigrants as come from *Bleep-hole* countries, certainly, insulting enough on its own, we should morally be responsible enough to examine our role in their being kept that way.

We need to know that our arrogance more than peeks out when the World's self-appointed cop has a shadow the size of all the Native peoples' lands we stole, and all the women we kept from voting. Our hypocrisy is on display for as long as all the while we were asserting all MEN are created equal, we were imprisoning slaves. An uncomfortable silence fills the room every time we accuse others of wishing to be nuclear powers when we are the only country to have used atomic weapons, and eight times over the last seventy-five years to have threatened to use first strike capability

And we need to know that our hypocrisy is on display, even if we won't speak to it, when we walk away from World gatherings on race, and in treaties to hold down global warming, to only months later make others cry "uncle" and publicly kiss our ring affirming our unflinching "goodness" in the fight against terrorism.

Look, politics in the real world is complicated and I am not asking for perfection or pacifism. For the U.S. to only to respond to the challenge of terrorism with vigilance at airports and a dogged commitment to fighting evil overseas is to miss an important point. When I, and we (country, church, or individual alike) don't acknowledge our shadows, can't examine our own behavior or motives, or allow for imperfection in others, what we are really doing is playing a game of image control—mostly from our own consciousness.

When we refuse to see all of ourselves, we will miss that in addition to all the warm and genuine feelings of togetherness evident in a parade can be a pretty parade of distractions our patriotism, just like our commitment to our UU principals can be a pretty distraction from the more unmentionable sides of ourselves.

And that is less a problem when we acknowledge it, look at and for it.

If nations were compelled to first and foremost be open about their own motives, and step into other shoes, would Israel and Palestine be trapped in what seems an endless violent debate about how or if to share the same space?

Would Syrian reformers/revolutionaries and the government not be able to work out their differences?

Would we be at such odds about immigration?

It may seem a pipe dream, it likely is a pipe dream that we all pause for a moment of deep self-reflection and disclosure, but if people really worked the depths of their faith, would we not have a lot safer world?

When we as a nation, perhaps the kindest world power ever, can't calm our lower selves, our baser motives, controlling markets, maintaining economic advantage, and or throwing our power around, "Our Flag" isn't a pageant sash that reads "Most Noble and Democratic," it is an invisible garment of self-assurance on the emperor who has no clothes.

In all the talk of how inviolately our election process should be—and certainly it should be purer—how much reflection have we done on the many countries whose leaders we have directly or indirectly tinkered with if not directly overthrown?

The answer is, Not nearly enough!

According to UU Reverend and race and oppression scholar Bill Jones, racism is more dangerously locked up in the behavior people would describe as good, and bright, rather than that which they acknowledge about themselves to be evil. And he is right.

Yes, terrorism is awful, Yes, the Taliban is backward and repressive, we should go arrest the bad guys, maybe kill those we can't bring to justice. But we must understand that our act of creating a spectacular enemy and pursuing the latest Darth Vader can, maybe has, become an addiction, a distraction to our own mythic journey as a nation.

And that is true of me.

I like to believe myself to be good-hearted, helpful, and ". . . to have a strong instinct to change all that is structurally wrong." But, when I am not willing to honor that my secret wish is to live safe and sterilized from the real struggles of life that being a moral being demands, I "find myself strangely blind to the very pain and struggle right below my eyes."

When I am unwilling to look at the less than friendly, affable me, I am able to stick with the truths about me that are more convenient and easier to believe about myself and what was and is more wholly and deeply true.

I have seen that my decision to choose a professional place to express my deepest concerns, to honor my call to ministry, can confuse me to the continued, very personal nature of the moral journey within.

And, I have seen it deafen my own self-understanding.

I have literally seen that my desire to be of service, to make the world a better place, can ironically have me running around when more than likely I would, in the truest sense of efficiency be serving my own desire to be a pastoral presence by dropping my task orientation and simply sit still. And that is at least as absurdly funny as sad.

I am also deeply proud to be a UU minister in a tradition that is open enough and when at its best trains itself to look below the surface and honestly at the heart of our national life— my role —and you help me keep my instinct to keep peace and justice a first priority and to broaden my acceptance.

What distracts you from your own mythic journey?

But, I see our shadow revealed too, and like our government, our shadow. It shows not so much we fail to be all that we come here to train ourselves to be, but when we refuse to see that failure.

A week short of eighteen years ago you might remember feeling struck by grief in one moment, and numb the next; voyeuristically watching the Twin Towers in a weird movie-like awe, then mad as hell, and then a minute later grieving again until you noticed that everyone was for once very civilly standing in line. That is a good thing to muse upon,

We as moral beings get to choose which of the cocktail of emotions we cultivate. But we only get to choose if we are willing to be aware of all that swims inside us.

Look, unwrapping and putting on display our national and personal shadows is hard work that virtually nobody but you can ask yourself to do.

We, like I, naturally don't want to do this because being still enough to listen feels like an extra duty, it slows us down from our mission. Looking for and at your shadow will initially make you as a person and us as a country less self- assured. Perhaps confused. However, to proceed without a willingness to listen to the self-righteous side of us transform nation and person alike is to risk walking this road again.

In the way therapists know that the hard stuff needs the creation of safe place to peak its head out, and, like the way Buddhist masters know that the first act of taming our scattered monkey like minds, is the simple acknowledgement of our instincts. We Americans need to understand our darkness too. With death sterilized from us, and the glow from our TVs, perhaps more than ever we need to explore the poorly lit.

My nation, like myself, must remember to breathe. Failure to pause is to risk being addicted to the dramatic energy that coursed through our veins years ago. We must stop to collectively look at the habit and the results of a national attention that moves us from one sensational tragic story to another. I believe that because we are so defensive about our positions, our take on guns, or immigration, or these hot button issues, these "stories" it seem to get told and then forgotten.

With no collective self-reflection, there can really never be any mythic journey, or moral improvement.

To forget that to the majority of the world we are among the great security risks, we are among the great propagandizers. We participate in what author Steven Kinser describes us as a thoughtless child who without thinking leaves a trail of toys and mess behind us.

We will, reflective or not, as a nation or as individuals, never get it all right. That's not possible. What we should strive for, is to be the kind of warriors that don't make the TV soldiers and heroes of our own characters, may that first act of heroism be the dangerous covert act of quietly and lovingly performing reconnaissance on the shadowy places of our own hearts.

That's the best exit strategy I know of for all future conflicts.

Amen