

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
 8 September, 2013

## **Everything is Connected**

We know this, but we forget: *Everything is connected.*

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It is early morning on Cape Cod, near the end of yoga class on Lighthouse Beach. I am facedown on a towel. Valerie Twomey stands with her back to the vast, open ocean. “Inhale,” she says. “Can you feel your heart?”

I surrender to the soft sand and drop my attention into my chest. The earth upholds me; I put my heart, tender with grief, against the earth, breathe into our loss of Nancy Gleason, here, and of Kem’s student, Jacob Weiskopf. Yes, I feel my heart, beating *yes*, in spite of loss; *yes* to life; *yes*.

All around me, the other yoginis are also lying facedown; we are babies in a nursery, the ocean waves rocking our cradle, rising and falling, pulsing, comforting us with a rush – *hush!* – as they break on the tideline. And then, another sound – eerie, then delightful, then magical. Just above the breeze coming off the water, a low, many-voiced howl: it’s the harbor seals, piled up on a sandbar half a mile out; the seals, also lying facedown in their own yoga class .... the seals are *singing*. I lie, transfixed by their siren song, by this kinship: my heart, the heart of every person on the beach, the ocean, the seals.

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Joeritta<sup>1</sup> Jones de Almeida, a local educator and therapist, was memorialized in Cambridge yesterday. In a piece written for *Turning Wheel*, she said,

“When I was a little girl, I had a profound experience [that] marked the beginning of one phase of my life and the end of another. Before the age

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<sup>1</sup> rhymes with “Loretta”

of five, my relationship to the world around me was one of unity. I remember looking at trees, people, things, and feeling that I was everything, and that I knew everything. It was as if my eyes were not mine. Some higher force within me was showing me the world. This all seemed very natural to me. For a while, I thought everyone saw all that I saw, felt all that I felt, knew all that I knew.

“Then suddenly one day, walking past a mirror in my grandmother’s house, I saw myself for the first time. In that instant, I realized that I was a separate person with a separate will, detached from all other things around me. I lifted my arm in amazement as I realized I could do whatever I willed. At that time, I thought I was experiencing [what I would later call] a religious awakening. I felt a tremendous amount of love.

“This moment of self realization, however, also marked the birth of my personality, my small self. It was the beginning of my life as Joeritta, a small black girl living in Florence, South Carolina. The memory of that moment has always been alive in me as the instant in which I was separated from the vast mind of oneness. From that moment on, my life has been a journey to reconnect my small self to the vast mind I so vividly recall.”<sup>2</sup>

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We find ourselves today in the midst of the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Days of Awe, when Jewish people incline their hearts to G\*d with repentance, prayer, charity, and resolutions, and ask that they be sealed in the Book of Life for a good new year. Yom Kippur, the highest of the Jewish high holy days, will come at the close of this week – the earliest it will be observed, by the way, for another sixty thousand years!

The fifth and final prayer service of Yom Kippur is the *Neilah*, which means “closing the gate.” As the service ends, the gates of heaven, which have been open throughout the Days of Awe, will close. The *Neilah* concludes with resounding cries of, “Hear, O Israel ... G\*d is one!” Then joy erupts in song and dance, followed by a blast of the shofar.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Joeritta Jones de Almeida, PhD, *Turning Wheel*, Spring, 1993. Please see [www.openriver.org/Joeritta.pdf](http://www.openriver.org/Joeritta.pdf) Sympathy, thanks, and love to Katherine Hazzard and Liz Grant

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to [chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template\\_cdo/aid/995354/jewish](http://chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template_cdo/aid/995354/jewish)

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While the earth lurched on its axis as Syria used poisonous gas on its own citizens;<sup>4</sup> and, here at home, George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin and the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King's mighty Dream occasioned a fresh examination of the gaping wound of racism in this country; there was still, somehow, good news: good news that reached the world from Deatur, Georgia, where, at around noon on August 20<sup>th</sup>, Antoinette Tuff, a bookkeeper in the front office of the Ronald McNair Discovery Learning Center, with eight hundred-plus elementary students in classrooms behind her, talked a would-be mass murderer into laying down his arms and surrendering to police.

