

Service  
Sunday, November 11, 2007  
Third Unitarian Church of Chicago

### **Opening Words**

It's been said that "Terrorism is an intolerant reaction to the hypertolerance of our societies." Did you know that in our history, some of the people we have supported were thought to be terrorists. That begs the question: do you call it terrorism if you believe in the cause? Can peace ever really come from violence?

### **Spoken Mediation and Reading**

Astounding, isn't it, how much information we gather without relying on language? Our grandparents used to predict weather patterns just by looking at the sky, and relying on their experience; a sidelong glance from your partner either ...I don't need to explain this, which is proof of what I just said. Any reasonably sentient three-year old knows what I'm talking about. And so do you, when you think about the people, or the causes, you know best. Theology is an attempt to articulate what we know in our hearts to be true, but can't prove, and so language seems necessary to articulate this truth. To the true believer, this explanation may be useful, but ultimately, it's superfluous. A poem by Brenda Shaw says it far better than I ever could.

### **Parent**

Father, I know more about Mother  
than I do about you,  
and she died when I was a baby.  
I lived with you for eighteen years.

In all that time you seldom spoke.  
Your favorite words were "Oh my gosh!"  
said in three different tones  
for three different sorts of occasion:

In surprise  
at an unexpected pleasant happening.

In anxiety if I were proposing  
some crazy stunt and you were worried.

In despair if the worst  
that could possibly happen had happened.

I wonder—is that what you said  
when Mother died without warning,  
without saying goodbye?

Somewhere along the way  
I asked you questions—very few.  
One was, "What was Mother like?"  
but you couldn't find the words.

Another was "Which of your two wives  
did you like the best?"  
You said "The one who gave me you,"  
and choked up.

Later I asked  
"Do you believe in God?"  
You said "No, I guess I don't."  
On that, at least, we agreed.

We knew each other on a level  
beyond words.  
There were no divided loyalties.  
I knew you'd stand behind me or beside me  
whatever happened.

There was one question I never had to ask.  
The one sure thing in a nightmare world  
was the knowledge that you loved me.

Surprising, then, what those loves at a pre-lingual, bio-chemical level,  
will inspire in us, and lead us to do.

### Offering Thoughts

Good morning to all of you on this 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Armistice Day, when men of great import, stern countenance and weary pragmatism ended the “war to end all wars.” They were soon to be found wrong on that score, but they had the right idea. With that sobering thought, and as fall begins to slip almost imperceptibly toward winter, let me ask our newcomers this morning to stand as they would like and to introduce themselves, and perhaps also to tell us how they heard of us.

With respect to our offering, the poet Dana Gioia has said, “Money. You don't know where it's been, but you put it where your mouth is. And it talks.” So let it talk for you, as you otherwise listen silently to the music that is very much a part of our ministry at Third Church.

### Reading

#### Doing Nothing

When I passed him near the bus stop  
on Union Square while the cops  
cuffed his hands behind his back, while he  
said, "I didn't *do* anything,"  
I didn't, either,  
do anything but look away,  
a little afraid they might cuff me  
if I paid too much attention,  
and walked on still wondering  
what he might've done  
and still more what I  
might've done.

### Sermon:

#### “In An Age of Terrorism”

My colleague the Reverend Renjillian might know from his theological studies the old saw about sermons: that there are four kinds, and four kinds only: those intended to reform, those to inform, those for comfort and the ones for inspiration. I have never been able to rely on just *one* format per sermon—because it doesn't seem real to me.

You know that the great eulogy is both sad *and* funny. And how much of one key incident in your life—for instance, the way he looked at you when he proposed, or what you said in anger to a former boss—how much of those events means the same to you as time goes by?

The message today isn't so much about one kind of sermon—as it is a sermon about *one* word, and who controls what that word means. It all depends on who says it. I'll explain.

Norman Mailer died yesterday. He was famous and infamous for his novels, for his behavior, for his scathing and funny anti-Vietnam writing, but when he said as an unrepentant male chauvinist he was against birth control, he meant it. This is because, as the *New York Times* reported, he fathered nine children from eight different women. Now, this is *not* what Mrs. Clinton would define as “reproductive rights.”

