Opening Words

I think of wonderful lines from a former member of our congregation who moved to Amsterdam in the 1960s. Lee Bridges, a musician and a poet, died twelve years ago, and oh so long ago, had sent me one of his volumes. Lee Bridges writes,

Sometimes you wake up
In the mornings and it's
Raining and you say
Aw, no….

And sometimes you wake
Up and say
Oh, yeah!!
And sometimes you wake up
And read newspapers and
Newspapers and newspapers

And then
After all of that
Even after all of
That

Worlds abounding in fears
Always you say
Come on, yeah
Come on…

We'll go on
In love and
In tears.
We'll go in love and in tears.
READINGS

(1) The New York Times reported the following a few years ago (and the Christian Century magazine titled this brief paragraph: “Values Clarification”).

“For several years after 30 year-old Ann Nelson died on 9/11 in the World Trade Center, her laptop computer remained untouched back home in North Dakota. Her parents weren’t computer literate, for one thing, and it was just too painful for them to deal with the laptop. But eventually her mother learned to operate the computer and found a file labeled “Top 100,” which contained a list of Ann’s goals. Among them: be a good friend, keep in touch with the people I love and that love me … appreciate money but don’t worship it…(make a quilt, never be ashamed of who I am….)

And what might be among your life’s goals, and how goes it for you?

(2) Henri Nouwen, spiritual guide, author, and Catholic priest writes,

“Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.”

(3) Every year at this time of our regathering at our Homecoming, I think of the story about the community of monks living high upon a mountaintop, close to the sky. One day, one of the monks while visiting the village at the foot of the mountains was questioned most seriously.

The villager said, “O teacher, how wonderful it must be to live so close to holiness. It must be all that one could ever hope to attain. Tell me what is it that you do there?”

The monk answered, “We fall down, and we get up. We fall down and we help each other get up. We fall down and we help each other get up.”

“Living with Hope and Courage – Wounded Healers”

How do we live with resilience amid the small and large heartaches?

Accepting pain as part of the miracle of the gift of Life in our personal journeys… such appreciative awareness conspires with hope, courage, and community. We go on in love and tears.
Turning to September 11, 2001, we each carry memories, imprinted on us, perhaps lingering wounds…. Perhaps healing…. Perhaps denial…. Perhaps gratitude if you escaped direct hits to yourself or your loved ones… or gratitude for those who survived.

In the midst of ordinary days of love and fear, we mark the time – an anniversary fifteen years. As our responsive reading reflects, “We respond with thought or prayer or smile or grief.” (Max Coots)

On that lovely fall day, initially so graceful, on Tuesday, September 11th, after the Twin Towers fell, I was soon at the church most of the day: Having located all my family, who were physically safe at school or work, I met with a few remaining staff, who were soon on their ways home.

Among the events of the day, I spoke on the phone with members, tried to reach some who worked downtown near the World Trade Center, welcomed some visitors to the Chapel, and to my surprise even greeted a member who had come by to assist with our nightly shelter for homeless men.

As I sat on the stoop of one of our buildings (it was about 5 p. m.), I saw a church member approaching, Sue Kistler, a shelter volunteer. She was pushing her very full home-grocery cart along the sidewalk. We spoke a bit about the day’s horror and numbing grief, and I added softly, “Why are you here?”

She reported matter-of-factly. Today was her day to stock the shelter’s pantry with various food items for the week ahead. The men, our guests, would still need a place to sleep. And she had purchased extra food. She declined my offer to help as she remarked that her routine was familiar and easy. Later still, guests arrived and hospitality provided like every night… even amid the trauma from the terrorist attacks. The shelter remained open that night – normalcy on an abnormal, aching day.

This morning we recall that day with sorrow and resilience, courage and hope.

It is also our Homecoming Sunday, a new season of our life together.

We gather in this spiritual community of service and witness in service of the Beloved Community, revisiting the themes of our lives as Caretakers of Wonder, Wounded Healers, and agents of compassion and New Life… an abiding faith in the ever-new possibilities for ourselves, each other, and the world.
We each have our own deeply personal stories of the days that followed, and for a moment I want to turn again to the documentary film, *Rebirth* (directed by James Whitaker), which for seven years, with annual interviews, traced the lives of five of the survivors.

Each of the five had been deeply affected by the assault on and destruction of the World Trade Center Towers with so many dead or injured.

One woman, Ling, worked in an office on the 78th floor of the South Tower, a floor struck by one of the planes. She survived after 2nd and 3rd degree burns covered much of her body. We see her skin grafts; we learn of her many, many – 40 of them – operations... and her moods via the annual interviews: Her despair, her progress, her letting go, her acceptance.

