

2008-8-24Knoxville
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Opening Words

We are here
on a late summer's morn
to worship in the spirit of wisdom,
to celebrate life freely and honestly,
to rejoice in the transforming power of love,
and respond to compassion's deep call.

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Affirmation from Galway Kinnell's *Flying Home* 1980

*And I have slowly learned that while a good many things are easy,
love is not.
Because love is first of all a power...its own power...
which continuously must make its way forward
from transcending union always forward into difficult day.
Love is very much like courage;
perhaps it is courage,
and even perhaps, only courage.*

Sequence

Let it be. The sweep of storms over the land.
The straw-like grass. The shooting stars of night.

Let it perish.
the sad conflicts of nations,
the cruel division of everything into pro and con, the selfish laziness of
prejudice and scorn.

Let it be. The blue flower of the chicory and
gold disc of the sunflower. The roar of the
ocean. The altitude of hills. The gift of tears.

Let it perish.

The habit of denial. The false safety of entitlement. Endless excuses for why
nothing can really change for the better. Self-pity.

Let it be. Acceptance. The honest naming of
what is. The honest facing of it. Hopeful
organization. And the solace of sweet silence.

bell and silence

Let it be. The Love which sustains us and
strengthens us. Each relationship which helps
us to be more who we are than we could be
all by ourselves

In the continuing silence, may we welcome their faces into our hearts, or their
names onto our whispering lips. Those we miss, those we engage, those who
invite our tenderness and sympathy, even those with whom we struggle.

naming

In times of trouble, in times of joy; in times of
joy and trouble and beauty all mixed together,
wisdom comes on the wings of silence and music, on the serene breeze of
summer mornings. Let it be.

Readings

The First Reading comes from Robert Solomon's 2002 book, *Spirituality for the Skeptic*. I recommend the book for those who are interested in this often misunderstood subject.

A few years ago, the mother of a boy who had lost his two best friends in a tragic accident tried to help her son discern some meaning in it all. She wrote up her agony in a popular news magazine, and concluded, "I don't think that tragedies happen on purpose, but, and I echo my own son's words, if people learn to value one another more and to appreciate how precious life is, then perhaps some good can come from something so awful." Wise and modest words, and she finished by adding, "In the end, the musings of a nine-year-old boy, struggling to find a reason, are the musings of us all." Those who would give an "answer" to tragedy, or reduce it to blame, lack this wisdom.

We too often opt for victimization or cynicism, the products of our overactive faculty for blame and our extravagant sense of entitlement. Or we take refuge in pessimism. (If we expect the worst, what worse can happen?) But there are better ways to think about life.

Gratitude is one of them. Spirituality at its best is a combination of gratitude....and a passionate engagement with the details and the people in our lives. The important thing is not to deny tragedy, but to embrace it as an essential part of the life we love, and for which we should be so grateful.

The Second Reading comes from Nance Guilmartin's most helpful book, *Healing Conversations*. If you feel clumsy at a memorial service, or in a difficult conflict, you might want to check out her sensitive and wise approaches to such things.

Many ordinary people have undertaken extraordinary efforts to make a difference after something in their lives went terribly wrong. Judy Shepard is dedicating her life to educating people about the high cost of hate. Her son, Matthew, was beaten to death for being gay. When Nancy Bostley died of cancer, her family collaborated with their YMCA to start Nancamp, a local, subsidized outreach program for children and families affected by cancer.

The Forget-Me-Not Foundation was created to help families of brain-injured patients. It was founded after the family of Nan Zobel couldn't get the help they needed to cope with the after-effects of a serious brain injury.

When friends and families set out to create a living legacy in the wake of a tragedy, few of us know how much work it will take. Our success is made possible because families, officials, banks, lawmakers, the media, and strangers pitch in to help. We take risks. We learn how to communicate new, and sometimes unpopular, messages to the public. We hang in there for the long haul. We take comfort in doing something. We learn that we never know what we are capable of doing until something very painful touches the core of our being—inspiring us to action.

