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From Theory to Action to Reflection: Hope for Transformation

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On September 11, 2001, I was engaged in teaching and supervising chaplain residents when the devastating events of that infamous day began to unfold. By the time the second plane hit the World Trade Center, we had already decided there would be no more training sessions that day. We deployed everyone on staff to strategic points around the hospitals that we serve to provide a presence, comfort, interventions, and prayers. Many of our staff members had family and friends in New York City, several of them working in the World Trade Center. One employee's son died in the inferno that day. The grief became very personal and the trauma of the events weighed heavily on us all.

I immediately began to hear from former students in and around New York City and Washington, DC as they were pressed into action. For several weeks thereafter, I heard from many other colleagues from around the United States who were being deployed to "ground zero." Their primary concern was that they didn't have a theology sufficient for the task that lay ahead. I concurred. None of us did. I remembered the words of Matthew Fox from thirty years before, "Every cultural crisis produces corresponding spiritual crises."[1] Our belief systems were about to require major overhauls that might lead us into wildernesses of despair or usher us into lifetimes of transformation. Only time would tell.

There is a widely held assumption that each of us has an operative theology that informs how we make choices, that governs our actions, that is consistent with what we profess to believe, and that is sufficient to the task at hand. Following the events of September 11, 2001, I am persuaded that this is generally not the case. According to the teachings of scripture, every child of God is a "theologian," a person created to contemplate the originator of creation, to reflect on and live out the meaning of life in the context of community, and to anticipate a future that redeems creation. Unfortunately in our daily living, most of us have difficulty thinking and acting theologically. This is not a new phenomenon. It has been with us since the beginning of recorded history. From the questions, "Where are you?" to "Am I my brother's keeper?" we have attempted to construct reality so that it would allow us to escape the implications of God's mysterious love. From the beginning, we have struggled with the dilemma of being God's creation and at the same time being co-creators with God. We have all been born into a world filled with possibilities, potentiality, choices, and consequences. We are sons and daughters of God, blessed by God's grace and challenged by the responsibility of living in the image of God.

As I have reflected on the events of September 11, I have been aware of the many influences in

my life that color my experiences and my thoughts. As I consider what to share with you, the reader, it is important to acknowledge that I come from a specific context that decidedly informs my perspective. I was raised in the Churches of Christ, graduated twice from Abilene Christian University, attended Princeton Theological Seminary and Penn State University. I served Churches of Christ in New Jersey, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. Along the way, I also became a board certified chaplain in the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC) and a full supervisor in the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc. (ACPE, Inc.). My primary vocation for the past twenty-five years has been clinical pastoral educator. I train ministers and chaplains to provide competent pastoral care. This involves teaching the theory of pastoral care, counseling, and theology. It requires the supervision of the clinical work of students as they attempt to integrate theory and practice. It also involves the facilitation of their reflections on what happens as they provide pastoral care, and helping them consider other ways of encountering people that may be more effective. This clinical method of learning (action, reflection, and new action) is the paradigm through which I practice and teach ministry.

The unsettling truth is that we, like so many other religious traditions in the United States, have no theology of crisis adequate to address the events of 9/11.

Because I work in a very large teaching hospital, I find that a significant amount of my time and attention is spent wrestling with issues that see to have no easy answers. I experience people's pain that is beyond comfort. I feel helpless in the face of challenges and mysteries understood only by God. From my perspective, it seems that it has been a long time since the church has seriously attempted to engage the dilemma of theodicy: why does God's justice seem to allow evil? Our operative belief is that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). When we are confronted with a profound crisis or tragedy, we comfort ourselves with the teaching of Jesus, "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45b). Or we recall Solomon's wisdom, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl 3:1). We have long attempted to comfort others with the words, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13b). We are not as likely to turn to Job to find comfort in crisis. We are uncomfortable with the implications of that story because it exposes the inadequacy of "answers" or trite, though well-intended, words of "comfort." God essentially tells Job and his friends to sit silently in the suffering because they will never understand the mystery that is God. The only comfort for mortals is that God is present with us and fully shares in all that occurs. Beyond that, God suggests we cannot understand God's ways. We must simply allow God to be God, and we must be faithful in our response.

So how did we as God's people respond to this cataclysmic event? What I have observed and learned from communications with others is that we held prayer services, gave vent to our anger and frustration, cheered the decision to declare war on terrorists, got in touch with our grief and loss, and metaphorically wrapped ourselves in the American flag. The unsettling truth is that we, like so many other religious traditions in the United States, have no theology of crisis adequate to address the events of 9/11. We assumed that as Americans (God's chosen people), we were impervious to the intrusion of terrorism close to home. The events of 9/11 forever changed how we will experience the world around us. In the most sobering and dramatic of terms, we were reminded of our vulnerability and finitude in inescapable images, symbols, and feelings. All of God's creation has been challenged to reflect on who God is, who we are in relationship to God, and who we are in relationship to one another. These reverberations will continue with us the rest of our lives.