And yet sometimes people mean *exactly* what they say, and based on who they are, they surprise you when they say it. A Protestant minister, in Chicago, the Sunday following of what was portrayed as a terrorist event, said, “We need a careful definition of what freedom is...if it means to preach destruction, and scatter the seeds of anarchy [well], the sooner we exchange the Republic for an iron-handed monarchy the better it will be for all of us.” This is a minister of the one who, ironically, died to set us all free: a respected community leader who had a great view of the steady influx of immigrants of from far away into the city, because they often marched right outside his office window over on Ashland Avenue.

No one doubts now, or doubted then, the need for cheap labor. At the time of that bombing, we were benefiting from a generous immigration policy. Businesses can't, nor couldn't, run without it. As one of you said to me, memorably, last July, “who else is signing up to lay sod and pour concrete in 100 degree heat?” And after that attack, you were either considered safe or suspected based on how well you spoke English. This is just like what happened to the Islamic community in Dearborn, Michigan, after 9/11. Media types rushed to judgment, saying it was time to build to fix broken borders; time to spend real money on homeland security.

The pictures of the men thought to be responsible for the bombing were of course all over the press, only the events I'm talking about weren't in 2001, or after the immigration marches a few years ago. Did you know today, as well as Armistice Day, is the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "Black Friday," the hanging of Albert Parsons and three of his anarchist friends? The minister I mentioned was David Swing, preaching the Sunday after the Haymarket explosion in 1886, to a congregation of Yankee, nativist, wealthy, anti-labor elites.

Probably a lot of you know this story, but let me recap it for those who are less familiar. On May 3, 1886, striking workers in Chicago met near the McCormick machine plant on the near South Side. A fight broke out when replacement workers attempted to cross the picket lines. The police attacked the strikers, killed four and wounded several others, and now the city's working community was up in arms.

Word spread fast, and a rally was planned close to downtown. It began peacefully under a light rain the next night. The activist August Spies, who saw the McCormick attack, spoke to a crowd while standing in an open wagon on Des Plaines Street. Witnesses said Spies didn't want a riot. Meanwhile, lines of police watched nearby. The crowd was so calm that the popular four-term Mayor, Carter Harrison, walked home early. Nothing was out of control.

Yet soon after the mayor left, the police ordered the rally to break up and began marching towards the wagon. A bomb was then thrown at the police line and exploded, killing an officer named Mathias J. Degan. The police immediately opened fire. While several police officers aside from Degan were hurt by the bomb, most of the police casualties were caused by bullets. About sixty officers were wounded in the riot; no one knows how many civilians were. This is because the injured were afraid to get help. They didn't want to get punished for their part in the riot.

After a manhunt, eight men were charged as accomplices to murder in a conspiracy, even though no principal murdered was ever found. The judge made only a slight attempt to remove those with any bias against the anarchists. And so, after a sham trial worthy of a totalitarian state, the jury returned guilty verdicts for all eight defendants, with death sentences for seven.

The sentencing resulted in protests around the world and made the defendants international political celebrities. The press mostly cheered, and stoked the fears of middle-class Americans on labor radicalism, saying the “Slavic wolves” and other workers had only themselves to blame for their problems.

An appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court didn’t work. One of the men committed suicide in his cell; two others were granted a plea for clemency. The three others who didn’t ask for clemency, because they weren’t guilty in the first place, were hanged on November 11.

Six years later, Governor Altgeld signed pardons for Sam Fielden, Oscar Neebe and Michael Schwab after having concluded all eight defendants were innocent. The pardons ended Altgeld’s career, which is one of the reasons we’re the only church in America with his likeness on our walls.

In the first reading, I talked about how deep love might make you stand beside someone, no matter what. Albert Parsons’s wife Lucy, a woman of color, kept preaching the labor cause, and getting thrown in jail, well into her 80’s.

I’ve preached on Altgeld before, but not about terrorism. Haymarket was our first “Red Scare.” And this is how it affects us at Third Church. The government’s interpretation of the men buried over at Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park—that they were terrorists—set the tone for how the government dealt with labor. And no small number of us at TUC have fought in labor’s cause.

