

**Falling Flowers Our Wreaths Will Be
August 10, 2008**

In the two weeks that have passed since the shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, which left two people dead and six others wounded, I have engaged with people in several soul-searching conversations about how to respond to such a tragic event, happening within our own denomination. In those conversations, questions have arisen: How do we communicate both our grief *and* our faith to the rest of the Austin community? How do we keep our own congregation safe? How do we speak to our children about what happened, if we do at all? How do we reach out to the Tennessee Valley UU Church, as well as the Westside UU Fellowship, who were holding a joint service that day when the gunman entered and, during a children's performance before 200 people, abruptly changed those people's lives forever? As of yet, there is no one answer to any of these questions. We

have made good efforts. On Monday the 28th, we held a roadside prayer vigil, where about thirty Wildflowers were in attendance. Last Sunday, we had a special offering, and together, we raised nearly \$800 to go to the Knoxville Relief Fund. That same day, after the worship service, we began a conversation about establishing policies for managing crises of all kinds within our congregation.

And, on a denominational level, if you receive the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, you may have seen this morning the full page ad, containing a letter from Unitarian Universalist Association President William Sinkford. The ad's heading reads, "Our Doors and Our Hearts Will Remain Open." President Sinkford's *letter* within the ad reads, in part, "Unitarian Universalists know that our congregations are places where our spirits can be nurtured and [where] we will be lovingly supported on our spiritual journeys. But," Sinkford

notes, “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.” The letter concludes, “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 congregations nationwide, remain open. Unitarian Universalists stand on the side of love. We invite you to stand with us.”

Therein lie the beginnings of answers to many of our questions, both about the Knoxville tragedy, and about the continuing tragedies of violence and war all across the world. Do not give in to fear. Meet hatred with love. Keep our doors and our hearts open. President Sinkford’s letter reflects the passage by James Vila Blake that the Tennessee Valley UU Church keeps on the home page of their website: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great

covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.” The letter is a response, an amen, to the call of Micah: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” The letter, in its refusal to give in to fear, is a reminder to us that indeed, in the words of the poet Denise Levertov, “We have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.... to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.”

The communion of struggle. In just what struggle must we commune? To begin to explore that, I want to refer to just one line from John Hersey’s 1946 book, *Hiroshima*, which documents the miraculous survival of six individuals of the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945—just 63 years ago this week. The edition I read is a newer edition, published in 1985, and includes a section entitled *Aftermath*, in which

Hersey again traces the lives of the survivors—this time into old age, and for some, into death.

The last chapter of the book focuses on the Reverend Kioshi Tanimoto, a protestant minister who had worked feverishly in the days, months, and years after the bombing, to aid other survivors. In the final paragraph of this chapter Hersey writes about Rev. Tanimoto, now seventy years old, spending his days reading about The United States and the Soviet Union, quote, “steadily climbing the steep steps of deterrence.” Hersey continues, “[Rev. Tanimoto] lived in a snug little house with a radio and two television sets... He ate too much. He got up at six every morning and took an hour’s walk with his small wooly dog, Chiko. He was slowing down a bit.” Finally, Hersey ends the book with this line: “His memory, like the world’s, was getting spotty.”

In what struggle must we commune? I believe, in part, we must struggle with our world's spotty—very spotty—memory. For, as long as our collective memory continues to lean towards amnesia, or minimalization, or rationalization, or plain old denial of the harm we keep doing to ourselves and each other, we will continue to perpetuate the very bloodshed and heartbreak to which people have repeatedly cried out in response, “never again.”

Take, for instance, World War I, also known as “the war to end all wars.” Not only did the Second World War begin only twenty years after the War to End All Wars ended, but very real, very dangerous, reminders of both wars still remain all across the landscapes of Europe. In his 1996 book, *Remnants of War*, Donovan Webster travels across northern France with members of the French Department of De-mining, who, since 1946, have “collected and destroyed more than 18 million

artillery shells, 10 million grenades, 600,000 bombs dropped from aircraft, and 600,000 underwater mines.” He continues, “Through these efforts, more than 2 million acres of France have now been reclaimed from the explosive and toxic tools of war.” Still, Webster notes that, for example, “thirty-six farmers died in 1991 when their machinery hit uncollected shells.” And he reports that, as of 1996, *millions* more unexploded shells from both world wars still rest undiscovered in the forests, fields, beaches, and waters of France. That’s just France. Think of Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia. Think of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan. And, as of this week, the Republic of Georgia. Think of what we as a human race are doing to ourselves and to the generations to come.