Sermon

My godson Toby Rzepka joined himself in marriage to a wonderful woman named Rosalie this late July. His mother Jane and I helped officiate at the lovely Unitarian Universalist Jewish ceremony, at a beautiful park graced with a noble lighthouse and misted pines on the rough Pacific. It was called Cape Disappointment. The sailor who named it was simply disappointed that he had not found the useful passage he was looking for, only a shallow inlet. The great Columbia Gorge was still some ways away.

The ceremony took place under a huppah, or canopy, made of pieces of cloth folk chose to send beforehand. A rose-window of my grandmother's own 60 year old lace radiated at the center of the huppah. It was beautiful in every way. Words. Ceremonial. Setting. A perfect day.

For us that is. It was the preface to a terrible day for some other folks. For the next morning, when I was returning through the mountains of southern Washington State, Michael Brennan, our Church Administrator, called me to tell me that there had been mayhem in one of our congregations. His call was interrupted several times by high cliffs cutting off the signal, but by the time I got back to Portland, I had at least a small idea what happened, although there were still no names and faces attached.

By the next day the most basic facts were clear. As most of you know, a certain man had entered the building of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville during their Sunday Worship time.

A group of their children were singing when this man raised a gun and shot and killed a man and a woman. He also wounded several others quite seriously, until two people lunged and dragged him down, and took his shotgun away from him.

In a single day, a tragedy that affected many lives in that single congregation rippled far and wide through millions of human hearts round the nation. Some folks in this congregation, for example, had either been part of that Knoxville congregation once in their life, or had at least attended while visiting relatives down there. One person in this congregation has an aunt who is a member there, a woman who knew the man who was shot quite well.

But even without such direct connection, I don't know of a person who wasn't affected by it. Members of our local interfaith clergy group associated with BREAD called me in sympathy and solidarity. Friends who were Jews and Muslims and Christians and unreligious called me too, for the same reasons. This was a tragedy for our larger human family, not just for Unitarian Universalists near and far.

This sermon, coming a few weeks after the initial events, hopes to touch on at least one or two of the larger issues raised by this tragedy. I am speaking of issues which, I assure you, are being raised in ALL of our congregations in these weeks following, not the least of which is the Knoxville congregation itself. Even as I speak, their minister is offering a sermon called God, Gays, Guns, and the Gospel, addressing one small factor in the shooting. His sermon last week, on Liberalism, made me weep. I commend his podcasts to those of you who are computer literate. I am convinced they will help you think...and feel... through this event.

But even his sermons cannot cover all the issues raised by this attack. Issues of safety. Issues of courage. Issues of forgiveness. Issues of practical response, readiness and risk. Issues of trauma. Issues addressing the lives of children. Issues of mental illness. Even issues of language, since innuendo

and vile language are now commonly considered perfectly acceptable in the public square. And all of these issues are permeated by the language of theology and philosophy, the two chief vocabularies of *why* and *meaning* and *hope* in the midst of it all.

On the Large Church Ministers' chat line, the question of practical safety in our congregations has been bouncing back and forth. Some of our congregations have held fire drills, or trauma rehearsals. Others have been posting plainclothes off-duty police officers on Sundays just in case.

But listen. This trauma in Tennessee did not spark these preparations. The plain-clothes officer, for example, dates back decades, after there was a loud disruption of a service by an angry man ranting about occupation politics.

And I myself am not unacquainted with such unexpected disruptions to ministry and my personhood.

Early in my ministry, some 30 years ago, I was the personal focus of an emotionally impaired human being who openly claimed to want to kill me. Well, not me *per se*, but what I stood for, as far as she was concerned. My looks reminded her of someone, and my sexual identity upset her. After a bizarre incident she caused which scared me senseless, she proceeded to write me every day, both at home and at the office, to tell me she intended to take my life. A different letter every day. With no margins, tight text, and vile language aimed at my family. This went on for a whole year.

