

GEARING UP: CARING FOR EACH OTHER AND THE WORLD

Rev. Kit Ketcham, Aug. 3, 2008

Wednesday morning of this past week, I had gotten up plenty early to get to the gym and do my workout before starting the day, but I'd gotten sidetracked by all the information and emotion still flooding into my online world and my mind was full of the sorrow and consternation that such a bad thing could happen to such good people, as exemplified by the experience of our brothers and sisters in the Tennessee Valley UU church.

Gail Adams was at the gym too, and she and I often have a bit of conversation side by side on the exercise bikes, and that morning was no exception. We both had things to say about the Knoxville tragedy and we shared our own grief about the uncertainties of life and the inevitability of unexpected changes in our lives.

When she got off her bike to go to her yoga class, I said to her, "Gail, thanks for being here this morning, because it really helps me to talk about these things and I haven't had much chance in the last day or so. Thanks."

And she responded as we know Gail would respond, with a smile and an invitation to call anytime. I resumed my workout with a little lighter heart and after doing my normal routine, I collected my jacket and my keys and left the parking lot.

Just as I passed Trinity Lutheran's little chapel, where we have met so many times as a congregation, I noticed that a car approaching me on the highway was actually sitting still in its lane, with a string of cars backed up behind it. Before I had a chance to register much more than that, the other car's lights flashed bright and dim at me, a clear signal of some kind.

It was then that I looked to the side of the road and saw three deer, very possibly the three that roam my woods and yard, trotting along in the barrow pit. I stopped, waited till they had made up their minds about which side of the road they wanted to be on, and then began to roll again.

As I drove slowly past the other car with its out-of-state license plate, my hand went up in an involuntary wave, a signal of solidarity with the other driver and with our mutual desire to care for the deer.

My heart felt warmed and lifted again and as I made my way up the highway toward Bush Point Road, something came to me, something I've always known but was clarified sharply in that moment: We are here to care for one another and to care for the world. That is our job as human beings, whether we are Unitarian Universalist or Muslim or Jewish or devout anti-religious person. We are here to care for each other and to care for the world.

I've spent a good deal of time in the last week grieving about the shootings at our sister congregation in the Tennessee Valley, wondering what implications it has for us here on Whidbey Island, in our little rural enclave of mostly progressive folks, and how we might act on our convictions about peace and conflict and justice and oppression.

When I first heard the news last Sunday about Knoxville's tragedy, I felt overwhelmed by the startling knowledge that someone could come looking for someone like me, looking for people like us, to kill us because they disagree with our beliefs about life and feel we are responsible for their pain. I could hardly fathom the degree of anger that would produce such an act of violence. It was hard to think about, hard to understand.

But after a few days of stewing about this event, I began wanting to do something with this new knowledge and understanding. And I thought about what Knoxville's tragedy may mean to us here on Whidbey Island.

I'm not talking about being afraid. I'm talking about doing something to alleviate the pain in the world: the pain of disenfranchised people, the pain of addictions, the pain of homelessness, the pain of depression, the pain of poverty, the pain of war and torture and oppression.

Religion, we know, is about ultimate things. It's not about fashions or trends or possessions or money. It's about life and death, joy and sorrow, anger and reconciliation, shame and redemption, relationship and loneliness, love and hate, altruism and self-centeredness, stewardship and destruction.

We come to a faith community in order to find others to consider these matters with. We are not here to do navel-gazing but to care for each other and to care for those in the larger community.

What does that mean to us here today? If you had a magic wand, what would you do with it? What would you change, what would you do to care for us here? For the world? (cong. resp)

The title of the sermon this morning is officially "Gearing Up", and I had had vague thoughts about using mechanical analogies or equipment similes, maybe throwing in something about picking up speed.

But when I began to read the responses of the religious world and the secular world to our family tragedy in Knoxville, the mélange of love and courage and faith and support and, yes, insults and misinformation, I began to think differently about what I wanted to share with you today.

