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Boston Strong: The Need for Prophetic Vision in Commemorating Tragic Violence

Abstract: The way we respond to violence both expresses and shapes our social imagination. In an era of what Charles Taylor calls "flatness," the response to and commemoration of the Boston Marathon bombings evinced a real need for transcendence and a desire for solidarity. At the same time, our tendency to fall back on comfort or vengeance, presumption or despair, diffuses and de-fuses these desires. By consciously and intentionally commemorating such events, religious persons and organizations can offer educative voices of prophetic critique and support practices of prophetic hope. We can do so by recounting memories, problematizing current practices, and offering opportunities to practice hope.

On April 15, 2013, my brother called me from Atlanta to make sure that I was OK. He had just seen the first news reports of explosions at the finish line of the Boston Athletic Association (BAA) Marathon. Fortunately, I had been miles from the finish line when two homemade bombs exploded. The next several days were spent trying to ascertain that friends were unhurt and reassuring friends and family that I had not been near the scene. My reactions ranged from shock to confusion to anger to resolve. Like many others, I made serial pledges to run the race the next year, to take first responder courses, to be more courageous and generous in helping people, and to "get the most out of life."[1] I wore a "Boston Strong" t-shirt and cheered when Red Sox star David Ortiz proclaimed on live TV, "This is our fucking city!" Something, however, felt incomplete.

This past spring, the one-year anniversary of the bombing saw both formal and informal memorialization of the events surrounding the Marathon Bombings. The city held an official ceremony with speeches by survivors, local clergy, and politicians. The Boston Public Library displayed photos and articles collected from the impromptu shrines that had sprung up at the bombing site the year before -- what Sylvia Grider calls "vernacular" shrines.[2] Print media recapped the timeline of events and wrote follow-up stories on victims, survivors, and rescuers.

The commemoration of the Boston Marathon Bombings evinced a real need for transcendence and solidarity, for inspiration, meaning, and moral exemplars. It also, however, was shot through with both an uncritical acceptance of a given lifestyle and a provincialism that could short-circuit our best natures. In the way we consciously and intentionally memorialize such events, religious persons and organizations can offer voices of prophetic critique and

[1] Three spectators were killed in the bombings, and more than 250 wounded, including sixteen people who lost parts of at least one limb -- the bombs were apparently designed to maximize lower-body injuries. Several days later, the Tsarnaev brothers, Tamerlan and Dzokhar, killed a police officer in a resumption of violence that resulted hours later in a shootout with police, during which Tamerlan was killed. Dzokhar other was found after a day-long search, badly wounded but alive, and is now awaiting trial. What made the violence so terrorizing for many locals is the extent to which the Boston Marathon is a community event. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that everyone in the area has some connection with someone who runs the race.

[2] Sylvia Grider, "Spontaneous Shrines and Public Memorialization," in *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, ed. Kathleen Garces-Foley (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 248.

support practices of prophetic hope. In the following, I argue that memorials are pedagogical tools, and therefore ought to be part of religious education. Religious voices have fallen short of calling attention to the "dangerous memories" of the Boston Marathon tragedy, leaving too much room for both presumption and despair. Our education must more adequately turn to the hopeful prophetic vision to which this violence calls us to attend.

Memory and Meaning in Massachusetts

Patriots' Day, officially marking the battles of Lexington and Concord cited as the start of the American Revolution, has become synonymous with the running of the Boston Marathon -- so much so that in local parlance it is as often known as "Marathon Monday" as it is Patriots' Day. In the growing emphasis on the marathon (rather than American history), we can see the expression of contemporary values of participation, physical fitness, appearance, and the achievement of personal goals eclipsing the traditional rhetoric of liberty and self-defense.[3]