Was I scared? You betcha. I watched my step every day. I looked both ways. I slept with one eye open. She called me every night and left horrific messages on my answering machine. I would take the tapes of these horrible threats down to the police, who said at the time that mere harassments and threats were not crimes. (It actually wasn't a crime back then, although it is now.) "You mean you can only do something if she succeeds?" I asked in terror. They said, "Yep." Now believe me, I was genuinely frightened for my life. But of course, when you are a minister, and you come to preach your sermon on Sunday, you are in the presence of many, many other people beside yourself. Her threats made them vulnerable too, making everything much, much worse. You're right. I gave thought to just quitting. My whole career.

But instead I chose I have to have a conversation with my Board, inviting their feedback. Together we crafted a plan. We agreed that if I saw this woman approaching the door of the Meeting House, through the window I could see from the pulpit, I would say a certain word, and I would leave by the back way, and let her know I was outside the building, since her focus was only me, not the congregation. Then I would disappear down the well-wooded ravine for my own safety, and they would call the police.

The story is a lot longer than what I am telling you, but, in short, with the help of a brilliant psychologist I consulted, I was able to find a way to give this poor disturbed woman some verbal images that actually stopped her scary assaults on my life. At the time, the idea that a few choice images could do such work after such a long time of frustration felt more like a miracle than anything else. I assure you I would never have been able to come up with the solution without leaning on the therapist for help.

But all of a sudden, the phone silent, the mailbox empty, I felt pretty safe for a change. And I realized what a wonderful feeling that is. Safety.

The man who killed and hurt the people of the Tennessee Valley congregation assaulted their sense of safety deeply. Far more than my own safety was assaulted. Some of the kids in the congregation still won't come into certain parts of the building. Trauma teams and psychologists have been working every day with the survivors, who are defusing their rage and fear, both expressed and suppressed. And those who were hurt by the gunshots have suffered such injury that several will not be able to return to work for months, including primary breadwinners. So it's clear that the dismantling of a sense of safety caused by the act of a deranged man will be in effect for a rather long time.

I know that folks have pointed out that this man who killed other human beings offered as his excuse that he thought that liberals were destroying America and should be shot. Certainly the books he had read by Michael Savage and Ann Coulter, which refer to all self-defined liberals as being mentally ill, or both stupid and not worth spitting upon, provide a chilling atmosphere in which the murders were perpetrated. Nothing kind or

praiseworthy can be said about such cruel and hurtful language, entirely comparable to the bullying bureaucrats of every totalitarian nation in human history, who refer to any group or culture they hate and blame as mere vermin, i.e. bugs. And as you know, few rush to confess to the sin of murder when they swat a mosquito. No, there is no doubt the vile language of over-confident right wing pundits ricocheted through the sick mind of the killer.

But did these awful books force this man to shoot people? Many millions of others have read these books and have not gone on killing sprees, and so there is every evidence that this poor man was suffering from a kind of emotional impairment that can neither be fairly called political nor philosophical. Just tragic and sad.

But such people have always existed. From Jack the Ripper to the twisted minds that shoot up schools or tie fragile young gay men to barbed wire, they have always existed. Is there a social atmosphere for such crimes...from nasty books like the aforementioned titles, to distorting sermons from religious deceivers like Dr. Dobson, to the systemic and social calamities of quicksand poverty, unemployment, and racial tension? You betcha. Absolutely. But even so, if such things had the power people claim for them, murder such as befell Knoxville would be common, not rare, and thank goodness, it is indeed most rare. The woman who wanted to kill me was deranged, in a day before medication was invented which could have reigned her in. Her upside-down mind was unlucky biology, not evidence of political or homophobic animus against me.

I was lucky and escaped physical harm. Folks in Knoxville were not so lucky, and will suffer for a good long time.

Is there meaning in such misfortune? No. As the mother of the nine year old in our first reading said, "I don't think that tragedies happen on purpose." I agree. Tragedies are just sad.

Is there something special about me that I am still living, despite the bizarre assault on my life? No. I was just lucky. That's all. Was there something lacking in Knoxville? Could they have prevented what happened? Of course

not. You can't wrap everyone up in cotton forever to keep them from hurting themselves, as our story makes clear this morning.