I could tell, from the responses of the outside world, that there is a lot of education to be done about what UUism is, a lot of misunderstandings and misinformation to be corrected, a lot of hate out there to soften and gentle down.

I could also tell, from the responses of the religious world, that there is a lot of admiration for us as a faith tradition that takes seriously our work in the world, that our openness to all people, our championing of unpopular but just causes, our desire for reconciliation instead of rejection, our commitment to peaceful solutions, all these qualities that define the heart of our faith are appreciated by many other religious people.

I am proud of our faith, proud of our people, proud of our principles.

UUA President Bill Sinkford issued a statement on the tragedy, saying:

"It will take time for Unitarian Universalists to mourn and to heal. But let me assure you that we will not change our beliefs or compromise our demands for social justice. Fear will not prevent us from standing on the side of love, and we will continue to open our doors and our hearts to all people. This Sunday, just like any other, more than one thousand Unitarian Universalist congregations will be open for business, and our business is to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbor, to nurture the spirits of our people, and to help heal our wounded world."

To welcome the stranger, to love our neighbor, to nurture the spirits of our people, and to help heal our wounded world. That is our business as Unitarian Universalists.

When something threatens our safety or the safety of our loved ones, we always wonder what we can do to protect them and ourselves. And in the wake of the violence we see around us, we may be tempted to set barriers in place, to be wary of anyone who looks different, to limit what we do, what our children do, where we go, what we offer to others.

My colleague the Rev. Randy Becker, who serves a congregation in Florida, wrote recently on the UU ministers' listserv about his experience as a parent. His eldest daughter was killed in a terrible car accident several years ago and Randy struggled with how he could protect his younger daughters from a similar fate. His impulse was to keep them home, keep them safe, keep them under wraps.

Instead, his understandings of what life is all about led him to a different conclusion. Here's what he told us: *As I pondered (my theology) to inform my feelings and actions, I began to realize that fulfillment of my wish (total safety and security) would mean almost absolute restriction of my daughters' freedom. In the name of keeping them safe I would, in effect, be killing their futures, killing them. The theology I found which helped me past that chilling possibility was one that allowed me to let them get on with their lives: to drive the interstate, go away to university, do the daring things which young people do, make their mistakes, risk their lives, and in the process be alive.*

That theology has only a few simple statements:

-- We can't control what will happen to us, but we can control how we react to what happens.

-- Energy which is spent on security is energy which is not available for living.

-- Life lived in fear is not life lived.

-- *There can be meaning on the other side of anything.*

To embrace this theology, I had to be willing to acknowledge that I can't control everything. I also had to see that beyond (reasonable) measures of security, any energy invested in striving for safety and security actually diminishes the living of life.

Scary times call for daring people, not fearful people. (The man who gave his life) Greg McKendry showed us that spirit on Sunday. I hope we can remember how he lived more than how he died. Thank you, Randy.

Security is appealing, but too much security limits our living, circumscribes our freedom, and makes us afraid. Security is found less in the barriers we erect between ourselves and perceived dangers and more in the love and understanding we invest in caring for each other and for the world.

Security is love, security is life, security is joy, security is reconciliation and redemption. It's not fear or isolation or protectionism. And that's what we in this community are all about---security, real security.

The security of knowing that there are people here who will care for us if we need them to. The security of knowing that we are ready to care for others who need us. The security of being free to believe what feels right to us, to trust our own experience, our own understandings, our deepest longings for relationship. The security of a community that we can work with to help heal the world. The security of a community that welcomes all who come through our doors. This is the security that our faith community offers.

We do take stands on controversial topics. Sometimes our stands on those topics can be misunderstood, misinterpreted. We are sometimes criticized when others infer from our stance that we are rejecting something that is important to them. Sometimes that's true, as in the case of equal marriage rights; more often it is a misunderstanding and requires conversation to clarify the issue.

Recently, we took part in the national anti-torture campaign directed toward the government's refusal to forbid certain forms of interrogation that are considered torture by the Geneva Convention. In doing so, we posted a banner on our property: Torture is a Moral Issue.