Another woman, Tanya, then in her 30s, lost her fiancée who was a firefighter who died in the collapse. She calls Sergio her “soul mate”, and in years to come still wears her engagement ring from him, even after her marriage some years later to a very nurturing partner. Tanya is only able to take down a shrine to Sergio in her home after the birth of a second child.

A young man, Nick, was in high school when he lost his mother who worked for Cantor Fitzgerald on the 104th floor. He has been struggling with family and vocation, while focusing now on political rather than the personal.

Another man, Tim, was an emergency management responder, who lost his best friend and many other colleagues. He struggles with survivor’s guilt for years to come.

Brian was a construction worker who lost his youngest brother, a firefighter who was in one of the towers when it collapsed. He immediately went to the site and pitched in as a first responder and a recovery worker amid the carnage. We hear and see his depression that sets in a few years after – dazed by depression or medication or both at times, and then his recovery.

Again, the documentary is titled *Rebirth*, which suggests the journey we take with these five survivors of great losses. We hear them tell their stories, unfolding year by year with an astonishing candor... emotions of “shock, grief, anger, confusion” – wry humor, and resiliency, learnings, strength, and new beginnings, suggesting as the title does, “rebirth.”

We follow their lives from 2002 to 2009. Various wounds... now healing... integrating those wounds... perhaps a better word than “closure” or “completion” of grief work.
Howard Thurman, one of the grand religious teachers of the twentieth century, offered an annoying, at least challenging insight when he reported, "Everything is sustenance."

Everything? Even the bad stuff? Yes, even the bad stuff offers spiritual opportunity to grow your soul.

Pain walks with us, and just maybe, just maybe we become wounded healers, for others as well as for ourselves. The resilience and radiance of the human spirit enables us to become ever more fiercely loving agents of Beauty and New Life.

These five in the documentary arrive, or so it seems, not unscathed but well along in healing from their very different traumas, and on this day, I wonder how you are with your own grief, anger, rage, losses, confusion, numbing, healing or other reactions to what for me is a lingering wound, certainly not piercing, but not forgotten. And if you would like to talk a little or be with others, please meet in the Chapel after the brief children’s chorus during Fellowship Hour.

As the documentary Rebirth comes to a close, several of the interviewees speak as scenes of the Ground Zero construction are shown.

I think it is Ling, who had been burned so massively, who says, “Everybody heals in a completely different way.”

And Tanya, who eventually finds a new partner, marries, and has children, says, “You’re always grieving but it shouldn’t keep you from having a life of joy.”

We live and love, and cry amidst the wounds, and amid mystery, we carry on with each other’s support.

We all have personal heartaches and wounds with deaths of family, friends... more and more as time passes. For me, in August a niece, age 48, with a gentle soul, died from cancer.... I carry great sadness for her, for Sara’s mother and sister, sadness by so many. Sad... mad... why her? Too young, a wizard as a computer scientist and business owner; also a creative writer, with a passion for sailing on Lake Ontario.

Her mother shared this poem, a poem by Lucille Clifton that she often read to Sara in her final days. It is titled, “blessing the boats.”

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back
may you open your eyes to water
water waving forever and
may you in your innocence
sail through this to that

I am glad to report that my sister-in-law has strong good support from friends including those at her Unitarian Church in Toronto.

On this Homecoming, also a bit of history and reaffirmation of some of the basics of who we are and what we affirm.

In 1819, the first Unitarian congregation in the City of New York came into being because the human spirit cannot be contained by dogma and should not be defined by depravity. Flawed though we may be as humans, we nonetheless have

- inherent worth and dignity,
- the potential to bless, heal and amaze the world, and
- untapped possibilities for ever-greater goodness and social good.

Transplanted New England Unitarians responded to the spirit of their times, to what they described as “the mists of bigotry … [that] have … long hung over this City … have enveloped the simplicity of … [Jesus] in a cloud of mystery… and alienated the minds of many liberal and intelligent persons.”

Then a few short years later, in 1825, our congregation came into being as the uptown church at Prince and Mercer streets, and we were the Second Congregational Unitarian Church in the City of New York, which then took informally the name The Church of the Messiah.

In 1919, our Congregation adopted a new more interfaith, prophetic, and inclusive vision and name and became The Community Church of New York. The new bond of union (a statement of aspiration, not a creed) included those words outside on
our building: “Knowing not sect, class, nation or race, welcomes each to the service of all.”

The multiple oppressions throughout our society and mists of bigotry remain, as we know so well, and they await the ongoing work of our hands and hearts, though ignored or unseen by too many still.

