

NOTHING WILL EVER BE THE SAME

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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In the summer of 2005, my wife Holly, my daughter Zoe and I took what so far remains our favorite family vacation. We rode on horseback through the Loire Valley in France. As many of you know, both Holly and Zoe are accomplished riders. I am not, which is why the steed and saddle selected for me provoked, initially at least, peals of laughter among our small group of riders. My horse looked like a Budweiser Clydesdale, not a lithe and nimble warm-blood or thoroughbred. And my saddle wasn't proper English tack, but rather an Australian stock saddle, which looks like a Lazy-Boy recliner with stirrups instead of a footrest. By the third day, however, no one was laughing at me anymore. They were saddle-sore to the bone, and I was still comfy in my Lazy-Boy saddle.

We began our ride in Sancerre, where the vineyards produce one of the world's most elegant white wines and where the great tower—the Tour des Fiefs—stands in silent tribute to courage of French Protestants, who withstood a genocidal eight-month siege by Roman Catholic troops during the Wars of Religion in the 16th century.

On a typical day, we'd ride for several hours in the morning through ancient forests, verdant hills, and Van Gogh fields filled with sunflowers. Then we'd pull into a tiny village, put our horses in the church yard, and traipse into the village restaurant for a three-course lunch. The wine eased our aches, and the camaraderie made us friends. Thus fortified, we'd saddle up and ride for another three or four hours until we reached one of the private chateaux—typically owned by a member of the French aristocracy and located on dozens of square miles of farmland and forest—where we would have dinner and spend the night.

As I recall, the most memorable dinner came on the third day. The count joined us and introduced his girlfriend, explaining that the countess was spending the week at their home in Paris. He then proceeded to offer Zoe a glass of champagne—Zoe was thirteen at the time—and then he proposed marriage to her. Zoe wisely accepted the champagne (we were in France, after all) and declined the marriage proposal.

During the soup course, we went around the table and introduced our party of six to our hosts. One woman whom I will call Wendy was traveling alone. She explained to the count that she was a housewife from a small town in suburban New York City and had four children at home, all boys. Responding with DSK-like patriarchal entitlement, the count asked, “And how is it that your husband allows such an attractive wife to leave his children at home and travel abroad alone?”

Already knowing the answer, the rest of us sat in tense silence. After a pause, Wendy replied without affect, “My husband is dead.”

Stunned, the count tossed back his fourth Scotch and then effused, “Mon Dieu! Pardon moi! I am so sorry. I did not know.”

Silence reigned at the table for a few awkward moments, until the count decided that the most prudent course of conversation was a different subject.

“So how are Americans feeling about 9/11 these days? Are Americans still worried about terrorism?”

The rest of us at the table froze, our eyes on our soup. We waited for Wendy, knowing the answer was hers to give. Finally, she replied, “Yes, we are still worried about terrorism. You see, my husband died on 9/11.”

Horrified, the count recoiled in his chair, mumbled another set of apologies, and then fell silent.

The next morning, as we rode through a forest in the pouring rain, Wendy explained that she had never before needed to tell anyone about her husband: everyone in her small town knew what had happened. And for the first time since 9/11, she was away from her children, the youngest of whom was not yet born when the towers fell.

And then Wendy did something else she had not done in four years. As she mocked the count’s insufferable sexism, she began to laugh. And the rest of us joined in. After four years of mourning, with her husband dead and her children safe, Wendy rode through the rain in a forest in France, laughing.

In the harrowing days and weeks after 9/11, Adam Zagajewski’s poem titled “Try to Praise the Mutilated World” gave us a measure of hope. He writes:

Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June’s long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.
You’ve seen the refugees heading nowhere,
you’ve heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth’s scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the grey feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.

The poem begins by acknowledging that our world has been mutilated: nothing will ever be the same. The scars run deep; the losses endure.

In his opening words this morning, Michael Magdol mentioned his colleague Carol Demitz, who perished on 9/11. Carol was on the 94th floor of Tower Two. She left behind her husband Fred and their daughter Annie, who was almost four and a student at the All Souls Nursery School. Shortly after 9/11, Annie announced to Fred that all of her teachers here at All Souls were dead. No, her father replied, your teachers are fine;

you'll see them this afternoon. It's your mother who is dead. No, she insisted, my mommy is at a meeting, and she'll be home tonight. I'm sorry, sweetie, Fred responded. Mommy is not coming home. Mommy is dead.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this tenth anniversary of 9/11 is that we remember our losses so vividly and feel them so deeply. In the Huffington Post, Michael Oreskes observes that New Yorkers tend to be impatient with tragedy and loss. Our usual approach is to "stride relentlessly forward. Tragedies are history to throw off, a roadblock to progress. But this time, so far, New Yorkers feel differently. Ten years after the 9/11 attacks, New York's prevailing mood is to resist the city's natural tides of forgetting, of moving on."

