

We Don't Have to Do It Alone
Association Sunday – October 12, 2008

It was just eleven weeks ago today that a gunman entered the Sunday worship service at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and opened fire. The man had a shotgun and killed two people and injured six. And if that were not enough, the attack began while the children of the church school were up in front of the church, preparing to sing. They were rushed out a side door and into a neighboring church, escaping any *physical* injury. Eventually, congregants subdued the gunman and he was arrested and is now in jail.

The attack was not random. The gunman had specifically targeted the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church because it lives out and embodies our shared Unitarian Universalist values. It is, and has been for decades, a beacon of love, equality, acceptance, hope and justice for all people. For so very long, the Tennessee Valley church has been a very public witness to the Good News of our welcoming and justice-seeking Unitarian Universalist faith.

On the morning of the attack, many members of the neighboring Unitarian Universalist congregation – Westside Unitarian Universalist Church – were present that morning because of the children's performance. In the matter of a few seconds, the entire Knoxville Unitarian Universalist community had been violated and it was in shock, dismay, grief and mourning.

And just as immediately, the eyes of the world were suddenly focused on the Knoxville Unitarian Universalist community. As the members of the two churches reeled from the incomprehensible and horrific attack, and all of the damage it wrought, there were immediate and necessary matters to tend to. Who was there to make decisions, who was there who could possibly imagine what

needed to be done in those first few hours? Who could think clearly enough to create a process that spoke to all of the different victims in the tragedy – those who were eyewitnesses, those who were injured, the loved ones of those who were killed; and what about holding the church members who were not at church that morning and who were drowning in ‘what-ifs’ and ‘if onlys’. Then there were the kids – who didn’t really witness the shootings themselves but who were deeply affected nonetheless and needed counseling in developmental and age appropriate ways?

Well, fortunately the leaders and members of the Tennessee Valley and West Valley churches didn’t have to figure out those questions or come up with their answers. Within a few hours of the attack, employees from the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Office of Public Witness were dealing with the onslaught of media and communications requests. By the end of the day ministers from the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Ministry, who are specially called to minister to those who are in the throes of trauma, were on the scene to deal with the practical, physical, emotional and spiritual crises that the shooting created.

Within less than 24 hours of the shooting, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Reverend Bill Sinkford, was in Knoxville providing a steady voice and hand to ensure that even with all of that shock, anger and terror that folks were feeling, our Unitarian Universalist values would shape and determine the response to that most horrific event. When asked by the press whether he believed that the gunman would go to hell for his actions, the Reverend Sinkford answered that the gunman had already been living in his own hell.

This is just one example of the many ways in which the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations supports and spreads the values that we, the members of those congregations, come to church to create and embody. And the Association does this work

of living out our values even though you and I are not even members of it. You see, you and I are not members of the Unitarian Universalist Association – it is an association of congregations – over one thousand congregations in the United States alone. The Association exists to do all that these one thousand individual churches want to see done, but that could never be accomplished by a thousand congregations acting individually.

It is the Association that is the public face of Unitarian Universalism in all of those places where there are no UU churches. It is also our voice in the public arena – in the marketplace of ideas and in response to the voices of hatred, violence and exclusion. The Association’s Office of Advocacy in Washington DC keeps our values and our voices present in the decision-making and deliberations that create and enforce that laws of our land and others.

The Office of Public Witness – is just that – it loudly proclaims our Good News of radical love and absolute equality and liberal religion’s promise of redemption on this side of the grave. The Office of Lifespan Faith Development creates religious education programs that offer lifespan religious education. The Office of Ministry and Professional Leadership oversees the formation and fellowshiping of ministers and the credentialing of professional religious educators.

The Association is not only the outward voice and face of Unitarian Universalism, it is the nerve system and the internal structural framework on which Unitarian Universalism is built and grows. That is why Unitarian Universalist churches all over the country are celebrating Association Sunday today. The work of the Association is extensive and expansive. It calls upon us for its sustenance and growth.

We individuals may not directly be members of the Association but we are at its very heart and soul. In recognition of that, fifty percent of the funds raised at Association Sunday celebrations this year are dedicated toward lay theological education and deepening the spirituality of lay members and lay leaders. This is as it should be.

One of the tenets of liberal religion is the primacy of lay ministry – the acknowledgement that the ministry of this church and of this denomination cannot be done by professional clergy alone. It is what the great Unitarian scholar, James Luther Adams, called the priesthood and the prophethood of all believers.

