

# Terrorism

## Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

03/28/04

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### Reading

We have no reason to harbor any mistrust against our world, for it is not against *us*. If it has terrors, they are *our* terrors; if it has abysses, these abysses belong to *us*; if there are dangers, we must try to love them. How could we forget those ancient myths...the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses? Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

--Rainer Maria Rilke, from *The Enlightened Mind*, edited by Stephen Mitchell

During my seminary years, I worked as a developer for a company that built corporate web sites. Most of the people I worked with were far younger than me and far better programmers...and like all good computer nerds, they also loved computer games. My son, Jack, would sometimes come to work with me on his days off from school, and at lunchtime we would have these huge computer game competitions over the network. (The games sometimes stretched into mid-afternoon, depending on our workload and the passion of the game players).

I remember one game that we played called "Counter-Strike." It involved two teams: one team being "the terrorists" and the other, "the counter-terrorists," and I always had trouble figuring out which team I was on when the game started. Their uniforms were only slightly different; not surprisingly, they *all* carried guns; and though I finally figured out that it was the terrorists' job to keep the hostages and the counter-terrorists' job to rescue the hostages, the means employed were surprisingly similar. I remember one time shouting out at the beginning of the game (we were all playing at our own computers in our respective cubicles), "Which team am I? Am I terrorist or counter-terrorist?" And a fellow programmer replied in exasperation, "It doesn't matter. Just look for the other team and kill 'em!" And, indeed, at the end of the game you would hear the voice from the computer say, "Terrorists win!" or "Counter-terrorists win!" But by that point, it didn't really matter to most of us, because we were already, within the world of the game, dead.

Sadly enough, I've thought of that game many times as I have sought a clearer understanding of what

terrorism is and who qualifies as a terrorist. The identification seems to be rather fluid and based mostly on which team is talking: the terrorists are the guys in the *other* uniforms, in the *other* countries, with the *other* beliefs. And, indeed, some people switch teams, one to the other, in the popular and political understanding of this country, seemingly without any substantial change in their behavior—The Taliban, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Colonel (Muammar) Gaddafi,...friend to enemy, enemy to friend...

So, as much as I puzzled over this choice of theme for my sermon this week, wondering why I had chosen such a dark topic to follow my ordination service, now when I am feeling so amazingly fortunate and grateful to you all and positive about our future---(how on earth did I have the idea, lo those many months ago, that I would want to immediately immerse myself in something so dark and complex, something so replete with opportunities for saying the wrong thing, something so difficult to disentangle from political propaganda and strong and painful emotions and the worst of human suffering...what the heck was I thinking?)—as much as I chided myself to plan better next time, I *do* remember what first led me to write the word "Terrorism" down in my schedule of services: it was concern that a word that seems so mercurial in meaning is being used over and over and over again in the public arena as if it was crystal clear what was being talked about, as if, indeed, it was absurd (or worse, disloyal) to even question what was being talked about, and that such a word is being used to justify a redirection of tax dollars from much-needed social services to war, to justify startling repressions of civil rights, to justify continued military action in places that have tenuous connections at best to terrorism, and to justify the killing of so many people--men, women and children simply going about their normal lives--who have *no* connection whatsoever to terrorism in even its most absurdly inclusive definition. It was concern that a word, so powerful in its evocation of tragedy and fear, is being used to close down discussion rather than open up our sincere and searching conversation. And it was inspired from a hope that we can, together, work to fashion an appropriate and meaningful response to the troubling realities at the heart of any discussion of terrorism.

In trying to define terrorism, I remembered Noam Chomsky pointing out that terrorism once referred to the brutal actions of a state against its own citizens, whereas now it refers solely to individuals or groups acting against the state, making it virtually impossible, by definition, for existing governments to be accused of terrorism. Again, it seems that it is not the actions that define terrorism, but the actors.

Along these lines, it was interesting to find these definitions in a book entitled, *Confronting Fear: A History of Terrorism*:

*Terrorism is defined as violence perpetrated by either individuals or groups against a more powerful opponent, usually a government (and/or its citizenry), the goal of which is to disrupt normal functioning by the dissemination of fear and intimidation, thereby forcing a change in the policy or approach of that opponent in the direction of the terrorists' political or social program or viewpoint. Terrorist acts include assassination, bombing, kidnapping, hijacking, and the use of weapons of mass destruction.*

This is in keeping with the newer definition of terrorism in terms of who perpetrates the acts.

However, in this same book the term "terror" is described as *a systematic policy of violence and intimidation by an existing government intended to further the domination and control of its own population.*

This would fall into place with the way that Chomsky says "terrorism" was originally defined.

Neither of these definitions would include assassination, bombing, or the use of weapons of mass destruction by a government against another country. This would still fall, one presumes, under the benign-by-comparison term: "war."

The introduction to this book goes on to describe categories of terrorism based on the type of perpetrator.

There are individual acts of terror, exemplified, for example, by the recent case of the Unabomber.

There are acts committed by groups, which is probably the sense in which terrorism is most often used. The author points out that terrorist cells and organizations of this type have been motivated by beliefs across the ideological spectrum, from anarchist to fascist, Christian to Muslim.