The transcript of Antoinette Tuff's 911 call to dispatcher Kendra McCray is more than twenty-four minutes long. I invite you to join me in imagining spending twenty-four minutes alone with an emotionally deranged young man with five hundred rounds of ammunition on his body.

He should have gone to the hospital, he says; he's not on his medication. He doesn't care if he dies, he tells her. He doesn't have anything to live for.

Antoinette Tuff's heart opens. She does not see a monster; she sees another human being. Armed with nothing but empathy, compassion, and kindness, she begins to talk with him. "My husband just left me after 33 years," she says. "I got a son that's multiple disabled.... But look at me now. I'm still working and everything is okay." She lets him know that she, too, had despaired to the point of death, but that there is always hope.

He will not tell her his name; respectfully, she addresses him as "sir." And then, after fifteen minutes together, she calls him, "Baby." Somehow, through his terrible despair, he hears her. She speaks to Kendra McCray, the dispatcher. "He wants me to go on the intercom and let everyone know he's sorry. He doesn't want to harm anybody."

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/How-Is-Yom-Kippur-Observed.htm and chabad.org/ holidays/ JewishNewYear/  
 template\_cdo/aid/ 5349/ jewish/ Closing-Services.htm

<sup>4</sup> On August 21<sup>st</sup>, the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad killed more than fourteen hundred civilians in a sarin gas attack. Please see "Obama hands decision on Syria to Congress" in *The Week*, September 13, 2013, p. 4

Slowly but surely, Antoinette Tuff talks him into surrendering. She tells Kendra McCray, “He just wants to go to the hospital.... Can you talk to the police and let them know he wants to go outside with me? ... If I walk outside with him, they won’t shoot him...?”

They stay in the office. Agonizing minutes later, Antoinette Tuff calmly convinces him to surrender his weaponry. “Put it all up there,” she says, and has him lie facedown on the floor. “Tell me when you’re ready, then I’ll tell them to come on in,” she says.

And then, “Did you want me to call somebody ... for you? We’re not gonna hate you, baby; it’s a good thing that you’re giving up, so we’re not gonna hate you.”

She tells Kendra McCray, “He’s on the ground now.... Tell them to hold on a minute.... He wants to drink his bottle of water, so let him drink.... Let him get it together.... [Tell them] Don’t come in shooting at anything. They can come on in, and I’ll buzz them in.”

Twenty minutes into the call, you can hear the officers mustering to come in. Antoinette Tuff says to the young man lying on her office floor, “It’s gonna be all right, sweetheart. I just want you to know that I love you though, okay? And I’m proud of you. That’s a good thing you did, giving up, and don’t worry about it. We all go through something in life.... You’re gonna be okay.”

From the depth of his madness, he surfaces in response to the lifeline she has extended from her courageous, open heart, and finally tells her his name. She responds, “Your name is Michael Hill? .... My last name is Hill, too; my mom was a Hill.” Later, I learned that Michael Hill<sup>5</sup> is white; Antoinette Hill Tuff is black. But she knows they are related.<sup>6</sup>

Then mayhem: the officers come in, shouting. But the day has already been saved by Antoinette Hill Tuff. *Love wins.*

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Brandon Hill

<sup>6</sup> Joan Walsh (author of *What’s the Matter with White People: Finding Our Way in the Next America*), “The Story bigots hate: Antoinette Tuff’s courage,” at Salon.com, 8/22/13. Please see [salon.com/2013/08/22/the\\_story\\_the\\_right\\_hates\\_antoinette\\_tuffs\\_courage/](http://salon.com/2013/08/22/the_story_the_right_hates_antoinette_tuffs_courage/)

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Beloved spiritual companions, this week, may the *Neilah* conclude with resounding cries of, “Hear, O Israel ... G\*d is one!,” and may joy erupt in song and dance to greet the new year.

With the five-year-old Joeritta Jones de Almeida, may our lives be a journey of connection and reconnection, reconnecting our small selves, as she says, to the vast mind of oneness. May our relationship to the world be one of unity.

May we take to heart the mighty heart of Antoinette Hill Tuff. *Love wins.*

*Listen!* The seals are singing. And our hearts – open, broken, broken open – our hearts are beating together. *Yes* in spite of loss; *yes* to life; *yes*.

Remember: *Everything is connected.*

*Amen.*