In 1920, Congress said it was legal to jail or deport people for even *having a flier* for a radical meeting. The hard left was hounded and spied upon through and beyond the fall of Communism.

I may well have failed some of the members who have died while I've been here, because as I look back at the memorial services I've presided over—and it's hard to forget that we lost about ten percent of the congregation to death about two years ago—what I could have said is that these deceased were considered at some point in their lives as enemies of the state due to their political affiliations—that they could have been, or were, charged with sedition, and thought capable of terrorism.

Unlike the guy in the poem, we've usually done *something*, and not just walked away, wondering what we *could* have done. But for decades, the powers that be have given us credit, too much so, for the wrong kind of power: the power to blow up the instruments of the state.

Back then, *our government* was in charge of terror. Don't take my word for it. The eminent American historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote that even with a minimum of radical activity, and not much class conflict, the U.S. has had a maximum of industrial violence: at least 160 times, he reckons, when government troops broke into strikes, and at least 700 labor disputes in which deaths were recorded.

In 1969, *this church* was bombed when we showed a movie about the riots at the Democratic Convention. I suspect it wasn't Harry Gaynor, or Norman, who threw it because the movie started without them.

This is what Noam Chomsky calls “the Fifth Freedom”: our government taking any course of action to ensure that existing privilege is protected and advanced.”

Supposedly now, we live in an age of international terrorism, ready to be waged against us. When, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, have we lived in an era when terrorism *wasn't* used for population control?

Or when, since the beginning of religion? Long before al Qaeda, from the seventh until the mid-19th centuries, there was a Hindu cult called the Thugees—that's where we get our word, “thug.” They're said to have committed at least 1 million murders in the Indian sub-continent. They were perhaps the last and best example of religiously-inspired terrorism until the phenomenon reemerged a little over 20 years ago.

One scholar said, “Before the 19th century, religion provided the only acceptable justifications for terror. Secular reasons didn’t [come] until the French Revolution.”

The Sicari and the Zealots were Jewish groups during the Roman occupation of the first century Middle East. They murdered to send a message to the Roman authorities and Jews who collaborated with them. A Shia Muslim sect known as the Ismailis did the same thing in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. Like terrorists of God today, the Ismailis viewed their deaths as a guarantee they’d get to paradise.

And this is what I’m getting at. Once the government was in charge of terror; maybe it still is. Can it be true that they are the best equipped to contend against the ruthless, religious or political, who will kill at any cost?

There’s a documentary out now called “Terror’s Advocate.” It’s about the iconoclastic French lawyer Jacques Verges. From 1957 until independence in 1962, he won renown for defending Algerians whom the French called terrorists and he considered patriots, including the woman he later married.

He’s defended some of the most notorious international figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and was once associated with the Cambodian mass murder Pol Pot. “There is no bad cause,” he said, adding that he had been willing to defend both the former Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein.

“Everyone has a right to be defended,” he said. He’d even defend President Bush, as long as he admitted he was guilty. His point is: how do you understand the roots of terror, and the relationships it starts, unless you know terrorists well?

The Algerians weren’t terrorists to many in North Africa, or in France. The Haymarket Martyrs aren’t to you and me. Both had audiences overseas. Just as we know who the thugs actually were in 1886, and later up to today, let’s be honest enough to admit that there are people out there who are who are just as ruthless, and want to do us in. And some of the ruthless are in our government--our nominal protectors.

How should we, acting in concert with our principles in the liberal faith, confront the people who would take us out on a moment's notice? Is our faith in the progress of humanity, our faith in love equal or better than their hate?

I have tried mostly to inform you; tried a little to be inspire you, keepers of the Haymarket flame; probably failed completely to comfort you, but I've also told you what I always do: to remind you that if there's a need for progressive reform, and there always is, that you be out in front of it, teaching me how best to walk my faith in peace.

### **Closing Words**

Please--keep paying too much attention, so that we never have to wonder what we might have done, might have said, for someone whose rights hang in the balance.