

***The Road From Knoxville***  
**Sermon by the Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka**  
**August 17, 2008**

**Opening Reading: “Our Doors and Our Hearts Will Remain Open”**

*UUA Advertisement in the New York Times*

**A Tragic Act of Violence in Knoxville**

On Sunday July 27th, the peace of the morning worship service at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church was shattered by violence. A man beset by his personal demons opened fire with a shotgun just as the youth of the congregation were about to begin a performance. Two people were killed and six others were wounded before brave members of the congregation wrestled the gunman to the ground.

We mourn the loss of Greg McKendry and Linda Kraeger, and our hearts and prayers go out to their families and friends. We are praying for the recovery of the wounded.

And we celebrate the bravery of the congregants who, with no thought for their own safety, rushed to disarm the shooter before he could kill others.

Our prayers are also with the shooter, that he may find peace and reconciliation. The tragic events of that morning have much to tell us about the Unitarian Universalists of Knoxville and about the larger Unitarian Universalist faith community.

**Standing on the Side of Love**

In the aftermath of this horrible tragedy, it would be understandable if the Knoxville Unitarian Universalists responded with anger, with fear, or with despair. Instead, they have greeted hatred with love and have created meaning from a horribly destructive act. Their courage, their love, and their unbreakable spirit have been an inspiration to people everywhere.

Police reports suggest that the Tennessee Valley Church may have been targeted because of the congregation’s justice work in the community: opening its doors in welcome to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people; feeding and housing the homeless; and working for racial justice. Indeed, TVUUC faithfully embodies Unitarian Universalism’s focus on deeds, not creeds.

Unitarian Universalists know that our congregations are places where our spirits can be nurtured and we will be lovingly supported on our spiritual journeys. But we are not content to leave our faith in our sanctuaries when Sunday worship has ended. We are called by our faith to help heal our world. And we thank people of all faiths who have reached out with support.

On August 3rd, just one week after the joy and innocence of their Sunday service was defiled by gunfire, the TVUUC congregation rededicated their sanctuary to peace. Inspired by the Unitarian Universalists of Knoxville, Unitarian Universalists everywhere have rededicated

themselves to our religious mission: to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbor, to work for justice, to nurture the spirits of all who seek a liberal religious home, and to help heal this wounded world.

We will not give in to fear. We will meet hatred with love. We will continue to work for justice. Our hearts, and the doors of our more than 1,000 Unitarian Universalist congregations nationwide, remain open. Unitarian Universalists stand on the side of love. We invite you to stand with us.

In faith,  
Rev. William Sinkford  
President  
*Unitarian Universalist Association*

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Tragedy strikes in so many ways. It is almost always unexpected, painful and life altering. As much as we may like to think we are in control of what goes on in our lives – our education, our careers, our health, our faith – we are not really in control of much: a diagnosis of cancer in a member of a healthy family; a car accident caused by another driver under the influence of alcohol; a sports injury that, in an instant, transforms a beloved family member from a vivacious athlete into a bed-ridden patient; a beautiful congregation torn apart by a gunman beset by personal demons.

I want to lift up once again the names of those two Unitarian Universalists who lost their lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, three weeks ago: Greg McKendry, a member of the congregation who stood up and blocked the shooter from firing more widely, and Linda Kraeger, a member of the neighboring Westside UU congregation who was there to see her granddaughter sing during the Sunday service. Our hearts and prayers, our money and our goodwill go out to their families and friends, and to the six others wounded, and their families and friends.

Of all places, a house of worship should be a safe place to gather, no matter what our beliefs are. But it was scary to learn that David Adkisson, the shooter, left a note in his home describing how he had not been able to find a job for years, that his food stamps were ending, and that he blamed “liberals” for his situation. Aside from this absurd notion, the fact that David Adkisson specifically targeted “liberals” was chilling. Because of this, I even read that the prosecutor’s office was looking into the possibility of charging this as a “hate crime.”

I fully accept that some people and some other religions don’t agree with us. I understand and even resonate with the anger some people feel towards those who don’t think or act like I do. But it is very hard to make sense of someone in this country who would kill because another person or group was speaking or acting on what they believed.

I feel the need to return three weeks later to this topic of the shooting at the Tennessee Valley UU Church partly because I was not here in town that weekend. The shooting occurred

on Sunday, July 27, and I left for vacation at a friend's cabin on Friday, July 25. The whole week I was at a cabin where we had no Internet and no television, and we did not return home until after the following Sunday service. When I returned home I was hit with the news all at once with six pages of emails from the Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association chat list.

