

**“Knoxville” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton September 21, 2008**

Chalice Lighting

We are safe.

We are together.

We are loved.

And so it will be.

-Brian Griffin DRE TVUUC

The facts of the Knoxville tragedy itself are simple and sad and are not the main point of this sermon. But we must begin by acknowledging what happened. During a summer service featuring excerpts from “Annie” by young people from a church camp, a stranger walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation carrying a loaded 12 gauge shotgun. An older man, an usher named Joe Barnhardt stood in front of him barring entry. Mr. Barnhardt died in the first blast. A mother in the quiet room nearby quickly barred the door putting herself between the shooter and the children. Fortunately, she was not noticed. The man walked into the sanctuary and fired again wounding seven including Linda Kraeger, visiting from another nearby UU congregation. She would soon die of those wounds

Jamie Parkey thought the blast was part of the play his daughter was helping put on. Then he saw blood on another parishioner behind him and saw the gunman. “He had the gun leveled in our direction,” Parkey told television reporters a day later. “That’s when I pushed my mother and daughter to the floor and got under the pew. When I saw the men rushing him was when I got up to join them.”

The men, led by Dr. John Bohstedt, father of another of the performers, subdued and disarmed the shooter who was soon taken away by police.

In many ways, those few terrifying and scarring moments were merely the start of this story, a story of strength and courage, of compassion and community, of solace taken from core liberal values that stand at the center of our faith. And most of all it is a story of healing begun amidst an ocean of love. That’s the story I wish to share today, the story of how our religion and our people helped one another through tragedy.

Within hours other Knoxville UU congregations had thrown open their doors for informal services and pastoral care. Within a day the various faith communities came together to hold services, to raise funds, and provide food. In the great tradition of the south, casseroles, pies, salads, cookies, and every other kind of food started pouring into TVUUC for the victims, the volunteers and the workers.

Within a day the Unitarian Universalist Association had a well-trained crisis intervention team on site, including a very dear friend of mine, Police Chaplain Rev. Lisa Presley. They and government provided grief counsellors stayed in the church for over a week organizing group debriefings and providing personal care for any who needed the chance to talk. The support is now continuing in other ways, including a relief fund of over \$40,000.

The evening after the shootings, there was a multi-faith candlelight service held at the Presbyterian Church next door. The crowds of mourners overflowed.

During that first week the fire department’s hazmat team came in and cleaned

the church and the Sanctuary. My friend Lisa remarked in a message to colleagues how gentle, kind and efficient they were. Within a day the only sign of the event were the shotgun pellet holes in a fire door you may have seen in the video. There was some talk of replacing the door, but congregational leaders put a hold on that. "We don't want to pretend it didn't happen", they said.

Four days later Annette Marquis, the District Executive for the region of UU churches that included Knoxville published the following:

I have never been so proud of being a Unitarian Universalist (UU) as I was yesterday in Knoxville. It started when thirty or so people, some from... (the church and the sister congregations), some from the Red Cross, some from the local mental health agency, some from our own UU Trauma Response Team, several local UU ministers, gathered together to plan the day, or should I say, the day after. The meeting was chaotic, disjointed, and disorganized—yet our task was clear. What needed to be done ... to begin the healing process in the wake of Sunday's devastating tragedy?

After only a few minutes, one subgroup broke off and began planning the critical incident stress debriefing sessions that would be held from 5 to 7 p.m. that evening, sessions that were age and situation-appropriate: those who witnessed the attack and those who did not, those from TVUUC, those from the other UU congregation, children and adults who had been in the cast of "Annie, Jr.", pre-schoolers, first and second-graders, second and third graders, and on and on. Another group created a master list of all the decisions, all the tasks, all the work that needed to be done this week, from getting the damaged pews out of the sanctuary and into storage to planning the vigil that was happening that night, to imagining a re-dedication of the sacred space that is the TVUUC building.

Within a couple short hours, amidst all the heavy hearts in the ...(church) that day, a plan to start the healing process was born...

"I made my way up the hill to Second Presbyterian Church, a congregation literally right next door to TVUUC, a congregation that provided blessed refuge for our children on Sunday morning, a congregation that generously offered to host our debriefing sessions and our public vigil that night...Starting the service with an emotional rendition of Spirit of Life, Rev. Chris Buice, minister of TVUUC, gave the opening words and identified the "power in this room." "The presence of so many people from so many faith traditions being here for our church means so much to us," he said.

Rev. Bill Sinkford helped those gathered try to accept that it was not possible to make sense of such a senseless act but that by owning our feelings of anger, grief, hurt, helplessness, and pain, we could work through this together. His clarity about how the strong social justice tradition of the congregation will not let it retreat in the wake of this tragedy brought tears to my eyes. He said, "None of us can allow our pain and anger to keep us from living our faith, from welcoming all people, from standing on the side of love. We will not let that happen. We will continue our commitment to welcoming all people."

Rev. Mitra Jafarzedeh, minister of Westside UU Fellowship, closed the service (with). "Go forth in light," she said, "be daring and audacious enough to have hope. Let nothing silence us."

(She)... was right: we are just beginning. During the pre-service debriefing

session held with the cast of the play that was being performed at the Sunday service, the cast members asked for the opportunity to bring some closure to the months of work they had put into this performance.

“Proud of my faith” does not even begin to describe my feelings, Annette concludes.

In my role as President of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, I was able to reflect from afar:

The news of the recent shootings ... was at once troubling, saddening and in an odd way, encouraging.