Memorials serve a number of purposes. In this era of what Charles Taylor calls "flatness" of time, place, and being,[4] they express our need to feel texture in the extraordinary while we come together to touch something bigger than ourselves. Secondly, they express the social imagination, providing a window into how we see and interpret the world and its violence. Given this expressive nature, Erika Doss notes that the study and use of memorials require a "critical pedagogy of public feelings."[5] Thirdly, then, if they express our imagination, they also help to shape it. They serve a pedagogical function, educating while they celebrate, often in the "subtler language" of art and symbol that Taylor sees making meaning accessible.[6] Commemorations are symbols that express emotions, thoughts, and ideals associated with an event but also make those emotions, thoughts, and ideals present anew, reinvigorating them. They offer the potential to move from trauma and victimization into transgressive possibilities of identity and purpose.[7] As such, they must be of interest to religious educators tasked with providing practical wisdom for our lives and the life of the world.

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[3] Patriots' Day has a celebratory atmosphere, with something of a bacchanalian feel at some of the colleges and universities along the race course. Of course, there is a consumerist edge to some of this ritual, as athletic shoe and apparel companies flood the city with billboards and other advertisements, official race memorabilia becomes emblematic, and local running shoe stores like "Marathon Sports" and "Heartbreak Hill Running Company" engage in fierce competition for customers' loyalties and dollars. It was this atmosphere that was shaken by the twin blasts at the finish line. The 2013 bombings at the finish line of the Boston Marathon have, of course, changed again the tone and tenor of the annual celebration, at least for the foreseeable future.

[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1st edition (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). For Taylor, part of the "malaise of modernity" is that life too often proceeds undifferentiated. "High" times and "low times," for instance, have merged into a single, "flat" sense of time, stripped of myth and mystery and transcendence. This flatness is at odss with what Mircea Eliade describes as a human drive to touch the sacred in our construction of time and space, something of an anthropological need. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

[5] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2010), 59.

[6] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 353–361.

[7] Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 131–133.

Memory and Prophecy

Memorialization of the tragic violence a year later offers the opportunity to reflect on just what is being memorialized, how it both expresses and shapes the ways we think, feel, and act. From the standpoint of Christian religious education, the memorialization of this violence evinces both possibilities and need for educating for a prophetic imagination and genuine prophetic hope in a world of flatness and tragedy.

Walter Brueggemann characterizes the prophetic task in ancient Israel as facing a couple of challenges. First, Israel held a blind and uncritical confidence in its ideology of exceptionalism. Then, when disaster struck in the form of destruction and exile, the shattering of the facade of exceptionalism gave way to utter despair. The prophetic task, then, was threefold. It involved an assertion of critical reality that would involve both identifying and critiquing the "chosenness" ideology. Second, in the face of denial of the unsustainability of such an ideology, the prophetic task involved giving voice to the real grief this denial perpetuated. Finally, the prophetic task required building a community of hope to counter the despair that could lead to violence, hedonism, or moralism.[8] With Brueggemann, we can see the need for similar tasks today, for the fostering of an imagination of prophetic hope as an antidote to the despair and presumption that mark its deficiency or excess. Such a task may be thankless, certainly it is often unpopular, and requires courage to undertake. Because it impinges upon the well-being of both the person and the community, it is a task for religious education.

In particular, it is worth investigating how the commemorations of the bombings have evidenced despair, presumption, and resources for genuine hope. We must also consider how religious educators can contribute to this task of memorializing for hope. The point is not to dictate how the memorialization of the Boston Marathon bombings ought to be structured forever, but to grasp hold of a moment, and to consider how future moments can be handled. Here I focus on three forms of commemoration that are fairly representative: the city's official ceremony, the Boston Public Library's "Dear Boston" display of artifacts from the informal shrine,[9] and the *Runner's World* May 2014 issue that carried stories of the day of the bombings and some updates on persons who were involved.