Some of you are perhaps familiar with award-winning poet, playwright, and essayist Claudia Rankine, who teaches at Yale University. In her volume *Citizen*, she writes about the invisibility of racism in the ordinary encounters of standing in line in a drugstore or to buy a cup of coffee:

> It’s finally your turn, and then it’s not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised. Oh my god, I didn’t see you. You must be in a hurry, you offer. No, no, no, I really didn’t see you.


Comedian and activist Dick Gregory would ask us, whatever our so-called race, to shine light upon our own deeds, small and large: “When your children and grandchildren read about the current struggle for human dignity in their history books, what will be your answer when they look into your eyes and ask, ‘Were you there? What did you do? What part did you play?’”

Dick Gregory also declared, "I'm not into isms or asms. There isn't a Catholic moon and a Baptist sun. I know the universal God is universal. I feel the same God-force that is the mother and father of the pope is the mother and father of the loneliest wino on the planet.”

In our diverse paths, we here celebrate that same inclusive spirit, seeking to live with radiance of spirit and courage and hope.

On the theme of courage on this 9/11 anniversary, I think of a National Park Ranger, Robert Franz, at the Flight 93 Memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Perhaps you saw the article a few weeks ago in the *NY Times*. 

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As an interpretive park ranger, Franz tells

the story of United Airlines Flight 93, bound for San Francisco from Newark. How four hijackers redirect the jet southeast, most likely to crash into the nation’s capital. How many of the 40 crew members and passengers fought back. How this hurtling jetliner nearly flipped before crashing at 563 miles an hour into the soft, strip-mined earth, killing all.

“The crew and passengers put democracy in action,” Mr. Franz says. “They take a vote” – to storm the cockpit and regain control of the plane....

When children ask about the recovery of bodies, Mr. Franz redirects, ever so slightly. Since there were only remains, no bodies, he explains that a spot out there, beyond the wildflowers, is now “a final resting place.”

... And sometimes, Mr. Franz is standing before another 11 o’clock crowd, as he is now, telling an American epic in less than a half-hour, all the while reminding himself not to get emotional again when he comes to a certain point....

The more familiar narrative of Flight 93 focuses on those Mr. Franz calls the “big guys” – Todd Beamer, for example, the young software salesman who helped to organize the passenger revolt and whose last recorded words of “Let’s roll!” became a national rallying cry. But the park ranger makes the gentle point that the revolt was “a group effort.”

“Let me tell you about Sandy Bradshaw,” he says, recalling the 38-year-old flight attendant who, in a furtive call to her husband, explained how she was boiling water to hurl at the hijackers.

“Let me tell you about Honor Elizabeth Wainio,” he says, recalling the up-and-coming business executive known as Lizz who, in a moment of supreme compassion, called to comfort her stepmother about what was to happen, and who was part of the revolt. She was 27.

“No, it’s not looking good,” Mr. Franz says. “But they weren’t going to give up.” [He then struggles with his composure...] taking a brief private moment in public that seems to him like an hour. Sandy Bradshaw. Lizz Wainio. Democracy in action...

His emotions in check, Mr. Franz acknowledges his awkward pause and returns seamlessly to his story. How the airplane flew right over Route 30, “the road you came in on.” How this elevated ground is a place to reflect on the tragic loss of life, yes, but how it is also a place to honor the courage of the passengers and crew of Flight 93. And that, he says, “is a good story.” (“A Ranger...”, Dan Barry, NY Times, 9/4/16, A1)
Courage is not always far away. Hope endures.

A final story from 9/11: On September 11th, very late in the afternoon, after being at church, in mid-September’s late summer, on my way home, so sad, so bewildered, I walked by St. Vartan Park at Second Avenue and 35th Street.

No more ghostly, ash-covered women and men were walking home as they had been in the morning and early afternoon. At the park, there were some young children playing with their parents at hand – some parents watching, some joining in – children running, laughing, filled with joy… as they should be – filled with innocence of youth; the parents filled with love to make things normal for them on a tragic day… parents no doubt forever changed, and wounded, yet doing a healing thing.

After the grieving, and sometimes in the middle of some great grief, even amidst the most tragic of days, we realize that Life goes on. Love continues. The hope for the future remains in our children and in all we give them. And in us….

On that tragic, wounded day, at the playground, I had again a powerful glimpse of something sacred and trustworthy. God, perhaps. At least Spirit. Life. Something trustworthy showing up. Good news…

Good news, simple, trustworthy, daily, holy….

We gather again for a new season… to share and receive comfort, courage, and hope. To be radically inclusive, to help build the Beloved Community. To embrace rational spirituality and compassion’s depths, together.

Life is a gift. Our days are brief. Give thanks.
People are precious. Caring counts ultimately.
Be bold in your living and your loving and in your giving and your forgiving.
We need each other. And the world needs us….

Dreamers and Doers, as we are, with hope and courage, together: Wounded Healers.