

Opening Words

It Could Have Been Me
by Holly Near

It could have been me, but instead it was you
So I'll keep doing the work you were doing
I'll be a student of life, a singer of songs
A farmer of food and a righter of wrongs

It could have been me, but instead it was you
And it may be me dear sisters and brother
Before we are through

But if you can work for freedom
If you can die for freedom,
If you can sing for freedom,
If you can live for freedom
If you can speak for freedom
Then, I can too

Standing on the Side of Love

Jim Eller

In response to the recent shooting at the Knoxville UU Church our Sunday service will be a tribute to this congregation, their bravery and our faith. "Like a school, a camp or a hospital, a church is supposed to be a safe place." How much are we willing risk for love and justice?

Every week millions of Americans enter houses of worship seeking healing for their grief, solace for their worries, and deep connections with each other and to the very source of Life. Houses of worship are places where we can be vulnerable enough to be ourselves. It is because of that vulnerability that clergy and religious leaders are held to high standards. In order to worship, to learn or to experience healing, we need to be open enough, vulnerable enough for healing, connection, health or learning to take place. If we are heavily guarded, then these are much less likely to take place. Worship requires a kind of surrendering into the experience for real connection and wholeness to take place. In order to be fully present and fully ourselves, we need to be able to trust.

This is why the attack on the Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville is also an attack on all places of worship, because it makes any community of worship that much more vulnerable. The attack this last week draws into question the safety of every congregation.

This need for a sense of reasonable safety is one reason that our orders of service are more alike week to week than they are different. This predictability is designed to increase comfort. It is one of the reasons we have well prepared music and strong and capable ushers for our services.

I am concerned for our safety on any given Sunday, but I am more concerned this Sunday. I believe that outrageous acts of violence tend to invite copycats. There is more likelihood of violence in one of our UU churches this Sunday than before the Knoxville shooting. As a result, we have discussed the safety of this congregation at our staffing meeting. Our

greeters for the next few months will be on higher alert, as will our ushers. Each Sunday we will have at least one person in this sanctuary empowered to be on point should someone threaten us during a worship service. We have added a roaming security person in our children's area. Hearing this may make you feel less secure, when in fact it is intended to let you know we have taken additional precautions and are, I hope, safer.

As our staff was discussing these concerns, one of our staff members suggested that we consider locking one or more of the doors into our building for the next few weeks. My answer was a strong no. To surrender our openness, our willingness to practice welcoming and radical hospitality is say the terrorists have won again. Our country has made this mistake in response to the events on 9-11. We have become a garrison state. We have found torture acceptable, as a country we have lost our way. We have surrendered the best of who we are in order to buy the pretense of an increase in security. Some reasonable small loss of freedom may be necessary to maintain security, but every increase in security comes with some loss of freedom and vitality. I would rather we stand on the side of courageous freedom and enduring love, than to give into fear. I do not want us to become a fortress, when what the world needs is for our UU congregations to be sanctuaries for religious freedom and beacons of justice in our communities.

In my previous church, I served a small congregation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Tahlequah is a town of about 15,000 people. Early in my ministry there, the only black church in town was fire bombed on the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Our UU congregation was the first community in town to reach out and offer assistance. We showed up to help with clean up. We showed up with meals for their members. The damage to their building was relatively minor. So, they were able to continue to meet in their own building, or we would have offered to share our building, but we did host a town meeting asking for a united public response to this act of hate. The first person to show up for the meeting was the regional FBI agent. I was surprised. He

insisted on seeing a copy of our fire insurance policy. If we were over insured, we might have become suspects, I suspect. But, we were very under insured and the agent was concerned for our welfare. I asked our Board to have an emergency meeting to discuss whether we should continue to host the "Say No to Hate" activities, knowing that our building was insured for only about 25% of its value and knowing that there was some risk that we would be fire bombed too. It was going to take several weeks to get the insurance changed to more closely match the value of our property. This UU congregation's leadership said unanimously, we must be willing to risk the welfare of our church, if it comes to that, to stand for our values. It is a gift to be able to stand for our beliefs. The congregation suffered no damage and came to be seen as a leadership congregation in the entire community.

Yes, there is hate in our world. Yes, there is hate in our country. There are people who preach hate. Some go so far as to say that God hates. There are some who blame liberals, homosexuals, feminists and environmentalists for every thing from hurricanes to economic uncertainty. Some talk show fanatics make hate into cash and call it entertainment.