Presumption

Perhaps the greatest temptation faced in religion is the domestication of God coupled with the divinization of our own lives and desires. Part of the prophetic task is to prevent that divinization and domestication.[10] Metz puts the warning somewhat differently in his critique of "bourgeois" Christianity: We "believe in discipleship and, under the cloak of this belief in discipleship, continue in our old ways."[11] We have here what Brueggemann describes as the uncritical acceptance of current ideology and practices as unproblematically blessed. Elements of this presumptuousness are visible in the memorialization of the bombings.

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[8] Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

[9] Although the "Dear Boston" display focused on the popular shrines, of course not everything was included. The display, then, was not exactly an unfiltered vernacular. There is still some level of an "official" story being told there. Further research could involve the exploration of the whole gamut of artifacts left at the bomb site, artifacts which were collected, photographed, and archived.

[10] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev Sub edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997), 66–97.

[11] Johannes Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church : The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3.

One theme that was prominent, both in the days after the bombing and in the anniversary commemorations, was that "the terrorists" had only redoubled the running community's resolve. That there was a running "community" was widely accepted. The "Dear Boston" display recreated the array of running shoes left at the bombing scene, and featured a large poster that read "Lace up your shoes and run for those who can't." The popular pastime of running became "running for unity" or "running for freedom." The BAA eventually agreed to expand the field of the 2014 marathon to accommodate some of the swollen interest in participating in the event.

Of course, there is nothing inherently harmful in wanting to respond to communal violence with running. At the very least, it can provide an opportunity to come to together in something collective, to remember, to talk about victims, for the injured to feel empowered in their own lives, and for others to feel that they are resuming something that had been interrupted. The problem is if we act as if ALL of our running efforts are somehow blessed, as if running has become in and of itself an act of compassion and solidarity in defiance of hate. It is problematic when four-time Boston champion Bill Rodgers banally remarks, "This is a sport of peace. We try to get along."[12] Most of the time, distance running is not about world peace and unity; it is about running.[13]

One 2013 Boston finisher sounded a reflexively critical notes when she said of her short-lived pride in her personal-best performance: "I felt foolish. . . . I was embarrassed that I had crossed the finish line before anything happened, and that I spend so much of my life and my energy and my time in the pursuit of something completely selfish."[14] She asks herself -- as we must ask ourselves and others -- if it is really true that the "return to normalcy" that we herald as the goal of grieving should indeed be a return to our old way of life. Presumption puts a bandage over the wound without helping it to heal.

The presumptuousness could be seen also in equating our current lifestyle with God's blessing on the United States. Vice-President Joseph Biden punctuated his remarks at the anniversary ceremony, "America can never, ever, ever be defeated," and concluded, "God bless you all, and may God protect our troops."[15] The belief in American exceptionalism could hardly more closely parallel the Israelite exceptionalist ideology that Brueggemann sees the prophets decry. The "American way of life" is conflated with the gospel.[16]

Despair

There are also, of course, ways in which grief can spiral inward into despair and outward into violence. Real grief must be voiced, the losses must be lamented, but we cannot stay only in grief. On the other hand, for all of the inspirational success stories from survivors at the official memorial, there is a danger of glossing over the real, deep, continuing pain many continue to suffer. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, it is in the pages of the notoriously shallow *Runner's*

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[12] Christine Fennessy, "One Year Stronger," *Runner's World*, May 2014, 70.

[13] Self-identifying as a runner, and especially as a marathoner, also takes on the veneer of naturalized taste when in reality it is a sport that, at least in the United States, tends to be skewed strongly toward upper-middle class and highly-educated participants. While in theory anyone can be a runner, not just anyone is a runner who gravitates to expensive shoes, gear, and even travel to races. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[14] Cindy Kuzma, "Wins And Losses," *Runner's World & Running Times*, June 6, 2013, http://www.runnersworld.com/runners-stories/wins-and-losses?page=single.

[15] "Boston Bombing Memorial Service, Part 2," *C-SPAN.org*, accessed June 12, 2014, http://www.c-span.org/video/?318905-2/boston-bombing-memorial-service-part-2.

