

**Travels to the Holy Land
July 26th, 2009**

Earlier this morning we read in unison the words of Unitarian Universalist minister and former Unitarian Universalist Association President, William F. Schulz, who proclaims:

This is the mission of our faith:
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

Though this statement, like our own congregation's mission statement, does not bind us as a creed, and though many people come to Unitarian Universalism and *stay* specifically because no creed is demanded of us, I wonder at times what shift might occur in our community if we were to make such a statement a regular part, a weekly part, of our liturgy. I

wonder what it would be like to say aloud, every week, with our children present, Schulz's words: "This is the mission of our faith: to teach the fragile art of hospitality..." or to say every week, as was written by this very community, words appearing in our mission statement: "We joyfully nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys, and we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice"?

Such practice could be like a prayer, like a chant, like a song sung over and over again, like the discipline of saying "I love you" to your beloved not just when you feel like it, but when you are angry or distant or sad, and love is not easy to remember or feel.

We Unitarian Universalists are proud, I think, that we have no external or hierarchical authority charging us from on high to believe or recite or act upon any one particular

religious message. Our own conscience is enough, thank you. I will say “I love you” when my conscience tells me to. In fact, just a month or so ago, I said from this pulpit that one might use one’s own conscience as something synonymous or analogous to the more mainstream religious notion of God, if god language does not appeal to you. Let your own conscience be your authority.

And yet. And yet in my travels to the Holy Land—the land of Salt Lake City, Utah, and central and western Texas; the land of companionship with friends, colleagues, and high school youth; the land of books, animals, and my own couch—in my travels these past weeks to such holy places, I have come to see that my own conscience is not enough, for I, alone, am not enough. Though, as an introvert, I treasure solitude and will continue to seek it; though I believe solitude can offer up space for that still, small voice to make itself

heard, I have learned too much in these past weeks, and before that, to believe mine is the only conscience, the only story to believe or to honor. I must listen for and to the stories of others, and learn to integrate them into my own. In the words of Jacqueline Lewis, which we heard Lois read earlier, I must understand that *all* of us are “living texts,” that *all* of our stories “teach us values, ethics, and meaning.”

So it is that I hold up this morning a story not of my own, but of others indeed, one which occurred one year ago tomorrow, on the fourth Sunday of the month, as this is the fourth Sunday. On July 27th, one year ago tomorrow, in Knoxville, Tennessee, a Unitarian Universalist congregation known as the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, was fifteen minutes or so into a special, children-led service, when a gunman entered and began shooting. Do you remember? Within minutes he was tackled and restrained,

taken away by the police—but not before six adults were injured and two adults were killed. Thankfully, no children were physically harmed.

This story of Knoxville is obviously a tragic one: one of a single man so deep in his own suffering that he could only think to “kill” that suffering by killing others; it is one of innocent women, men, and children seeking communal celebration, but who found instead bloodshed and terror.

And yet. And yet it is a story as well of resilience and rebirth, a story of love and renewal. For within hours the people of that church, led by their minister, the Rev. Chris Buice, proclaimed they would not let this tragedy drive their faith into silence, nor would they succumb to locking their doors against the world. Instead, in grace and hope and tears, they welcomed the love and hospitality of their religious neighbors, some of whom they had had little contact with until

that time, as those neighbors came pouring in to stand beside them and serve them in their time of need. The gathering of compassion and love and justice was transformative. And in that gathering, in that healing response to violence and suffering, echo the words of Rev. Schulz:

This is the mission of our faith:
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.

On *this* fourth Sunday of July, as was that Sunday last year in which a man with a gun entered the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and shot and killed two people and injured six others, on this day, in this moment, let us take time for silence, again, this time to receive and integrate into our stories, our living texts, the stories of those people who

suffered such a tragedy. In our silence, let us exchange with them *our* compassion for *their* sorrow, resilience, and forbearing love. Let us be silent together.

SILENCE.

Now, holding this prayer in our hearts and minds, I invite you to return with me to the wisdom of Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church, whose words we also heard Lois read earlier. In his book, *Freedom from Fear*, Church encourages us to practice not wishful thinking, but thoughtful wishing. As I read aloud some of those things which Church suggests we wish for, hold the stories of the people of Knoxville, and hold the stories of those nearer to you, including yourself, as well. Here they are: things to wish for, thoughtfully:

- the courage to bear up under pain
- the grace to take our successes lightly

- the liberation that comes with forgiveness
- the energy to address tasks that await our doing
- the meaning to be found in giving ourselves to others
- the patience to surmount things that are dragging us down
- the joy to be gained in even the smallest tasks
- the pleasure of one another's company
- the wonder that lies between the sacred moments of our birth and death

In my travels to the Holy Land this past month—whether I was walking in my short hair and tattoos with my tall dreadlocked Caribbean friend through the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City; whether I was living for a week at the U Bar U camp and conference center outside of Kerrville with 28 teenagers and six other adults; or whether I was roaming the streets of Marfa, Texas, half ghost town, half mini Santa Fe—in my travels through these Holy Lands, I encountered living

texts that demanded of me that I listen—that I listen and that, in so hearing, I wish thoughtfully for deeper connection to all the wonder that lies between the sacred moments of my birth and my death. In other words, I was asked, again and again, to *learn* and to practice and to teach the fragile art of hospitality.

Not that the places I traveled to were *my* territory out from which to practice hospitality. The Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, for instance, belonged to the Church of the Latter Day Saints, not me. Still, as a stranger in that strange land, despite all my doubt about how welcomed my friend and I actually were there, walking through the Tabernacle I could choose to resort to divisiveness, or to honor diversity. I could revert to a hostile heart, or I could thoughtfully wish for, and thus discover, a hospitable one.

The work of choosing the latter is ongoing, and must be returned to again and again, like a prayer, or a chant, or a song, or like saying “I love you” to your beloved, not only in times of delight, but in times of plight as well.

Regarding plight, I don’t know much about the man who entered the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church last year and brought such havoc upon the lives of others. He was unemployed, on the verge of losing his food stamps, and was seeking a place to lay down his anger. The letter, or “manifesto,” he left in his car before the shootings vilified liberal religious and political views, stating that since he couldn’t reach the “generals” of liberalism, he would aim for its “foot soldiers.” So he targeted this Unitarian Universalist congregation, which he had attended once, years before.

Knowing all of this, at the gunman’s hearing last February, Rev. Chris Buice did not return the vilification in

kind. Instead he simply stated that this man was, in Buice's words, "a *victim* of his own hatred."

Buice himself would not let his community of faith go down that same road of hatred. After the shootings, the minister of the Tennessee Valley congregation noted, "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."

On this one-year marking of the Knoxville shootings, I ask us Wildflowers, if we are to follow the example of Rev. Buice and the Tennessee Valley UU Church, where shall we continue *our* commitment to welcoming all people? Where shall we open ourselves to the stories, the living texts of those we meet? In our own sanctuary, yes. But *our* space is not the only holy space. Our share of the land is not the only holy

land. The holy land is wherever we choose to stand on the side of love. The holy land, if we stop to listen, is where we will hear, indeed, the spirit of life and love saying again and again, "I am here. I am here."

So may it be. Amen.

Please rise in body or spirit to join in singing hymn
#1018, Come and Go with Me