I did hear that on August 3, both Michael Holt and Stephanie McCullough-Cain, members of this congregation, provided on that Sunday morning beautiful moments of reflection and remembrance to honor the victims of the attack, and the Tennessee Valley UU Church. I deeply regret not being here during the moments and days following July 27, but I am deeply grateful to Michael and Stephanie for their presence here that Sunday morning.

It may be that by now some of you have processed the events of July 27 to a point where you feel more at peace. But, perhaps partly because I was gone that week, disconnected from the outside world and from this congregation, I feel the need to revisit this event and address some of the questions that arise from it. I feel a sense of importance around naming some of our fears, our anger, and questions around how we travel the road from Knoxville that lies before us now. I could take this service in many directions. I could focus on anger and righteous indignation. I am sorely tempted to rail against intolerance in our country, and against senseless violence perpetrated by our government in Iraq and other countries around the world, which I feel provides an ideal model and sanction for senseless violence perpetrated between people on a personal level inside this country. I feel a desire to go on a verbal rampage myself, entering into a diatribe against "conservatives" in this country who speak and act out with so much vehemence and intolerance toward anyone who is not like them.

I could also talk about mental illness, and our communal bias toward these marginalized people. Some people in the news have speculated or stated that David Adkisson is mentally ill, and that going off his medications was the beginning of his murderous rampage. I could preach tolerance and compassion as we educate ourselves about mental illness and integrating mentally ill people into our congregations.

I could talk about the advertisement in the New York Times that was read earlier. Some in our Unitarian Universalist movement don't like it because they feel it is grandstanding, using a violent crime as a springboard simply to get more publicity. Others deeply appreciate the ad, describing how the ad both counters hate with love, and how it gave them strength in their efforts to process and address their own emotions.

Though I do feel compassion for all sides in the midst of painful events, and though I worked for a short time for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, I do not feel compelled to speak on mental illness today. And though I do sometimes feel very intolerant of people who are intolerant, I am also aware of the old adage, "Be careful who you choose to be your enemy, for you will become like them." By nature I want to be open to the possibility of love, and by theological training I want to preach the inclinations of my nature.

Because I continually feel called to preach on love, I recognize the difficulty of publishing an advertisement in the New York Times. The ad forces us to publicly state a Unitarian Universalist theology of good and evil, a theology we at best are uncomfortable with, and at worst, ignore. Our liberal theology calls on us to believe in the goodness of humanity, and of all creation, but when an event or individual destroys a family or tears apart a community, we often may find ourselves at a theological loss for explaining the pain and devastation.

As one UU minister wrote, "we want all the moral power that comes from being the innocent victims and martyrs to our causes. Yet we are not quite willing to name the shooter as

evil, but would prefer that he [is] seen as mentally ill, and hence, less responsible in some way. But to explain away evil by saying it is caused by mental illness is unfair to the mentally ill, and stigmatizes them.”

Yet another reality that complicates our understanding of this event is that David Adkisson was no stranger to Unitarian Universalism. For several years in the 1990s, David and his wife, Liza, attended the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute (SUSSI) in Virginia. In fact, a compilation CD of SUUSI music was created in 1995 and features a song David and Liza sang together.

It is easier to see our selves on the side of moral purity when someone who is considered an “outsider” terrorizes our people. But what do we do when the supposed “outsider” is really one of us? How do we make sense of brutality when it comes from someone who supposedly knows who we are, what we stand for, and is sympathetic enough to join with us in worship and play over several years?

We humans are expressions of life on what is really a very tiny chunk of rock in a vast universe. As I see it and feel it, all humanity and all life clinging to this chunk of rock are really part of the definition of “us.” Other theologies might say that we are all part of God’s creation. The question “what do we do when the supposed outsider is really one of us?” is a question based in fear. It is a question that really seems to be asking, “Could this happen here, to us?” The answer, of course, is “yes.”

The truth is that we are guaranteed nothing in this life. All of life is scary, uncertain, and dangerous. Shootings, car accidents, cancer, hurricanes and earthquakes are merely extravagant reminders that anything could happen to us at any time.

The question then moves us from “Could this happen here?” and toward the question, “How do we find meaning in a universe that is uncertain, and sometimes scary?”