There can be no final guarantees about safety if safety is merely understood as freedom from harm. No such guarantees can be made while any of us are still alive. Sorry. Even with fire-drills and safety plans...which I am for, by the way. After all, multiplying harbors doesn't reduce the sea, said Ms. Dickinson with poetic efficiency.

But gladly, we can find other ways of understanding safety. We can find ways of responding to tragic events. Emerson said it succinctly: There is safety in valor. In courage. And courage is, according to the poet Kinnell, one of the chief expressions of love. Maybe even the best and only, he dares to declare.

Thus, I was *not* surprised when I heard about that dear man in Knoxville turning, seeing the gunman, and moving in front of the children so as to block with his body the shots aimed at the children.

I was *not* surprised when I heard of the people tackling the gunman, wresting the gun from him to prevent more hurt at risk of their own lives.

As I was driving through the mountains of Washington State, I was *not* surprised when I heard that Rev. Bill Sinkford, the President of our Unitarian Universalist Association, showed up in Knoxville so fast that people's heads were still spinning. For love, you see, is courage. And solidarity. And compassion. And it's courage, solidarity, and compassion, I think, which chiefly reveal and outline the basic character of religious liberals.

I also was not surprised that a service of solidarity, valor and compassion would be offered here on the Monday evening after the shooting, even though I was stuck in the Portland Airport and could not lead it. For love, compassionate courage and valor...and thus safety...thrive and breathe in *this* congregation too. I could say I was proud of the response here, I suppose, but that would suggest that I might have imagined some other response, and frankly, I couldn't imagine anything else from a congregation of liberal character.

To continue to proclaim how we live our religious life, to continue to be open and welcoming, to continue to choose what we have chosen, is a great expression of love, which Kinnell insists is courage. I think of all the examples of courage following tragedy offered in our second reading...the Forget-Me-Not Foundation, the YMCA Nancamp, and especially, Judy Shepherd's breathtaking love and courage following the death of her beloved son.

So, after a few weeks of giving it some reflection, I have to say that I think there is safety in this place. Not safety hidden in the walls wired with alarms, or tucked away in hefty locks, but in the valor of day-to-day living as Unitarian Universalists. Each of us is a part of that valor. Each of us is a part of that love in our own way.

The times are tough, they say, the times are tough. Wars and rumors of wars. Downturns and inflation. Political fisticuffs and piles of books with vile titles insulting as many people as possible.

But you know what? With the courage, the love, the valor I've seen recently, none of this bends me anymore. I am only encouraged, buoyed, and grateful to be a part of this movement, grateful to claim this religious way of moving through a hard world, grateful for the details of your lives and mine, grateful to be engaged. So now, under the lacy huppah of the sky, the canopy of creation itself, I join hands with all who risk love, who understand that love is mostly courage, who smile, knowing that our safety is smack dab at the center of our courage, and join my life to theirs. In token of this joining, I offer the ring called beloved community, the circle that has no beginning, and no ending. We're not at Cape Disappointment today. Call it, if you want a geographic image, the Cape of Good Hope instead.

For my hope is undimmed. My love is only growing. My fear is fading, actually. And you and I are alive, I think, to work for a more hopeful, loving and safe world for both myself and everyone else alive on earth right now.

Blest is the day and task set before us!

Offering

They say times are tough,
and the economy is slow.
I say the spirit still moves
among those who care and
and are committed as fast
as it ever moved, and as freely.
We give and receive the morning
offering in a circle of support
for the real needs of this house of
light and love and learning.

Prayer

What wondrous love is this, which is strong
even when everything has fallen to pieces?
What wondrous truthfulness is this,
which shines relentlessly even when the clouds
fool themselves that they have put out the light?
What wondrous wisdom is this,
which resists the distortions of human brokenness by simply breathing steady
without panic or paranoia?
What wondrous day is this, which opens
up before us, filled with love, truthfulness and wisdom and wonder?