We are all ministers of this faith of deeds not creeds. Only by living out our values do we make what the Association publicizes and promotes real. Yes, it is only by us living out our Unitarian Universalist values that we make what the Association publicizes and promotes real. It is no accident the Desmond and Michael are leading elements of our worship service this morning. They are members of a vital and vibrant lay led Worship Committee that creates our congregation's Sunday worship.

The folks in our Social Justice and Jubilee work are transforming the lives of people near and far, through radical love and presence in their struggles. This is some of the type of work that our special offering today will support and grow. I found my way to ministry through Unitarian Universalist lay ministry and I know so many who have found wholeness and meaning in their lay ministry work. The Association knows this and has made a commitment to deepening the breadth and depth of our shared ministry with the funds that are collected today in support of Association Sunday.

And what is the ministry and the religion that we share? Reverend Patrick Price asks,

Is it a drinking fountain in a private park in a gated community, where only we and our selected friends can refresh ourselves at our leisure? Or is it an expansive, life affirming, ignorance busting, despair destroying, hope giving fountain of the waters of life, where justice rolls down and peace like an ever flowing stream that we have to paddle like mad to stay afloat on and laugh with joy all the while? Do we take our faith to the streets, to the highways and by ways, by first taking it in to our hearts and asking the Spirit of Life to move in our hands, giving life the shape of justice? I chose the latter and say yes to this faith and our Association of congregations which have placed before us the loftiest of ideals, without counting the cost. Because what we are doing is nothing less than changing lives and saving the world.¹

And the lives we are changing are not just our own. As we learned in the Time For All Ages this morning, we bring our own light to church and we leave more illumined by the glow of others' light. And so it is with our financial support of our church's work – we give of our own and yet leave enriched for having given. Faith and spirit are not just about getting but giving. This year's theme is *Growing Our Spirit*. It asks us to strengthen our connections and combine our resources, empowering us to *grow our spirit*, because our religious values are needed to help heal a wounded world.

There are special envelopes in your pews and the ushers have some if you need one. I invite you to join Reverend Kim and Kem, Reverend George Whitehouse and Gaby, Reverend Gene Navias and Jim, and Darin and I in giving as generously as you know you possibly can to support this very important work. We know that it is life-transforming and life-saving work and it needs us to make it happen and it needs us to make it real.

¹ *Now is the Time A Campaign to Grow Our Faith*. Association Sunday 2008 Organizing and Worship Resources, p. 37.

Now I know that it is A LOT to be asking you all to dig deeper into your pockets and checkbooks at this time of economic upset and uncertainty. This is not the best or easiest time to be asking you all to give more of your financial resources. But as we all know so very well, the work that we need to do transform our world and ourselves is not easy, and the best time to do it – the only time to do it - is now.

And our work and the Association's work is no less crucial today and, perhaps is even more important now than ever. The ushers will collect the Association Sunday envelopes during the regular offering this morning. Please make checks payable to the UUA. If you are unable to donate now, please consider taking an envelope with you – they are preaddressed and prepaid so that you can send your offering directly to the Association at a time that is more feasible for you.

The work of our faith is timeless. We see this in the entire story of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. It goes way back. You see the Knoxville congregation has been living out its – and our – shared values for well over sixty years.

In the 1950's the church ran the first mixed race summer day camp in that part of the south. The site of the camp had to be moved every single day because of the threats of violence from local individuals and the Ku Klux Klan. Then again, in the 1970's, all of the church's windows were shot out one Sunday night because the congregation was letting the local gay and lesbian Metropolitan Community Church worship in its sanctuary.

During those turbulent and frightening times, the other churches and faith communities in the Knoxville area did not come to the physical or moral support of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian

Universalist Church. In fact the neighboring church that sheltered the children the morning of the shooting had planted a large hedgerow to distinguish its property from that of the Unitarian Universalist church next door. Now that church has made a commitment to tear down that hedgerow, to break down that barrier.

We have this opportunity to similarly work to break down all kinds of barriers by giving generously to support the Association's work of barrier-busting work.

Throughout those dangerous and life-transforming times the Association alone provided moral, physical and practical support to the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church as it sought to heal the wounded world around it. The Association made it possible for that work – our work - to occur in the most hostile environment and times imaginable. The Association made it possible for that work to take place just where it was so desperately needed.

That is perhaps the most significant work that the Association performs – supporting and encouraging the liberal religious voice in times and places where it is not welcome and where others seek to silence it.

So my fellow Unitarian Universalist seekers, we are here today to say that that voice – our voice – will never be silenced. It will never be marginalized out of existence, nor will we. The support that we give to the Unitarian Universalist Association today is the promise we make to ourselves, and our world, that we will make sure - always - that love will prevail over hate.

May it be so.

