

Unitarian Universalists and Pain

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

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Reading:

In the Virginia Tech memorial convocation Tuesday evening, professor and poet Nikki Giovanni said:

We are sad today, and we will be sad for quite a while. We are not moving on, we are embracing our mourning. ... We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it, but neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS, neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid being captured by the rogue army, neither does the baby elephant watching his community being devastated for ivory, neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water, neither does the Iraqi teenager dodging bombs, neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib in the home his father built with his own hands being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy.

Sermon:

One of the criticisms that liberal religious folks hear is that we don't take evil or suffering seriously. To understand the truth and limits of that statement, it helps to understand our history around these issues.

Our Unitarian Universalist religious voice evolved in part in response to those who preached predestination and original sin. As two defining characteristics of the human condition, one a law of God and the other an immutable birthmark on the human soul, taken together they meant that we humans might be damned despite our best efforts in this life. In both cases, it was God alone who for mysterious reasons could save us from our fate.

This didn't sit well with our predecessors. They rejected both ideas in favor of a God who affirmed humanity's role in its own salvation and to that end gave us not original sins but original blessings, like reason, free will, and the ability to cultivate a character that could serve the good.

It is still very much and very often the case that we, as a tradition, accentuate the positive. Ours is much more a religion of the carrot than of the stick. We hold up potential and the power of humanity for doing good rather than the fear of being caught in the grip of Satan as a way of inviting our folks to be moral. It is a fabulous faith for good times when

all seems possible and we are there to remind people of their role in such possibilities, but it can mean we are caught short when evil or great suffering does arise, like this last week with the events on the Virginia Tech campus. In such moments, I am reminded of the adjunct professor at Harvard Divinity School who was minister to a tough community in Boston. He said to a group of UU seminarians who gathered with him one day that he loved a lot of what we had to say, but he wasn't sure what we would have to offer the young woman in his parish who had just lost her young son to a stray bullet that entered his room while gangs shot it out on the street outside his window.

So it is a good question for us to grapple with, especially this week: What is it we liberal religious people have to say to tragedy and unbearable pain? What do we have to say in such moments that can offer comfort and strength to those who suffer?

It's somehow easier to know what most of us probably couldn't say -- at least not say and mean. I don't mean to presuppose your beliefs, but I imagine many of us could not say what that Harvard professor could say to his parishioners when they faced unbearable loss. He could say to them with a straight face and the integrity of his faith commitments that God had a plan. He could say that this child was in a better place, was with God now, and that someday the child's mother would be there with him too. He might say that God didn't give her, never gave anyone, more than they could bear; that God has his reasons and, like the God who responds to Job, we have to trust in God's love and know that things are unfolding as they should be. I think that is what he could have told this woman, and perhaps did.

Most of us, however, I expect don't buy this particular notion of God. We may affirm a power larger than us in the universe, one we perhaps feel moving through us too and among us -- but a God with a plan, with all of human history written out and each of us puppets in the tale, serving our part somehow by free will and somehow not? This doesn't make sense.

And for many of us, even for the ones who may feel that somehow part of us carries on in this world, the notion of a Heaven as a great gathering in the sky where folks gather after this life is over to heave a sigh of relief and await being joined by those they love -- well, it seems somehow a bit fable-ish too.

Finally, for anyone who knows what it is like to bear great pain (and I expect that is most of us), and especially for those of us who know of friends or family who bore so much pain that they took their lives through suicide or dulled the pain with drugs and self-destructive behaviors, the idea that we are never given more pain than we can bear is patently false. Moreover, the notion that it is *God* who is doling out this pain only adds to this the strange imaginative leap that would make God into a kind of borderline sadist.

So all of that -- all of this -- is what we cannot offer people in times of great pain. There are other things, however, that we can offer, that we can speak of with integrity from our liberal religious perspective. Here's what I think they are. We can:

- * Honor the reality of the loss or pain, not explain it away.
- * Testify to the enduring power of a life.
- * Affirm a basic faith in life.
- * Stand for the commitment to make good come from bad.
- * Be a reminder that the suffering are not alone, that the power of community to love us and make meaning of tragedy with us is there for us when we need it.

Two boys in the congregation lost their grandfather to cancer this winter. The grandfather seemed a bit young to have been lost. He suffered from and with his disease. He fought valiantly and wasn't at all ready to let go. This man was determined to see the grandsons he adored through childhood and college, to dance at their weddings, and maybe even celebrate the births of their children, but he didn't survive his illness. The parents came to me asking what they could say to their boys to offer comfort and answer the questions that were surfacing at home.

In such instances, the first thing we can and should offer is an honest sympathy with the reality of loss. As Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote in her gorgeous poem "Dirge without Music":

I am not resigned to the shutting away
of loving hearts in the hard ground,
So it is, and so it will be,
for so it has been, time out of mind:
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.
Crowned with lilies and laurel they go:
but I am not resigned.