For most folks who saw the sign, this was clearly a recognition that acts of torture, such as waterboarding, sexual humiliation, and physical injury, are not humane treatment of prisoners and violate international laws which regulate wartime behaviors.

Others were not so sure. What kind of message might this send to military families who had already had to deal with fear for loved ones in this very unpopular war, the loss of loved ones, the damage done to military personnel by the traumas of war?

Might we unwittingly be sending a message that would cause military families to believe that we hate the military, that we want to get rid of the military, that we blame the entire military for the acts of torture which have occurred at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo?

It was a surprise to think about this issue from another point of view. Most of us strongly support our troops, grieve with families who have lost a loved one in war, want the war to end so that our young men and women can come home and serve their country in a more appropriate way.

But we also had to consider the idea that our passion to end torture might be seen as a condemnation of their loyalty to their country by folks already beleaguered and demoralized by the many criticisms of the wartime policies of the armed forces and its leaders. For it is the rank and file in our armed forces who do the heavy lifting and take the brunt of the blame when things go wrong.

I remember how demoralizing it was to be a teacher and to interpret even well-meaning critique as just one more indication that nobody appreciated all that public educators do. So I can sympathize with this sense of being unappreciated and misunderstood. I also believe that we must take stands on important moral issues.

So conversations about the ways we disagree are crucial. Whether we are able to come to a complete understanding of another point of view or not, we can talk about it and have a chance to explain ourselves and listen to another's explanation. It's valuable to step back for a moment and consider other points of view and to make it safe for those points of view to be expressed.

But here's what I think is really important: we need to put our convictions into action, to make them so clear that no one can be misled. We need to put our money where our mouth is, as they say.

If we support our troops, for example, let's act on that support. Let's do something for the thousands of men and women who are coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic-stress-disorder.

The gunman last Sunday was a Vietnam vet who received no effective treatment for his PTSD. His life had spiraled into a nightmare from which he could not awaken and he inflicted his pain on those around him.

You may have read the recent story in the South Whidbey Record about a young man in our community who had a violent outburst at Choochokam recently. Luckily, this young man's behavior was recognized as related to his wartime experiences and the PTSD with which he is dealing.

I've had a conversation with this young man's parents, for they are friends of this congregation, and together we are going to see what we can do to offer support and care to the vets on this island, many of whom are suffering from PTSD and not receiving adequate support. In this way, perhaps we can demonstrate our deep concern for our troops and set minds to rest about our true support for our innocent military personnel, who only want to serve their country and whose families deal with anxiety about them every day.

On that fateful day last weekend, the children of the attacked congregation were singing songs of hope from the musical Annie. Their grand finale was to be the familiar song "Tomorrow". Instead, they were rushed from that bloody scene to a neighboring Presbyterian church for shelter.

They didn't get to sing their song that day but the next evening, that chorus of children sang it at a vigil in the sheltering sanctuary, in defiance of the hate and anger which had been hurled at them and their families the day before.

I will always have a new appreciation for this little ditty as I think of those children singing it in the aftermath of that tragic day. And I invite you, if you remember the words, to sing it with me now.

**The sun'll come out Tomorrow
Bet your bottom dollar
That tomorrow
There'll be sun!**

**Just thinkin' about
Tomorrow
Clears away the cobwebs,
And the sorrow
'Til there's none!**

**When I'm stuck a day
That's gray,
And lonely,
I just stick out my chin
And Grin,
And Say,
Oh!**

**The sun'll come out
Tomorrow
So ya gotta hang on
'Til tomorrow
Come what may
Tomorrow! Tomorrow!
I love ya Tomorrow!
You're always
A day
A way!**

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #1, May Nothing Evil Cross this Door

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that love is a stronger force than hate, that security is found in the care we take for one another and for our world, and that to change the world, we must be brave. May we find love and security and courage in this community and may we share that with the world. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.