

## **Life Flows On: The Challenge of Knowing**

A talk by the Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister  
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This weekend marks both our traditional water celebration and the 20th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks. When I first started planning my remarks, I wasn't sure how to connect 9/11 to the theme of water. Then Rev. Kelli Clement, my ever-wise colleague, said "How about the reflecting pools?"

Of course. I knew immediately what she meant – the reflecting pools at the [national 9/11 Memorial](#) in New York City. The two square pools are in the footprints where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center once stood. They're surrounded by the names of those who died, carved in stone. There's a mix of calmer water and flowing water, with a cascade down into a void representing absence and grief.



I was reminded of other reflecting pools I've seen, and the one at the [Oklahoma City National Memorial](#) came to mind. That one is also beautiful, part of an overall stunning monument, and it's dedicated to victims of domestic terrorism.

Such pools are meaningful and thoughtfully designed. But it occurred to me that, in a way, they're also emblematic of how America sometimes functions.

We reflect *afterward* – after the death, the terror, the tragedy.

Collectively as a nation, we react, often belatedly. Ordinary citizens may have been surprised by the events of 9/11, but government experts had been warning about just such a thing for half a decade. Hubris, invincibility, a pooh-poohing of the abilities of our enemies – that's how the United States reacted to the warnings, instead of with reflection and humility and prevention.

Richard Clarke, a former White House counterterrorism coordinator, published a memoir in 2004 called "Against All Enemies." In it, he writes: "America, alas, seems only to respond well to disasters, to be undistracted by warnings. Our country seems unable to do all that must be done until there has been some awful calamity."

“Undistracted by warnings.” Clarke’s quote was included in a Washington Post essay by Carlos Lozada, called [“9/11 was a test.”](#) In it, Lozada looks at the many ways that the United States has failed the test. And as we know, the idea that this country responds better to disasters than to warnings, that it waits to do the right thing until after the calamity strikes, applies to so much more than the events of 2001.

The dangers of climate change have been known for decades, and now we are responding to multiple major events practically every week.

The scientifically proven best ways to end the pandemic have been clear from the start but were met with rejection, and we are still, with wide disparities, paying a high price.

And for at least the past five years, the dangers of rising authoritarianism have been abundantly evident in our fragile democracy. A majority of citizens seem not to believe, nor pay attention. The result now in gerrymandered Texas is misogyny-driven vigilantism and a free-for-all of guns. There is so much frightening and heartbreaking news.

Through much of human history, it was the supernatural seers, the mystical oracles, who seemed to know the future, who could foretell what’s coming. In today’s times, that way of predicting the future has been flipped on its head. Now it’s those of us in the reality-based community who know what’s coming.

We have the facts of history to show us how democracies erode from the inside, and how a “nation-building war” is a contradiction in terms. We have the data to know where the climate is headed. We have the science to predict the course of pandemics. Meanwhile, we are still plagued by magical thinkers who believe that their god, alone, without any help from humans of free will, will somehow protect individuals and America from catastrophe, despite daily evidence to the contrary. American optimism is both our national superpower and our fatal weakness.

So, living in this place, in these times, what do we do? What do we do, those of us who are both blessed and cursed to know what’s coming? Those of us who are in fact distracted by warnings rooted in facts? What do we do, those of us who know the value of fully, realistically reflecting on future outcomes, as well as the value of building reflecting pools for what’s already happened?

These are not times of easy answers, but here are a few small suggestions.

One is that, while it's important not bury one's head in the sand, it's a good idea not to stare at the harsh, bright light of truth too relentlessly. Our country has a brutal past, a turbulent present, and a daunting future, and you're not a traitor to the truth if you take a break. As all kinds of marginalized people know, it's not only OK but lifesaving to bring rest and joy and even laughter to the journey. Focusing on relationships or creativity or a Netflix binge can provide resilience for the long haul.

And when you do return to taking in the truth, be sure to take in the positive facts as well. Such as all those activists, often people of color, leading the good fight in places like Georgia and Texas and the Line 3 area of northern Minnesota. Amid the demoralization, inspiration abounds.

Another strategy is to start small. In the face of huge, global problems, few of us on our own have the power to make big change; it's that [Serenity Prayer](#) all over again, changing the things you can. One place to start can be to listen to those local leaders in marginalized communities, who are closest to what's needed and who often have manageable tasks that can be of great benefit to individuals and movements. Small actions can help contribute to bigger changes.

A related idea for bringing about change is to focus on results and re-evaluate the effectiveness of longtime tactics.

Some of what worked in the 20th century still works; some of those habits may have had their day. For example, as much as I love the written word, I would offer that writing letter to a congressperson across the aisle has never been less likely to change a mind or a vote.

Many progressives, myself included, like to dream of persuasion; meanwhile, the hardliners on the other side have been conquering by focusing on raw power, from the local level up, for more than three decades. Our resources, stretched thin by so many problems, should be similarly focused on what works today. And we should support our local leaders, such as school board members, who find themselves on the front lines of the war on reality.

And of course, I will always suggest community, community, community. We are a year and a half into this isolating, exasperating pandemic, and we live in a political culture where the enemies of justice want to see us exhausted, divided, giving up. One antidote is connection, collaboration, and allyship. A coming together around shared values, coming together for companionship and support on the journey. As life flows on, reliably and relentlessly, may we navigate these times together.