It was deeply troubling in that one human soul so could become so sick and twisted that he felt he had to try and kill complete strangers solely because they support liberal religious and social positions. This gunman apparently felt that all the things wrong in his life could be blamed on people with progressive points of view. Unitarian Universalists were convenient symbolic targets.

I know what it is to be dispirited and angry, even filled with rage, but I feel blessed that I have never been so overcome with illness, rage or hate that violence has seemed like a good option.

For U*Us in many parts of the world this attack on our faith so deeply shocking as to be almost beyond comprehension. Yet I am mindful that for a good many of our brothers and sisters in too many parts of the world this act of violence, while still terrible, is not so rare or shocking. Our hopeful, loving faith exists in the midst of violence, lawlessness and political unrest, in the midst of warfare, in the midst of deeply dangerous circumstances. Perhaps those U*Us have a better understanding today of what our Tennessee sisters and brothers have experienced this week. Still, for me, fortunate to live in a fairly peaceful place, the news was terribly shocking.

One member of our local Edmonton church suggested that, as with 9-11, there are a lot of people from our communities feeling a little less safe in their churches today. That is troubling.

And of course, these events leave deep feelings of sadness for the victims, their families and friends. Only people who have been through that kind of experience can begin to grasp what the families must be enduring. I feel blessed that I have never had to face such events. All I can write is that I feel tremendous sympathy for the members and friends of the Tennessee Valley UU Congregation as they grieve their losses and try to find ways to feel safe again in their church.”

The video clip from Bill Moyers Journal showed Rev. Chris Buice, someone whom I had just met at our recent CUC meetings. He was not in church that day. Like me he was on vacation in July. Chris was present throughout the days and weeks of aftermath and by all reports did amazing work. I have listened to and was deeply moved by his remarkable series of August sermons stemming from the incident on the church website. They included the clips we heard a few moments ago. I commend them to you.

At the sanctuary rededication service seven days after the shooting, Chris spoke. There was sadness and grief of course, but overall his remarks were filled with passion, courage and hope, and his homily was interrupted many times by applause, even cheers. He said,

“There are many names for the power of healing, and we have felt that power in this congregation this week. This has been a time of paradoxes. Last week a man came into this sanctuary with the intention of inflicting terror and he inspired quick and decisive acts of courage. Reports say that he had been told that liberals were soft on terror. He had a rude discovery.”

“He came into this space to... do an act of hatred, but he has unleashed unspeakable amounts of love. A man tried to strike a blow for of intolerance and by so doing he inspired ...gatherings...throughout the week of Christians and Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, believers and unbelievers, crowded in the aisle, sitting on the stage, gathered outside in the rain, holding, hugging and helping each other to heal.

“A man tried to divide us...divide us into liberals and conservatives, gay and straight. Instead his actions united us making us more willing to listen to each other, care for each other, respect each other, support each other.” And referring to the tangible hospitality, “And let’s be honestfeed each other...in body and spirit...Our (larger)community surrounded us with love.”

“He came into this space to inflict death and he took away the lives of two precious people, wounded six others, traumatized our community, but strangely at the same time reminded us of the preciousness of our children, the sacredness of life and this moment of time, the true value of friendship and family and how much we need good neighbours.”

In a later sermon Rev. Buice shifted to the reasons for the attack: that we Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists profess a liberal faith and that the Tennessee Valley congregation has a strong justice seeking history.

“Liberalism is an easy target... (because we agree with Voltaire who said), ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.’” Buice suggests that it is an idea that leads some to think we are weak and easy targets, that we won’t respond in kind. He said, “You can call a liberal all sorts of terrible names and a liberal will still defend your freedom of speech... of the press... of religion. Contrast that with how others might react.”

He then led a guided meditation of a sort asking people to imagine themselves in a local bar late on a Saturday night. He invited them to imagine mounting the stage, taking the microphone and calling all in the room traitors to America giving comfort and succour to the enemy. He then surmised that anyone who did such a thing would soon be joined on stage by any number of people strenuously pointing out the error of that statement.

“We are peaceful, tolerant and understanding people. We are open to listening to opinions that are different from our own. We are committed to non-violent social change, therefore it does not take a lot of courage to verbally assault a liberal.”

From the first day after the shooting, this has been the message of the church President, of Rev. Buice and UUA President Bill Sinkford. Each issued strong and faithful statements. They declared that our liberal approach will not be altered or changed by this tragedy. They spoke of love and compassion, not hate and revenge. In the midst of this tragedy, the people found new strength and resolve. They are finding positive meanings in this terrible event.

I concluded my ICUU Presidential letter with this: “We who choose a liberal and principled approach to faith can expect to be tested in that faith from time to time,

though seldom is the test as shocking as that Sunday in Knoxville. It is at moments like those that we look to those Principles and to our understanding of the divine working within us to pull us through. May our Knoxville sisters and brothers find the strength they need in their time of grieving. May we all join them and find new reasons to renew our own commitment to our UU faith.

I leave the last word today to Tennessee Valley member Jim Elsaesser. He wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper a few days after the Monday candlelight memorial service.

“For the last segment of the services, the children of the cast of "Annie" took the stage of the sanctuary. After receiving counselling for the events they had endured, the children had asked their musical director, if they too could sing at the memorial service ... and they did, before a weeping, cheering, shouting church full of mourners ... all singing their grand finale, "Tomorrow."

It is worth noting that out of this tragedy, the children of that church led their congregation in singing, again, a song of hope, a song of healing.”