

# Rebecca Sears: Keeping the Connection after Sept 11th

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Rebecca Sears

## Keeping the Connection after Sept 11th

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share with you this morning as a way to put myself out a bit more as I continue to explore Seekers; although I wasn't so grateful yesterday when I couldn't find my Thic Na Hahn poem I've been saving for three weeks to read today. Guess that means his is just part one of this teaching, if you can bear it!

I am very glad I started my exploration here before Sept 11 not only so I had a spirit filled resting place but also I feel blessed to have heard some of the best sermons I think I have ever heard in my life. As Jesus says to his friends in Luke 21 this week, "these difficult and troubling times will give you the opportunity to testify", from my old Baptist roots I think you all have been testifying very well! (I cannot believe another relentless apocalyptic scripture. I do not have a [beautiful soothing sharing about fabric](#); I envy Amelia.)

Anyway, I wanted to share more after the vulnerability of [Deborah S](#) and [David Lloyd](#) several weeks ago moved me. Both shared sermons that seemed to call forth a fragile place, where somehow they felt different than others in the community, and that caused some sense of aloneness or nervousness. Both of which seem to make sense to me. How I

loved the trust that they must have had in order to share.

Therefore, I would like to follow with some thought about safety, defenses and connections. In this church, I am always aware of Gordon once saying we are all preaching to ourselves. So take what makes sense for you and let the rest be about me.

Jesus begins to address, in Luke 21, the very issue I am interested in: how we react to fear and uncertainty, and what it means for us not to defend ourselves and to act with wisdom, as Jesus tells his anxious followers in the Luke passage. Moreover, these are the threads that run through the lives of all the people I work with daily: the effects of fear, anxiety defenses and the search for wisdom. My work as a pastoral counselor has never been as challenging as it has in the past 2 months.

Therefore, some thoughts and questions I would like to tie together:

How in the world do we hold on to that strong feeling of connection, concern and community (local and worldwide) which we had rediscovered and created right after Sept 11? The sense of goodwill, the desire to serve, volunteer and give, was heartfelt and genuine and I think so reassuring. I basked in all the unified actions the signs and feelings. The reaching out to neighbors and strangers was stronger than most of us have witnessed in our lifetimes. There has been a bright and shining aspect of our humanity that seems to have burst through our glass ceilings of self-absorption and isolation. We felt, and knew somehow that we were in this together and that we belonged to one another. While we profess to believe this, we do not often act this way. This was a place where our professed theology differs from our operational theology! Nevertheless, we experienced this sense – this truth – that we are indeed connected in a new incarnated way.

We all shared stories of how we connected and how others

reached out to us. However, I remember most a woman that I see weekly who had broken her leg the week before the attack. Getting up the stairs here was difficult for her. When she came in 2 days after the attacks, she fell into the big green chair with a smile and said, "This has been a better week. Since Tuesday people have gotten up and given me a seat on the Metro."

I think the unimaginable events that we collectively experienced revealed more of our authentic humanity. By that I mean that we are all truly connected, that we were created in connection, and meant to live, heal and grow in connection – as brothers and sisters. There is a sense of homecoming when we do experience this primal authenticity. This is a oneness feeling that we are attached. We have all had religious moments of rediscovering this feeling on retreat and in relationship. Martin Buber called it the 'sacred betweenness': that sense of holy sacred space between us. We experience the reality of the other and the other truly sees us connected. Nevertheless, there is still an "I," and still a "thou." It is this space.

You know that most of the time we do not feel this connection, let alone believe it is our true state of being. Nevertheless, we do long for it, and in our souls, we know it. We are coded for it from the womb of the great mother God; we know it and we want that feeling back. We get into relations join churches go to great lengths to get that feeling back.

I think most of us experienced this connectedness more intensely on Sept 11 and shortly after that because those events broke through, indeed ripped aside, our encrusted defenses and our homegrown illusions of safety. **We** were vulnerable –exposed – and as our defenses were taken from us. Our God given inclination to connect was allowed to reemerge. Illusions about our differences disappeared and we experienced an energizing sense of belonging. We experienced our true essence, our cosmic connection, the sacred betweenness that

which was there before we experienced hurt and disappointment with others.

What begins to happen over time? Why don't we feel this sense of connection, especially if it is our true human nature? Well, after being vulnerable we begin to defend again, in the face of fear, and perceived danger. We have not yet evolved into a species that can give all that is needed to feel safe and meet needs even if we want to, and I do believe we want to.