[16] Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope*, 130.

World that some of the more honest elements of this pain were memorialized. Injured survivor Jody Mattie's recovery is described, but includes the detail that his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) now keeps him from holding a job.[17] The severe depression of amputees and rescuers, and the lifetime of anticipated medical expenses cannot be overlooked. Many first responders were war veterans who compared the carnage to that of an IED explosion in Iraq.[18] Responders, victims, witnesses who jumped in to try to help, many of them were noted as having had trouble sleeping, losing tempers, or drinking.

Our attention ought to be drawn to the psychological and emotional ramifications of this sort of violence and destruction -- another dose of "reality." If we are to recognize honestly the lingering effects of violence on this scale, then we should also be drawn to face the emotional trauma that war has on soldiers and civilians alike. Perhaps the blame game being played over the Veterans Administration's failures would be recast with a more honest accounting of the broad failure of the American people to provide the agency with the funding to treat the emotional as well as physical needs of war-scarred veterans.

Despair can also take the form of defaulting to intrusive or unjust police state tactics as necessary and appropriate for eliminating risk. In the late 1990s, polls of Americans found government interference in life to be their top fear. After 9/11, of course, as the national security narrative became part of the conversation about and memorialization of terror, increased government intervention was prompted by a climate of fear and despair in alternative solutions.[19] It is precisely this despair that allows for the still-unexplained Florida shooting of a Tsarnaev associate by an FBI agent that would seem to belie President Obama's pledge that the bombings would not weaken the administration's fidelity to a free and open society.[20] Despair can lead to further violence as well as to paralysis.

Hope

There are, though, ways in which memorialization of tragic violence can and does overcome presumption with critical reflexivity and can offer opportunities to grieve but also to turn grief into hope through the imagination of an alternative reality, a prophetic hope. In some instances, memorialization of the Boston Marathon Bombings has provided some excellent examples of tutoring in imagination and hope. One has been through highlighting community responsiveness and self-sacrifice. BAA executive director Tom Grilk framed his remarks at the official ceremony in terms of the "caring, courage, community, and common purpose" he had seen emerge during the events of the previous year. Former Mayor Thomas Menino, at the same event, highlighted "snapshots of grace" and urged that the anniversary of the bombing not remain simply a "day of remembrance" but also a "day of action" for everyone in the community who needs it.[21] Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick emphasized the common destiny of all in the community, citing Martin Luther King, Jr., in calling for a real and active solidarity.[22]

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[17] Fennessy, "One Year Stronger," 69.
[18] Steve Friedman, "Blown Together," *Runner's World & Running Times*, April 15, 2014, http://www.runnersworld.com/boston-marathon/blown-together?page=single.
[19] Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 147–150.
[20] *At Church Service, Obama Praises Boston After Marathon Explosions*, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vguxffX1ftg&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
[21] "Boston Marathon Bombings Anniversary," *C-SPAN.org*, accessed June 12, 2014, http://www.c-span.org/video/?318905-1/boston-marathon-bombings-anniversary.
[22] "Boston Bombing Memorial Service, Part 2."

The *Runner's World* anniversary edition included survivor Caroline Spencer saying that "Evil didn't define that day," and her shift to regularly asking herself, "What can I give back?" in a way that reframes her vision of what society can be.[23] Liz Walker, longtime Boston news anchor and now pastor at the Roxbury Presbyterian Church, pointed to the spirit of human sacrifice and heroism. She called the movement from grief to hope the "divine design" in a future-oriented movement not to be enslaved by the past. Alluding to Isaiah 40:31, she promised that we will "run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint, soaring on wings like eagles."[24] These words need not involve a prophetic vision for society, but they can promote one.

Memory, Prophecy, and Religious Education

So, what, then, ought religious educators to highlight in the memorialization of violent events such as the Boston Marathon Bombings? What in particular can religious educators add in a prophetic key? I name three, though this list is hardly exhaustive.

