

Living with Threats of Terrorism
Sunday, September 11, 2022
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

Genelle Guzman-McMillan, a 9/11 survivor says, "On September 11 I always take the day off. I want to be in a peaceful quiet place praying. It is a day I both mourn and celebrate." If I had been in the twin towers or the Pentagon on September 11 and had survived, I think I too would celebrate, but I would also most certainly ask, "Why me?" Why did I survive and so many others did not? And I would mourn all those others, the ones who did not survive.

This week CBS reported that, "Gilbert Mata woke up excited Tuesday for the first day of school since a gunman's bullet tore through his leg three months ago in a fourth grade classroom in Uvalde.

"The 10-year-old has healed from his physical wounds, but burning smells still remind him of gunfire and the sight of many police officers recalls the day in May that an assailant killed 19 of his classmates and two teachers.

"On a morning that many Uvalde families had dreaded, a new school year began in the small South Texas town with big hugs on sidewalks, patrol cars parked at every corner and mothers wiping away tears while pulling away from the curb in the drop-off line.

"Mata was ready to return, this time with his own cellphone. His mother, Corina Comacho, had a [tougher time letting her child go back to class.](#)

"There's a certain time he can get his phone out and text us he's OK,' she said after walking him into a new school, Flores Elementary, and dropping him off behind doors with new locks. 'That's like, 'OK, that's good. Now I feel better,'" [Uvalde students go back to school for 1st time since attack \(msn.com\)](#)

What is terrorism? According to an online dictionary it is "the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims." So, 9-11 terrorism, Uvalde probably not. Still, I think there is not much difference in how we learn to live with both.

Someone with a grievance against someone in this congregation could come and start shooting or someone who wants to make a statement about government expenditure of resources for older citizens could come in and start shooting. While we might like to know the answer to why this happened our feelings, our reactions, and our responses will not likely be much different.

Acts of violence, terrorism or not, can bring out both the best and the worst in us. The worst is usually prompted by fear, and fear is a normal reaction. Living with the knowledge that there are some who might target places in our country for violence because of political differences or living with the knowledge that any school, place of worship, workplace, movie theater, shopping mall, concert venue or grocery store could be the next target of someone with guns and/or bombs means living with some level of fear.

How we live with that fear is the topic I would like to address this morning. I think of Elizabeth Kubler Ross's stages of grief; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These are not stages we go

through in a neat row. We might have periods of time where one reaction is strongest, and we may have days where we cycle through all of the reactions.

To acknowledge that our world is not safe is to grieve having to let go of the thought that it is. My world is not safe. I could deny that. After all, what is the likelihood that something will happen to me? Maybe it would be good to just pretend I don't know that the world isn't safe. I will simply trust that my world is safe and let it go at that. The trouble with that is that you may need to stop watching the news or reading the paper. To stay in your bubble of denial you may have to ignore that going through security at the airport is different today than it was before 9.11. When you pick up your grandchild at school and the school secretary makes you show your id before they unlock the door your bubble of denial may be stretched pretty thin.

American politician and diplomat John Kerry said, "Remember the hours after Sept. 11 when we came together as one! It was the worst day we have ever seen, but it brought out the best in all of us." Certainly, many people came together and were there for one another. People gave blood, volunteered to go to help in the cleanup, sent words and tokens of thanks and comfort to NYC first responders, but there were also some of us who reacted with anger. People who were Muslim or perceived as Muslim were attacked in the street, some killed. There is nothing wrong with feeling anger. It is one of the natural reactions of grief. But turning that anger into our own violence makes things worse not better.

The next of Kubler Ross's reactions of grief is bargaining. If I build an underground shelter and stock it with a year's worth of food and water, I trust then that I will be safe. If I stay in my home, order everything I buy delivered, attend worship services on Zoom, watch movies on Netflix, then I trust I will be safe. If I get my own gun, then I think I will be able to defend myself and others against any attack. Of course, bargaining is not so very different than denial. We acknowledge that the threat is there, but we assure ourselves that what we do has mitigated that threat.

Somewhere between or in both bargaining and the reaction of depression is a response I have heard from one of my own relatives. "I'm glad I'm old. The world has gone to hell in a handbasket. Our only hope is for Jesus to come back soon." There is absolutely nothing we can do. Maybe some deus ex machina will appear, but....

The last of Kubler Ross's grief reactions is acceptance. I think Rabbi Harold Kushner, writer of [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#), illustrates this reaction well when he writes, "... The question we should be asking is not, "Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?" That is really an unanswerable, pointless question. A better question would be "Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?"

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Suffering_and_Evil/Responses/Modern_Solutions/When_Bad_Things_Happen.shtml.

When we are reacting from acceptance our answer to this question is not going to be our own violence or denial or bargaining or depression but figuring out how to respond in ways that help. What does that look like in response to acknowledging that we are always going to live with threats of terrorism and threats of random violence?

For one little boy in Uvalde, Texas it means being ready to go back to school. For one survivor of 9.11 it means taking every September 11 as a day off to go to quiet place to pray, to mourn and to celebrate.

For those of us who have never personally lived through an attack it may mean making a personal commitment to nonviolence or volunteering in some way to help those who have personally experienced such violence or maybe its ending a time of meditation, reflection or prayer with words such as the Florida Community of Mindfulness uses to end their meditation time, "May we share any merit or benefit that arises from our practice. May the effects ripple continuously to aid in the healing and transformation of the world."

Can meditation or prayer truly do that? I think it can if it changes you.

Our world is a violent place, but we choose how we will live in it. Neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl wrote in his book, Man's Search for Meaning, "(A) (hu)Man could be defined as the being who invented the gas chambers for human extermination. But (the) (hu)man can also be defined as the being who entered the gas chambers upright with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on (the) lips." Did the people who entered the gas chambers like that change anything? We might say they didn't, but is that so? Perhaps each act of strength or hope does make some difference in this violent world in which we live.

We end with a meditation by Caitlin Cotter Coilberg.

"As the news cycle brings us images of terror and heartbreak once again,
We grieve together
As each of us faces into this new level of horror,
We grieve together
As we remember other moments of pain, fear, and loss,
We grieve together

"Yearning for an end to violence and suffering,
We grieve together
Yearning for a true peace where all feel safe and whole,
We grieve together
Yearning for greater justice, compassion, and wisdom,
We grieve together

"In the shadow of violence we remember we are all connected in love
We grieve together
In the shadow of violence we recommit to working for a better world
We grieve together
In the shadow of violence we find comfort and courage in each other
We grieve together."