There is state-sponsored terrorism, which might include countries like Russia, Syria, Libya and many would claim that the United States belongs on this list through its support of repressive regimes in Latin America and the Middle East, leading to at least a partial response to the question of "why they hate us" (and leading, also, to Chomsky's remark that a good first step in the fight against terrorism is for the U.S. to stop engaging in it). States choose to support terrorist groups in other countries, the author points out, precisely because it is less visible and less risky than alternative means of settling issues, and, of course, easier to deny because of the shadowy chain of responsibility.

And, finally, there is state terrorism, the frightening decision by states to impersonate "their... oppositions, committing acts of terror they make sure are ascribed to their opponents in order to discredit [them] and defuse a social crisis." It should be noted here that, even when the state does not impersonate the acts of the rebels, terrorist acts are often seized upon "by the other side" to manipulate people and to discourage critical thinking and dissent. This is the stuff of conspiratorial nightmares (and I have enough of those already).

But the nightmares of terrorism run far deeper than my conspiratorial fears. They take shape in brutal deaths, unimaginable injuries, lives lived against a backdrop of fear and intimidation breeding vengeful acts and further spirals of violence. This is maybe nowhere so evident as in Israel and Palestine today.

David Horowitz, the author of a new book about daily life in Israel entitled *Still Life With Bombers*, [describes the process of leaving home](#) as "to enter a kind of grisly lottery — going out into a world in which there was absolutely no certainty that we, our children and all the other people we loved would make it home safely again at the end of the day."

Israeli journalist [Gideon Levy describes](#) the tactic of Brigadier General Gadi Shamni of Israeli Defense Operations called "stimulus and response" in which armed Palestinian individuals are encouraged to come forth and then killed. This method resulted in the death of innocent people including children, yet General Shamni just received an important promotion. "In Israel we count only the number of terrorists who are killed," writes Levy, "never the terrorists who are born as a result of [our tactics]."

Just yesterday [the New York Times reported](#) that a six-year old Palestinian boy was shot in a conflict that resulted when Israeli military vehicles entered the West Bank refugee camp. Israelis said the shot ricocheted from a Palestinian's gun as he shot at their jeep. Palestinian witnesses said the fatal shot was Israeli gunfire. Whichever it was, there is no disputing that the boy died on the way to the hospital. "Israeli soldiers raided the camp to search for militants planning suicide bombings, but left empty-handed," the article concluded.

Eighty-two year old [Pnina Failer](#) is a former nurse and a volunteer for Physicians for Human Rights. "I am Jewish," she says, "I am Israeli. I am a citizen of this state, and I am very upset. I am mourning for my people, who are getting killed and wounded...Here...I know two people, one has a grandson who lost an eye; he was in the army. The other has a grandson who was in a bus and there was a suicide attack on it. A girl near him was killed. He was wounded. I am mourning my people and the Palestinian people. I want my government to stop being an occupying force, to get out of the territories and to give hope to both people. I am accusing especially *my* government because it is *mine*. I pay taxes and I am a citizen, and I am responsible in a way for what they are doing. But I am not blind, I can't say the Palestinian leaders are all...saints."

These are a few stories of the civilians, the regular folks, the targets of terrorism and the targets of those who would cynically manipulate the fear generated by terrorism. These are just a few random examples of the toll that terrorism takes on individuals and they leave us all asking why, though no answer will quite suffice for those closest to the devastation.

I remember one man who lost friends in the destruction of the World Trade Center, responding to those who were looking for explanations of what had led to the devastation of 9-11, saying that he felt as if his own mother had been attacked and murdered and now he was surrounded by people who wanted to explain to him why she deserved it. I heard the rage in that statement...the anger against an utterly unjust act...the anguished impatience with those who would seek to ameliorate that anger with certain-to-be-insufficient reasons...But my question is, how far can our compassion for those who suffer and die, our rage against injustice, our impatience with neat and tidy political excuses extend? How far-flung is our family? We grieve our mother in this country, and what about our brothers in Spain, our sisters in Palestine, our cousins in Israel, our aunts in Sudan and our uncles in Haiti...does this family extend beyond national borders? Religious borders? Political borders? Does it have sides? Teams?

Terror-*ism*, we call it, as if it were a school of thought, a philosophy, a religious expression...Stoicism, Existentialism, Unitarianism, Terrorism. And, indeed, for all of the varied definitions we might find for the term, there are some principles that guide most forms of terrorism: the willingness to injure and kill

civilians in pursuit of concessions, to create and manipulate fear and intimidation to attain a goal. And it is the willful disregard of two principles we hold dear, two principles that are radical enough to change the world: the inherent worth and dignity of every human and respect for the interdependent web of all living things. Terrorists don't care about individuals. Timothy McVeigh's use of the term "collateral damage" for those children who died in the day care in the explosion in Oklahoma City has an unfortunately long and accepted history within the military, but it is at odds with our humanity and our faith. Terrorism, like war, turns people, individuals, into symbols, and symbols can be easily destroyed without pangs of conscience; it is our important task, I believe, to work at turning those symbols back into human life. We have to tell the stories, as many as we can, as exhausting and painful as it might be, we need to expose the suffering underneath the collateral damage, to show the flesh beneath the symbol, to do our best to act with beauty and courage when cynics tell us we are hopelessly naïve, to hold the power of love higher than any weapon...