We need not be resigned or offer some false joy about loss. There is loss, real and painful, even when it comes in the natural order of things and especially when it does not. We can be an honest voice for naming such loss for what it is: death as an ending, tragedy as tragedy, pain as pain.

Second, however, even as we do so, we can also in that moment affirm the power of a life. For a life of 70 years well lived, that affirmation is easy. For the life of a newborn -- let me tell you, it is not as hard as you might imagine. I told you all a few years ago about how I once buried a child who was born after her mother's uterus collapsed during birth. The child had only brain-stem function by the time they got her out of the womb and only lived a few months. At her funeral, we were able to name the promise of the life that was lost and the horrible truth of that, *and* we were also able to name the love we all had for her, how beautiful she was, how glad we were to have held her and known her and how knowing her had left its mark on all of us.

We can and do affirm the power of a life, any life, to touch and change us.

Third, to those who suffer, we can and must affirm a basic faith in life. That faith is a belief that, in the balance, life is worth living. Moreover, it is exactly what many people are most likely to abandon or discard in times of tremendous pain. Sometimes to reaffirm a faith in life, all that is needed is for us to reassure someone that although their pain seems to define them at the present moment, someday it will only be *part of what defines them*. That someday they will be the parent who lost a child *and* who served as second mother to a whole neighborhood of children. That they will be the husband who was left by a spouse *and* who found a new life partner who brought inestimable joy and purpose to his living. That someday she will be the woman who battled cancer *and* ran the New York Marathon with a pink ribbon pinned to her number. We can remind them, assure them with all the faith and experience we have that they will come back to themselves -- indelibly changed absolutely, but alive again.

For those faced with dark nights of the soul, our obligation is to affirm with absolute certainty that this life, despite its pain, will be worth the living in the long run.

Fourth, we liberals may not be able to affirm a Godly plan that makes sense of another's pain, but we can affirm a commitment to make sense of life's pain ourselves. In that way, we stand as a kind of Easter force that refuses to let death or loss or cruelty have the last word. That in the face of environmental degradation, for instance, says we will stand with the silently suffering Earth until she is saved and we with her.

Emil Fackenheim, the Jewish theologian who survived the horrors of World War II, suggested adding a 614th commandment to the 613 commandments that Jews had lived by for more than 2,000 years prior. Fackenheim's addition was this: "Let Hitler have no posthumous victories."

We can hold up a kind of generalized version of this commandment that we live by and invite others to hold to also. This commandment is that we never let evil or loss have the last word. Again, not that we deny the loss or pretend it was for the best, but that we never let it go unanswered. Like the woman whose son was killed by a drunken driver and started Mothers Against Drunk Driving, we *insist* that good comes from bad as a way to stand on the side of life and hope.

Fifth and finally, we in this community can be the force that reminds people that they need not go any of this alone. That none of us need suffer alone or heal or return to life without a community of support. Those of you who joined this congregation today joined such a place -- not just a place to ask and answer the big questions of life (though I believe we do that and do that well and that it is important work), but a place to catch you when you fall, a place to help you rebuild when the structures you counted on get torn down by the winds of change and life's inevitable storms. The reality is that, by giving aid, we too will grow in our ability to offer more authentic succor to those who suffer.

To that woman in Boston who lost the child to a stray bullet, and to the loved ones of the 32 men and women who died this week in the Virginia Tech shooting, we absolutely have something to say to them in their pain. It is authentic to who we are and what we

believe, and perhaps more comforting than lies and guesses. What we have to say affirms a basic faith in life, is honest about their loss, and offers a commitment to rebuild hope with them.

What we have to offer is this: We will sit Shiva with you for as long as you need us to. We will name what happened to you as the tragedy it was, as unnecessary, and as among the hardest losses a human being can endure. We will say that if there is a God, we are sure this God weeps with you and had no role in this murder and no plan that wrote such horror into it. We will remind you that someday life will be more than just these losses, and tell you that when you grow strong enough again, we will work with you so that pain doesn't have the last word. We will work against gang violence or the sale of semi-automatic weapons to the mentally ill. We will build playgrounds in your children's names. *We will do whatever it takes to outmatch the loss with acts of justice-seeking and love.*

And were they here among us, we would hold up the gifts that their loved ones brought into this world. In their spirit, we would say: We will redeem the lost places of this world and rebuild our lives together.

We UU's don't ignore the human possibility for evil anymore. That was a mistake and we learned our lesson a few times in the last century. We also don't deny the reality of tragedy and suffering. We do, however, stand stubbornly on the side of the redeemability of humankind and the world as the heart of a faith that doesn't wait for something else to right this world or another world to make it all right.

We close with the words Nikki Giovanni preached at the Convocation on the Virginia Tech campus this week:

We are better than we think and not yet quite what we want to be. We are alive to imagination and open to possibility. We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears and through all this sadness ...

We will prevail.

We will prevail.

We will prevail.

May we prevail, responding authentically to suffering and pain, determined to heal and comfort a sin-sick world. Amen.