The man who shot up the UU congregation in Knoxville, Tenn. somehow came to believe that liberals were responsible for the loss of his food stamps. That gays and liberals were in some way responsible for his suffering. Yes, it turns out that the shooter, Mr. Adkisson, was Vietnam era veteran with a history of instability and alcoholism. He was not mentally healthy, but his blaming of liberals shows both how much he misunderstood the true progressive agenda and I believe is the direct result and consequences of right-wing hate radio and the only way to fight hate is with love.

Unitarian Universalism stands for the dignity and worth of every person. We are people who say no to hate. We are those who choose love and act for justice. We help build equity and we work with compassion.

The Tennessee Valley UU Church had just put up a sign welcoming Gay, Lesbian and Transgender people to their

congregation. Our Knoxville sister church is home of the Spectrum Café, which is a social gathering place for Knoxville area high school youth who "support the principles of diversity, tolerance, and the worth and dignity of every human being." Teens who come to Spectrum respect each others' ideas, religious views, race, sexual orientations, abilities, and ethnic backgrounds. The group welcomes "self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people, and those who are questioning their sexual or gender identity." The Knoxville Monday Gay Men's Group meets at the church each Monday from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

David Massey is one of the coordinators of Spectrum Café, also known as "Spectrum Diversi-Tea and Coffee House. He said that Spectrum just began its eighth year this past spring. "We advertise it as a safe harbor for teens that identify as LBGQTQ and their straight friends and allies, plus any other youth who are being harassed for religious beliefs, appearance, or abilities," Massey said in an interview with UU World Magazine.

Our sister congregation is a leadership community. This church has taken the lead in sheltering and feeding the homeless in the community, was founder of the local ACLU chapter, and played a pivotal role during the civil rights era. They are currently a participating congregation in a faith-based justice organization similar to MOREsquared called WIN. And in this, too, it could have been any UU church in America.

Another UU minister wrote in his blog these comments: "Whatever the reasons for the shooting turn out to be, there are lessons I hope we take away from these events. One is that you can bet that the members of this congregation will find a novel way to approach their healing -- and in doing so, they'll set an example for the rest of us to watch carefully. When mental illness becomes the issue, they will respond to this man and his family with compassion and justice, because that's the UU way. And as hate turns out to be part of the story, too, then Knoxville, Tenn. is about to have a dialog on hate crime that will leave nobody in town untouched or uninvolved. That's the UU way, too."

The other lesson worth noting is that this congregation's cool, brave response. The 16-year-old foster son of Greg McKendry confirmed that

his father died in the shooting that morning at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. "Just make sure you let people know that Greg McKendry is a hero, an absolute hero," Taylor Bessette said as he emerged from a side entrance at the church about three hours after the shooting. Bessette said he was in foster care and was taken in by Greg and Barbara McKendry four or five months ago. He said McKendry acted as a shield to protect the children participating in the play. "He stood in front of the bullets and ... actually took the bullets to save the child," Taylor said.

Members of this UU congregation rushed Mr. Adkisson and pinned him to the ground. They stopped him from reloading. They did not beat him. They did not stomp on him. They did not turn the gun on him and return hate and violence for hate and violence. They held him until the police arrived and surrendered him to the authorities.

It could have been any one of our UU congregations. It could have been us. I could have been Community Christian Church or County Club Congregational Church or Mt. Zion Baptist here in Kansas City. It was what happened in one of our houses of worship that will now make all houses of worship less safe.

Now, we could take down the sign on our building that says Marriage is a Civil Right. We could take down our Rainbow Flag. We could withdraw from the citywide coalition to support the civil rights of LGBTQ men and women. We could take down our sign that questions the right of our country to practice torture in our name. We could withdraw from our racial justice commitments. We could withdraw from MOREsquared or drop our efforts to practice affirmative action policies in our own personnel management. We could lock our doors more of the time or even all of the time. But, we won't now or I hope ever.

Giving into fear and hate only gives hate more power.

Would you give your life for love? If our children were threatened, would you stand in harms way to save the lives of our innocent ones?

Will you continue to give your life and faith to support religious freedom, equity, justice, compassion and love? Will you do your part to make sure

that our places of faith and worship are sources of courageous love, places that practice the good work of leadership and compassion.

What the world needs now...

What the world needs now is a vision of courage love and
NOT FEAR MONGERING AND HATE.

Closing Words

UUA President Rev. Bill Sinkford wrote in a letter after his visit to Knoxville:

“It will take time for Unitarian Universalists to mourn and to heal. But 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.”

*This is our calling,
This is our work,
This is our promise.*

As our service ends, may you be renewed and recommitted to your vision of a more loving and equitable world and act to make it so.