

“Disaster Religion”

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As always in these Sunday morning theological excursions, this sermon is about *why we do the things we do*. And, as always, we ask, “*Why am I doing this particular thing? Have I really thought about my actions, and what are their consequences? Am I simply following suit, following the crowd, thoughtlessly finding myself ‘in line’ with the crowd?*”

This sermon is also about the origins of religion. It asks, *Is religion nothing more than a desperate response to deal with the ongoing disasters of our lives? Or, is religion the healing agent in the aftermath of those disasters?*

Today’s service is about the interesting ways that “disaster” forces us to rethink and perhaps re-design the way we live our lives. Think of how people react to events like tsunamis, earthquakes, tornadoes and other “acts of God”.

Also, think of how we react to individual, personal disasters like terminal illness diagnoses, deaths in the family, and other dire health crises. And look at economic disasters—for instance, what’s happening to Ford and GM workers right now (like my 40-something nephews in Ohio who are being cast out of their jobs in so-called “early retirement” programs.)

Because so many of the disasters we all encounter are apparently beyond our control do we need a bulwark and a defense against them? Did we create religion to do just that?

An associated question is, Does religion only do its work *after* the disaster? Or, does it *cause* the disaster, only for the sake of being in a position of power afterward? A close inspection of the great disasters throughout history indicates that very thing.

We remember, in our review, that the real controlling element is power. In that regard I want to make a distinction between religion and power. They are two very different forces, although they have often historically been joined at the hip.

I want to defend religion, as odd as that may seem. For I truly believe religion offers us a way out.

For me, religion is not about control—it is about healing and comfort to the afflicted. Power is *all* about control. So the discussion is really about power and how it comes into being and how it is exercised.

So let’s look, for a moment, at a great big disaster in our national history—how it happened, how we responded to it, and where we are now these seven years later.

Of course, I’m speaking of the disastrous events of September 11, 2001.

We surely did hope for a positive and *healing* response from our government, for it really was a golden opportunity for us to unite with the whole wide world who, at the time, were in great sympathy for and with us. Of course, we blew it. We took the whole wide world’s good will and blew it.

Part of my inspiration for this service comes from Naomi Klein’s remarkable book, *The Shock Doctrine*, which has to do with global economics and government. Her thesis is that “neo-liberal economic programs have repeatedly been implemented without the consent of the governed by creating and/or taking advantage of various forms of *national shock therapy*.” One example of this is from economist Milton Friedman: “*Only a crisis*—actual or perceived—produces real change... our basic function (is) to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”

According to Klein’s book, that disaster opened the door for the government to enact its agenda. While the world was in shock (and in profound sympathy with America), the government hastily enacted legislation such as the Patriot Act, which cut deeply into our centuries-old way of doing things. The Shock Doctrine also explains how the so-called War on Terror was instituted, which eventually evolved into the Iraq War.

A primary point is that these new tactics were enacted while we were in shock, and would have never been approved in democratic elections. Now we find ourselves, among other things, operating as an empire, complete with all its inherent support and advancement systems.

Instead of taking that good will and translating it into a honest and unifying world-wide response, we chose instead—as a nation led by our president—to defy the reality of the event, and to move it instead into our president’s personal agenda. The result: everyone around the world now distrusts and disavows our standing as a nation of true dignity and worth. Oh, so very, very sad!

I wonder if this true in our personal lives. *Does it take a crisis—actual or perceived—to produce real change?* Is this why we have religion? Is this why we are willing to go along with leaders like George W. Bush, even when we clearly see they are leading us into the ruin of our country? Is this why we turn to Jesus, our friend, when everything is falling apart around us?

This brings up another question with which I have struggled all of my career as a Unitarian Universalist minister: Do we approach our spirituality in the negative or the positive. Do we intend to be “reactionary” or are we “pro-active”? I suspect that some of you have also considered this.

I don’t want to be a religious person *negatively*. I want to be a religious person *positively*. And I truly believe that we all want that too.

So what do we do? What is our response to the ongoing onslaught of everyday life? What is your response? What is mine?

I don’t want to believe that I am living my life out of a *response* mode. I want to believe that I am living my life out of a positive faith—a *pro-active* way of being. I want to live in the promise of “possibilities”, rather than regret and remorse. And I think all of you do too.

So how do we—or rather, how *should* we respond positively to crisis? After 9/11, our president invited us to go shopping, as if that would somehow heal the wounds.

You know, that’s a popular response to crisis: *Go shopping! Buy yourself a little something to ward off the blues!* The official name for this is “retail therapy”. There was a recent survey which indicated that people may be willing to spend more on themselves when they’re feeling sad.

The study of 33 volunteers, to be published in the June 2008 edition of *Psychological Science*, found that feeling sad leads to self-centered thinking—and this, in turn, can lead to a greater likelihood of dropping extra cash on something to make you feel better.

To reach their conclusions, a team of researchers from Carnegie Mellon, Harvard, Stanford and the University of Pittsburgh showed volunteers either a video clip that showed grief following a tragic death, or a neutral clip from a nature show. Afterward, participants had the chance to purchase an ordinary item—a sporty water bottle. They found that people who’d watched the sad video clip offered an average of 300 percent more money for the item than those who had viewed the neutral clip.

Lieberman says there’s a strong rationale for the connection between sadness and spending. “People who are sad, miserable or depressed usually feel an emptiness inside,” Lieberman says. “So they engage in behaviors that fill up this emptiness, such as eating too much, drinking too much or spending too much.”

This is, of course, a basic element of religion’s value in our human reality. What do we do with the emptiness we all feel inside of us? And especially, what about that emptiness—actually, powerlessness—we feel in the aftermath of a disaster?

An offset to this ideal of retail therapy is its opposite: purge therapy. Again, this is a religious concept, since religion has sometimes suggested that humans become *ascetic* in order to battle with the trials and tribulations of the world. It’s *hedonism* (self-indulgence and self-gratification) versus *asceticism* (simplicity and plainness).

Here’s another idea I think true religion offers: “Come together.” If this were Cheap Theology Sunday, I would break into that Beatles song right now. Or maybe I would use “Get Together” by the 1960’s rock group Youngblood.

True religion is about getting together. It is, as I’ve often said, about the great “meeting”. What makes Naomi Klein’s thesis so poignant for me is that the shock doctrine excludes the coming together of the “demos”, the people. The great decisions are made behind closed doors among the power elite,