Charles Gerkin, a pastoral theologian, argues that in the postmodern era, people have lost their sense of the transcendent activity of God and that our challenge is to figure out how to restore a potent sense of God's participation in our lives. He then postulates that "in America the providence of God as concerned with human life has become fused with an image of protection and the guarantee of the continuity of human hopes."[2] This belief does not serve us well. Substituting a nationalistic theology for the good news of "the God who acts" robs us of our identity and our hope as disciples of Christ.

Thankfully, there are thousands of members of our congregations who believe that God is very much involved in our world and our lives and who volunteer their time and talents to share in making a difference in the world. They don't do so for recognition or to work their way to heaven. They do so out of the abundance of God's grace and love for them. There is also a handful of people in our fellowship who have chosen to serve in specialized ministries, who have sought extensive education and training, who have demonstrated clinical competence in the field of pastoral care and counseling and have become board certified chaplains or pastoral counselors. They too serve out of the abundance of God's grace and love for them. What is unique to them is their nationally recognized expertise as specialized ministers in all kinds of crises. Certainly this is not the only way to minister competently and meaningfully, but it is a promising, viable option for persons so inclined within the Churches of Christ. Hopefully our graduate schools and seminaries will begin to encourage and incorporate the clinical method of learning into their mission and vision statements and practice.

The chaplains and pastoral counselors who worked at "ground zero" had a unanimous experience. There were no words adequate to the situation. There were no trite clichés and no biblical quotations capable of touching the numbness and overwhelming devastation of the moment. The only meaningful response was to sit quietly with another person, unobtrusive but present, feeling the pain, feeling the utter sense of abandonment, feeling the nothingness. It was an incarnational ministry, God present with each person through them. Only the sustaining ministry of the Holy Spirit made those two and three week assignments to "ground zero" bearable. It was truly a ministry of hope embodied in the abiding presence of God's Spirit.

In the months that followed, those living in the midst of the devastation were provided ample opportunity to reflect openly about the activity of God in their midst. Some looked for ways of making meaning out of what was perceived to be a senseless act of terrorism. They wrestled with why God would allow bad things to happen to good people. Others allowed themselves to feel the helplessness and emptiness born of a bankrupt system of beliefs. Still others saw God's hand in the outpouring of love and prayers and support that offered hope for healing and for the future. Each of these responses was valid, and yet none of them was sufficient. "Meaning-making" requires an on-going wrestling encounter and lively conversation with God.

Early in my professional life as a chaplain and CPE supervisor, I read with great interest an article written by Leonard Allen. It was entitled "The Ordeal of Compassion: Professional Ministry and the Mind of Christ."[3] It was the first time I had read an article about pastoral care by someone I knew was a member of the Church of Christ. I was elated. He understood the paradoxical nature of ministry. He grasped the notion that although compassion was more of a liability than an asset in our culture, it was at the very heart of Jesus' ministry. In his article, Allen introduced the readers to a number of authors and constructs. Included were the following:

1. Reik's "the third ear" (listening in a way that allows for true understanding)
2. Thielecke's "the burden of reality" (to be fully engaged with others in their struggles)
3. Nowen's "the wounded healer" (the starting point of ministry is our own brokenness—to minister is to risk being wounded again and again)

Allen wrote, "What often seems in concrete situations to be the storm of God's absence—a storm no theodicy ever penetrates—[in our fellowship, it] is reduced to the 'problem of evil,' an intellectual exercise where a thoughtful person can of course find the answer if only he reasons correctly from the right premises."[4]

As Christians, we are confronted with great opportunities and challenges in the face of the tragedy of September 11, 2001. We are invited to return to the teachings of Jesus, to the ministry he modeled for us, to his emphasis on compassion, grace, and peace. He came to meet people where they were rather than to insist that they meet him on his terms. His desire was that people would come to understand the truth about their lives, and that, as a result, they would experience healing, wholeness, and joy. He came to point people to God rather than to a particular religion. Jesus wanted for people what God has always wanted for people—to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. Can we do any less? If we are going to respond with integrity to God's call to us, if we are to become imitators after Christ, then we need to become a broken-hearted, humble, and penitent people. Presently, it seems, we are more likely captives of our culture than servants of Christ.

So what might we learn from the events of the past year? What questions still need to be asked? What wrestling and reflection still need to be done? What might we do differently next time? Those are questions that you, the reader, are invited to reflect on in your relationship with God and with your sisters and brothers in Christ. Perhaps 9/11 was God's invitation for us to get back to God's business rather than our own. It may also have been a reminder that we cannot comprehend the mystery that is God, but that same mystery does always comprehend us. As I reflect on the events of the past year, I am reminded that in the most cataclysmic of events, there is both judgment and grace. My prayer for our fellowship is that our response will be to open ourselves to the fearful and awesome process of being transformed in the hands of a loving God. And may we all become "good enough" theologians to do what is just, to practice kindness, and to walk humbly each day with our God.

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ENDNOTES

1 Matthew Fox, *On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear: Spirituality American Style* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), xxviii.
2 Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 310–11.
3 Leonard Allen, "The Ordeal of Compassion," *Mission* (1979): 10–15.
4 Ibid.