Without even thinking about the threat, we flip into "auto-defend," that primitive sense of fight or flight. God created us to respond that way. We begin to do that which we learned to do in childhood to get safe. All our attempts to achieve that feeling of safety are different, and in almost all cases unconscious and outdated, (they used to work in childhood). It is what you do to get safe that scares others. We all long for the same goals: safety and connection, but without consciousness; we so easily make matters worse. For example:

- Fighters: fighters find automatic comfort first in action. They comfort in doing fighting – moving out away from the uncomfortable feeling that some us fighters may actually fight – or calling for action – fixing a problem now! We may do things like talk a lot. We may give sermon about Sept 11, give workshops or help everyone. Our energy is strong and outward – maybe even pushy, connecting with other fighters but not to fleers
- Fleers: fleers find comfort and safe feeling by pulling energy in. They wait it out, taking their time. They watch – working it out carefully first within and then slowly emerging when safe. They drive fighters crazy! Moreover, a fighter is very scary to a fleer's way of thinking!

Fighters and fleers want the same thing: a sense of safe connection. How they try to achieve it looks opposite

sometimes, (yes, we both use all defenses but we primarily use one.) Guess what? Opposites attract, and opposites irritate, especially when the danger feels great. There is the same goal but an opposite learned way of achieving it. Neither is better, it is how we understand and balance one another that matters.

Knowing about people – you and I and our defenses – is one of the most important things you can possibly try to become aware of, if you want to live in a safe loving relationship or a conscious community. I guess that covers all of us.

It helps me to think of our defenses as our animal totems. In Native American spirituality, each person had an animal totem or fetish that protected him or her. They may be sacred creatures, for example:

**Fighters:** lions, tigers, cunning like a fox, running around like a deer, squawking like a goose, mountain sheep, butting heads and peacocks.

**Fleers:** turtle, possum, porcupine, ostrich and salamanders.

God has given us ways to protect ourselves. All are necessary – or are they? They were once; are they still the best action? That is the questions now. What I once learned to do may not be working now and my defenses may need to change, especially the "do it all myself – look aloof and lone wolf" thing. Like, I do not need people, though, I do

Now, if you do not know your animal totem, or category, it is easy to find out. Ask the person you live with, "What kind of animal am I when we disagree?" If you do not live with anyone, ask the people in your mission group or stewards meeting. They know! You might even think of your animal totem as the animal that has helped keep you safe, especially earlier in your life. You might even introduce yourself at a meeting sometime as an exercise in awareness. However, I would also invite you to think of the opposite animal from the one that protects you and imagine that this animal might really be your safer

protection.

You see, we all have needed ways to get safe, and most of our methods are outmoded and can and do scare others. Your defenses are problematic, especially when you do not know what they are, and when you are aware of being critical of others who get safe in opposite ways. When you are critical or judgmental or when you feel the sting of being misunderstood you pull back and break the connection. This is what happened after September 11; after being vulnerable, we had to **do** something right away. Moreover, what do we do about this feeling of vulnerability leads to differing defenses, some conscious others not.

Three week ago the woman with the broken leg hobbled back in and sat down sadly and cynically saying "the caring is over." no one had given her a seat on the Metro for the past week and a half. When we do not feel safe, we defend. The other is not safe; the connection is broken

Again, this sense of separateness is an illusion. We must work hard at this point. We must begin to see beneath the defenses, mine and the others and what is under there is fear. Fear keeps us apart, or I should say unconscious responses to fear keep us apart and keep us feeling vulnerable and alone. The behaviors that bug us the most about others (people and countries) are their defenses. Look beneath and see the need, the need to feel safe and to say, "What am I doing that makes them feel unsafe?" or "What can I do to address their fear?" We do have a responsibility...

That is the beginning of what can be done, and like the Israelites after exile, we need a lot of encouragement and help for the journey. This is hard work! Moreover, Jesus, in Luke, tries to address the very understandable fear and anxiety that this friends and followers start to express when the discussion turns to war, destruction and end times.

Jesus says that it is these most difficult times give us the opportunity to testify. They make up our minds not to prepare our defense beforehand because I will give you a wisdom that no opponent can refute.

So what might this look like today? This would not be preparing your defense. Moreover, this is the hardest thing we can ever learn, and learn it we must. However, it does not come naturally. We are wired still to defense not understanding. We must try first to understand the other. We must become intentional – hold your reaction – to defend until we understand and can see where the other is coming from. Listen, listen and listen until you can see what the other is saying. Listen until you can walk into their world and see that it makes sense and then and only then you can empathize with them. Without empathic connection when struggles come, we are reduced to negotiating to avoid conflict rather than really seeking our common ground. Putting aside our defenses to do this takes commitment, courage and vision. Seeing the other is hard work. It is not for sissies! We need faith and courage to keep the connection. We must become counter our instinctual putting aside our outmoded defenses until we can understand the other. This makes a safer world for them to be understood. When we commit to this journey of creating a safer world, we are committing to the hard work of active love. Therefore, if you are a lion think of becoming a pussycat, and if you are a turtle, think of becoming loving larger than life gorilla that is able to beat your breast about important matters. It takes courage to change, and courage is fear that has said its prayers.

When we start to consciously do this then we will regain a sense of connection and the words of Isaiah become more embodied:

*For behold I/you create a new heaven and a new earth.  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion shall  
eat straw like cattle and*

*They/we shall not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain.*