It's true that the still-rising 1 World Trade Center will be even taller than the twin towers—an act of bold defiance against those forces that conspired to humble us and bring us down. But it's also true that the site of former devastation will be shared by a memorial to the dead and a museum, which bear witness to our sense that nothing will ever be the same in our city and in our hearts. Our world has been mutilated.

And the sense of vulnerability remains. Wendy's response to the count six years ago still rings true. We do worry about terrorism, even today—perhaps especially today. While it's not clear that the shift over the past decade from treating terrorists as criminals to declaring war on them has been in our strategic or economic best interest (a trillion and a half dollars and two wars later, our influence on the Muslim and Arab worlds is arguably less than it was ten years ago), we're probably safer from terrorist attack because of it.

In the current issue of the journal *Foreign Policy*, Charles Kurzman assesses the current threat posed by Islamic terrorism. His title previews his answer: "Why Is It So Hard to Find a Suicide Bomber These Days?" He explains, "The bad news, especially for Americans, is this: Islamist terrorists really are out to get you. They cannot be deterred by prison sentences, "enhanced" interrogations, or the prospect of death. They consider the United States to be their mortal enemy, and they would like to kill as many Americans as possible, in as dramatic a way as possible."

The good news, he says, which is often overlooked, is that "there aren't very many Islamist terrorists, and most are incompetent. They fight each other as much as they fight anybody else, and they fight their potential state sponsors most of all."

Kurzman concludes by acknowledging that there will be more terrorist attacks around the world, perhaps even here. Some could be successful in killing hundreds of people, perhaps even thousands. But, he says, "even if they succeed in killing thousands of us, attacks like these do not threaten our way of life, unless we let them."

Truth be told, our world has always been mutilated. Scars inflicted by human wickedness abound, from Sancerre to Auschwitz to Srebrenica—and to the hole in the heart of the capital of the world. Nothing will ever be the same. Annie's mommy is dead; Wendy's youngest son will never know his father.

This past Tuesday, we gathered in this sanctuary to mourn the death and celebrate the life of Marietta Moskin, a 55-year member of this congregation who spent several years of her youth in Hitler's concentration camps. For Marietta's daughter Linda and her son Jim, as for all of us at All Souls, nothing will ever be the same.

Our world also gets mutilated by forces other than terrorism. On Wednesday, I received word that a couple I know well has decided to separate. For them and for their school-age child, nothing will ever be the same. David Robb, one of our ministers here at

All Souls, received word late last week that his sister had died. For David, nothing will ever be the same.

Two days from now, Holly, Zoe, and I will board a plane bound for Edinburgh. From there, we'll drive to the University of St. Andrews, where Zoe will begin her study of physics and the philosophy of science. Just because the process of children leaving home is necessary and natural doesn't make it feel, to me at least, any less like a kind of mutilation. Zoe was six weeks old when I preached my first sermon here at All Souls, and her growth and development have been inextricably bound up with my ministry here at All Souls. Now she's ready to fly, and I am ready for her to go—but not fully, not yet. For me and for our family, things will never be the same.

Try to praise the mutilated world, the poet advises. The gentle light strays, and vanishes, and returns. Remember the wild strawberries, the drops of wine, and the dew. Remember the moments when we were together, the concert where the music flared, and yes, the gentle light. Try to praise.

Marietta Moskin wrote seventeen books for children and young adults, one of which was a prize-winning novel, based on her own life, about a young girl in Hitler's camps. The book is titled *I Am Rosemarie*.

Near the end of the book, after being freed from the camps by the Allies, Rosemarie and her mother, along with a family friend named Kay, do something they haven't done in years: buy shoes. They find a shop, select several pairs, and attempt to pay with a million-mark note, which had been used in the rampant inflation period during the war. The shopkeeper was aghast: in the post-war economy, the entire shop was worth only a fraction of that amount. He refused to take the note and make change. After the local French commander ordered the shopkeeper honor the note, however, the shopkeeper insisted on giving them the shoes at no cost so he could keep his shop.

Rosemarie's mother turned to Kay and remarked that she was beginning to feel sorry for the shopkeeper.

Kay looked at her scornfully. "I'm surprised at you," she said. "Getting all soft and tenderhearted. You—after all you've been through. Don't you hate the bastards? I do!"

"Hate?" my mother said softly. "I don't really want to hate. It's such a futile emotion. It tears you all up inside—and for what? Do you think any of them will care if we hate them? They'll just laugh at us. Hating hurts no one but yourself!"

My mother was right, I thought. It takes too much effort to hate. It is too painful I don't want to be angry and bitter and all cold and hard inside. The day is too nice, and the sun is shining and I am walking with lovely new shoes. I am free at last!"

Nothing will ever be the same: losses endure, but wonders never cease. Try to praise the mutilated world. Cherish those you love, relish the food you eat, and celebrate the sun's gentle light. Give thanks for the first fruits of civilization: freedom, dignity, and peace. Work to leave a better world for our children and better children for our world. And laugh—even through the tears.