Now, as you ponder those things, I’ll admit I’ve leapt in my focus pretty drastically from the single tragic incident of one man desperately seeking relief from his own suffering by

taking the lives of others, to a much more global, intergenerational story of the overwhelming perpetuation and suffering of war. But I do so in search of their common roots, and in the belief that the gap between one single act of violence and whole systems of war is not so wide.

Let me explain what I mean, by sharing with you this passage from the book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, written by former war correspondent Chris Hedges. As you listen, think of war as a metaphor for, or as representative of, *all* forms of violence. He writes, “I learned early on that war forms its own culture. The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug.... It is peddled by mythmakers—historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state—all of whom,” Hedges continues, “endow it with qualities it often *does* possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in

life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it....” War begets war. Violence begets violence. Why don’t we get that, really, finally get that? Because war, because violence of any kind is habit forming. And habits can become addictions. And addiction neither remembers nor is sane. In fact, in the world of 12-step recovery, the definition of *insanity* is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results. Think about it: Overdrinking, overeating, oversexing, overspending. Over-warring. Over and over again.

In other words, our history and our world culture are so entrenched in addictively repetitive systems of violence, we don’t know how to stop. Even in the subtlest of ways we practice violence every day. I do when I growl and lose my temper at the driver ahead of me simply because he is slowing

down to turn into a parking lot, thus forcing me to slow down, too. I do so when I'm less than kind to the receptionist at the dentist's office as I turn and walk out just a bit dramatically without saying goodbye because *I* hadn't checked *my* phone before I left *my* house to hear that *my* appointment had been cancelled because the hygienist had thrown out her back.

Those are subtle examples. Perhaps you have some, too. But I give you those subtle examples, because I believe it is in the subtleties that we must become mindful of the violence in our lives, and thus be able to affect change within ourselves, and then in the larger, more palpable world of violence that we live within. As individuals, and as a culture, we must begin to recover from violence, and learn a whole new way of being with ourselves and with one another. We must begin, to quote Denise Levertov again, "to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle."

The members of the Tennessee Valley UU Church have exemplified for us such recovery and such communion when, as quoted in Bill Sinkford's letter, "just one week after the joy and innocence of their Sunday service was defiled by gunfire, [they] rededicated their sanctuary to peace." Some of our own members of Wildflower Church exemplified the endeavor to transform our world when they engaged in a book group discussing peacemaking and nonviolent communication for nine months. Anyone is affecting change when he or she endeavors to say, "*I feel this,*" instead of "*you did that...*" Anyone who realizes that they have been doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results, and who chooses, having had that revelation, to walk a new path, where different results are possible, is affecting change. Anyone who strives to lean toward compassion, despite the impulse to move toward rejection, affects change.

Which way do we lean when we think of the gunman in Knoxville? I don't know if we'll ever really know what motivated the man who opened fire on our kindred church in Knoxville. There is evidence he targeted a UU Church specifically because of our liberal religious beliefs, because we open our doors to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, because we work toward justice for the poor and the homeless. But while these motives may be true, I believe he targeted our liberal church, our free church, mostly because he himself was *not* free. He could not find his way out of his own suffering. So he did what, in subtle and not so subtle ways, so much of the world tells us to do: he took it out on someone else. He projected his suffering onto others. He strove to experience, for at least a moment, that myth of violence that possesses, in Chris Hedges' words, "excitement... power, chances to rise

above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe....” Now he is imprisoned once again.

Similarly, much of humanity has become imprisoned by the rose-tinted belief of Alfred Nobel, back in 1892, that “the day that two armies have the capacity to annihilate each other within a few seconds, it is likely all civilized nations will turn their back on warfare.” An accurate prediction? *Hiroshima* author John Hersey points out that in the years and decades after the bombing of Hiroshima, the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, China, and India all developed, and continued to develop, nuclear weapons. And of course, the race hasn’t ended there.

On the other hand, neither has our faith ended. We Unitarian Universalists are a small denomination—just a thousand or so congregations and fellowships nationwide, compared to the hundreds of thousands of congregations of

other faiths. But whoever said that might is right? To paraphrase the frequently quoted words of Edward Everett Hale: “We are only one, but still we are one. We cannot do everything, but still we can do something. And because we cannot do everything, we will not refuse to do the something that we can do.” So let us keep our doors and our hearts open. Let us help heal the world from violence with words and deeds of compassion. Let us continue standing on the side of love, and, standing up and turning to hymn #368, let us sing!