Recounting and Embodying Memory

Metz's concept of the "dangerous memory" must play a role in the prophetic task of critically naming reality.[25] We cannot talk about the heroic rescuers unless we also honestly assess the impact of the violence -- death, PTSD, medical costs, physical pain and limitations -- and we cannot honestly assess the impact of the violence in Boston unless we admit that the violence that shears limbs is problematic in many places around the globe.

It is also noteworthy that the memorial services and displays this year had almost no mention of the Tsarnaev brothers. Some deliberately avoided it, reporting that the victims and rescuers "don't talk about the bombers. . . . [They don't] think about the young men's inner lives or how those lives bent and curdled into violence."[26] This near-absence is not surprising, as mention of perpetrators is quite often divisive. A display of crosses erected outside Columbine High School that included crosses for the two perpetrators drew scathing words for their builder and desecration of the crosses themselves.[27]

Such a denial cultivates a false consciousness. Refusing to discuss the Tsarnaev brothers keeps us from exploring the realities of religious violence, of ethnic violence, and the disjunction felt by those who try to escape violence and land on US soil. In the more immediate term, as Dzokhar Tsarnaev's trial approaches, this denial allows us to ignore ambiguities, to keep the killer safely unapproachable, and make capital punishment a viable option. A non-person is easy to "kill." Religious educators, then, must point to the stories of the victims with long-term psychological injuries, to the dehumanization of capital criminals, and to ethnic violence around the globe that impacts the streets of Boston.

Problematize Current Practices

Always we must ask whose interests are supported by current practices and operative ideologies. If our practices of remembrance are really self-serving attempts to fulfill personal

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[23] Fennessy, "One Year Stronger," 77.
[24] "Boston Marathon Bombings Anniversary."
[25] Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society : Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. James Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad PubCo, 2007). For Metz, dangerous memories make a claim on us and our futures. They are memories that threaten the legitimacy of systems that allow for victimization.
[26] Friedman, "Blown Together."
[27] Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 107–112.

marathon dreams, we lay that self-centeredness bare. If our commemorative "Boston Strong" gear is about strengthening our identities as athletes, having bought all of the proper accoutrements, then we ought to face that fact honestly as well. We must challenge our presumptive practices and ask whose interests they are serving. This challenge should come from pulpits, in liturgy, and in religious education classrooms as we seek to foster reflection on personal and social practices.

Opportunities to Practice Hope

The reaction to the Boston Marathon Bombings undoubtedly brought to light examples of immediate courage, sustained generosity, solidarity, and ingenuity in the face of adversity. We must continue to highlight these stories, for we need these moral exemplars and narratives of healing. What we can add are more opportunities to allow people to practice generosity and solidarity as part of our memorialization. Mayor Menino's call for a "Day of Action" as part of a "Day of Remembrance" is a useful one. If conscientization[28] comes about in reflective praxis, then the pedagogical power of offering opportunities to volunteer to provide meals for the mobility-impaired, medical care for the ill, or conversation for the lonely is immense. It is essential to note that in the occasion of remembering the Marathon Bombing such practices can be linked to the way we envision our best hopes for society. For instance, when we involve ourselves in the lives of someone who has lost a limb, we can better not only appreciate the need for long-term supportive services but also enter into the discussion of how we as a society might see ourselves providing them. Practices of service, long a staple of religious education, can be seen and reflected upon as practices of imaginative hope.

Tragic and terrorizing violence -- like the Boston Marathon bombings -- does and should stop us in our tracks, and prompts us to recalibrate time and space. In this recalibration, we have the opportunity critically to reflect on reality and express the genuine grief in this reality. If this grief is a hole the wall that holds up our psyche, papering over that hole with the presumption that everything will be fine is no more helpful than staying in the grief forever is. Pointing to, celebrating, and building on practices of community-building and meaning-making can engender prophetic imagination and hope.

[28] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, NY: Continuum, 1970).

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