Love and beauty and strength exist in this life in more than equal measure to pain. If it did not, there would be no point to living. From a pastoral perspective of spiritual care then, my concern and my questions at a time like this revolve around where we find our strength and our faith, what meaning we make out of this tragedy, and a desire to discover where we go from here.

I support much of the sentiment in the advertisement the UUA placed in the New York Times – that we respond to hate and fear with love, and that we honor and acknowledge courage, love and unbreakable spirits. But I also get from the ad a bit of a sense that tragedy will not move us, and that we are back to business as usual. Counter to business as usual, though, my experience of sitting with people during times of intense pain and loss informs me that three weeks after a tragedy is not long enough for us to find meaning in much of anything.

What we can do at times like this is to name our fear, our anger, our sorrow. We can stand beside the Knoxville congregation in unflinching love during this time of intense pain. We can share with each other our broken hearts.

We have a long journey ahead of us. It could be that out of our broken hearts we become bitter. We could become even more fearful. We could say to ourselves, “since a shooting like that could happen here, we better do everything we can by any means necessary to keep ourselves safe and secure.”

But a wise person once said, “The illusion of security is the only security we have.” I invite us to take a lesson from other tragedies and other reactions. In the past seven years, our country has become perhaps more “safe and secure” than it has ever been in history. And at what cost: a loss of privacy through illegal wiretapping, imprisonment of innocent Americans,

government monitoring of the books we read in the library, mass deportation of immigrants who still want to enter our country under these circumstances, a perpetuation of American military violence across the globe, including humiliation and torture of prisoners of war in direct violation of Geneva Convention codes of conduct among civilized nations.

I am reminded of the old adage once again, “Be careful who you choose to be your enemy, for you will become like them.”

In her poem, “The Love of Morning,” Denise Levertov writes:

It is hard sometimes to drag ourselves  
back to the love of morning  
after we've lain in the dark crying out  
O God, save us from the horror . . . .

God has saved the world one more day  
even with its leaden burden of human evil;  
we wake to birdsong.  
And if sunlight's gossamer lifts in its net  
the weight of all that is solid,  
our hearts, too, are lifted,  
swung like laughing infants;

but on gray mornings,  
all incident - our own hunger,  
the dear tasks of continuance,  
the footsteps before us in the earth's  
beloved dust, leading the way - all,  
is hard to love again  
for we resent a summons  
that disregards our sloth, and this  
calls us, calls us.

My faith calls me to a broader understanding of the human condition, and a deeper love. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is, in fact, a large-hearted faith. Over the past two thousand years, our religious ancestors studied Christian scripture and found there a Jesus who walked bravely and compassionately with the outcast, the orphan, the widow, the leper, and most amazingly, with the stranger who walks among us. Our Universalist ancestors also found in scripture, and in the world, a God full of so much love that they could not imagine hell, much less believe in a God who would send people there. They believed, and we carry on the belief, that all creation is inherently good.

Our faith challenges us with a demanding response. We are challenged to act out the love that we ourselves were born into. We are challenged to cultivate compassion toward a killer who not only has hate in his heart, but is also filled with profound pain and despair.

I am not advocating that we ignore our feelings of anger, resentment, outrage, or sorrow. I am not suggesting we merely roll over and allow people to trample all over us. I firmly believe in the health we create when we have clear boundaries. But in order to have clear boundaries,

we need to have deep understanding of who we are, including our own profound pain and despair. In our own awareness lie the seeds of compassion. As we open to our own pain, the more compassion we can feel for someone else.

Lisa Presley, a Unitarian Universalist minister and a member of the national UU Trauma Response Team, wrote about a conversation she heard while she was at the Tennessee Valley UU Church during the week after the shooting. As they prepared for the next week's Sunday service, she overheard people discussing whether they should have metal detectors at the doors. After deciding this was not the right approach, they continued joking about it, trying to figure out how to make them solar powered, energy efficient and environmentally green. Then, still joking, one member asked, "So...on which side of the metal detectors should we put the Welcome Table?"

This, to me, is what the theology of love – rather than the theology of security – is all about. Will we choose to live behind fortresses that protect us from life, or will we continue to open our hearts to the possibility of love as much in bad times as in good times? Our theology asks us to choose hope and possibility over fear and dread. Our theology continually invites us to return to love. May we respond with conviction to its summons.