

“In an Instant”

a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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It was, by all accounts, an *ordinary* weekday afternoon. People were at their workplaces; children were in their classrooms – homemakers were grocery shopping; retired couples were walking hand-in-hand, in the park.

And then – *in an instant* – life for every person in Japan, changed forever. Life changed because, on an ordinary Friday afternoon – the extra-ordinary, occurred: The earth shook so powerfully, and so dramatically, that it moved the main island of Japan eight feet further out to sea; the Earth’s very *axis*, quite literally, shifted...

As a result – we, here in Cincinnati, on the other side of the world – were reminded once again – as if we had somehow forgotten, which of course, we had – that, *in an instant*, in any instant – life can change. In an instant, life can end.

In *that* instant, at precisely 2:46 p.m., local time, on Friday, March 11, a chain of events began that ended more than 10,000 human lives. Twenty thousand more people remain missing, to this day. Countless others suffered immediate, often crippling, injuries; untold others still, will suffer the horrible effects of radiation, in the months, years, and even generations to come.

Thirty-foot high waves crashed ashore. Entire cities no longer exist. We have seen the images. We have seen them, until we are numb.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, on that first Sunday morning, we opened our hearts and sent more than 13 hundred dollars, from just this one small church – as *our* contribution, to the world’s outpouring of aid and love and concern, for those whose lives were forever changed, in that instant. It is in the wake of such events that we, as human beings, almost instinctively reach out to someone who has suffered an unthinkable, unexpected tragedy – while at the same time, we *steel ourselves* against the terrifying realization that – in an instant, in *any* instant – the same could happen, to us.

“There, but for the grace of God,” we often say.

A moment ago, I shared with you the opening paragraphs of Joan Didion's book – but I have yet to share with you the details, of what Didion simply refers to as “the *event*.”

In early December, 2003, the only child of Joan Didion and her husband of nearly 40 years, author John Gregory Dunne, came down with what appeared to be a common cold. Within a few days, she had developed pneumonia; by the end of the week, the young woman – a recent newlywed – fell into septic shock, and at last, into a coma.

Then, on the evening of December 30, Didion and Dunne came home from a vigil at their daughter's bedside, in the intensive care unit of the hospital. Didion lit a fire in the fireplace, and prepared dinner. As they ate, the couple discussed a book her husband had been reading.

Suddenly, he reached out his left hand toward her, slumped forward – and *died*, of a massive heart attack... *That*, is what Didion calls the “event” which, in an instant – or as she puts it, in the instant – ended life, as she knew it.

The earth jolts, beneath our feet. A boy makes the winning shot in a basketball game – and drops dead on the court. A girl goes out for a jog – and never returns. We turn on the TV, and see a plane, flying into a skyscraper.

In an instant. In the instant.

Yes, “*there* but for the grace of God,” we may say – but at the same time we cry out, “Where is God, in all this?” That is exactly what one of my fellow yoga students, at the Shine Yoga Center, asked me last week. She knows I'm a minister – a “priest,” as she incorrectly calls me – and she has been deeply, profoundly affected, by the tragedy in Japan. “My husband doesn't believe in God,” she told me – “but I have my own faith. The thing is, my faith is shaken. When I see things like what happened in Japan, I wonder, ‘Where is God?’”

Her plea was real. Her pain, was real. And I – I was supposed to *answer*, her question. It was not rhetorical.

I surprised even myself, with what I said. God is, I believe, in those workers at the nuclear power plant – the Fukushima 50 – who are at this very moment sacrificing their own health, their own *lives*, in an effort to save thousands of others. God is, I believe, in the ordinary – yes, *ordinary* – citizens of Japan, who dug through the rubble to find survivors; who rushed into burning buildings to carry out the elderly; who pulled people out of the raging water, saving them from certain death. God is in the young woman who gives her blanket to the shivering old man, in a makeshift homeless shelter; God is in the man who shares his last bottle of safe drinking water, with a complete stranger.

In short, God is in us – in our *capacity* for compassion, in our acts of kindness, in the moment – the *instant* – when one human being, reaches out to care for another. And never does our inner light – the divine essence of our humanity –

shine more brightly, than it does in the face of tragedy. “Under every grief and pine, runs a joy with silken twine; the tapestry of life – joy and woe, woven fine – our life a clothing, for the soul divine.”

In her timely and heartfelt book “A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster,” Rebecca Solnit examines a century of natural and man-made disasters – from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina – and comes to one powerful, hopeful conclusion: Contrary to the Hollywood stereotype of chaotic mobs and selfish survivalists – the truth, is that human communities, in times of great tragedy, display a deeply compassionate *cohesion*, characterized by acts of altruism and heroic selflessness. When the very survival of our community is threatened, it seems, we human beings are hard-wired to place the needs of that community, above our own.

Solnit’s analysis concurs with that of former Ohio State sociology professor Enrico Quarantelli, who founded OSU’s Disaster Research Center in the 1960’s. Quarantelli says that all the evidence gathered by his group indicates that, in times of disaster, “the social order does *not* break down; [instead,] cooperative, rather than selfish, behavior predominates.”

As an example of this counterintuitive process, Solnit cites the story of Anna Amelia Holshouser, whose home literally collapsed around her bed during the San Francisco earthquake. After wandering, for a time, in a daze, Holshouser set up camp in a nearby park, and made tents out of fabric she found in the wreckage. She created a shelter, and soup kitchen. She made a sign which read “One touch of nature, makes the whole world kin.” And soon – in a city that recently had seen race riots and vicious attacks against Chinese immigrants – soon, European Americans and Chinese Americans were spending the days working together, putting out the fires, and helping the injured. Huddled together under Holshouser’s tents in the evening, they broke bread together – eating scraps of food given by local restaurants and grocery stores which had been leveled by the earthquake.

The funny thing is, this was not an isolated incident. Similar scenes played out in every disaster Solnit and Quarantelli studied – regardless of the era, regardless of the culture. And they continue to take place, today, all across the globe. In Japan, a man named Hideaki Akaiwa dons scuba gear, and swims through ten-foot deep water filled with the debris of houses and cars, to rescue tsunami refugees from the roofs of their homes. In Libya, a woman known only as Re’em, works for the Red Crescent – the Muslim version of the Red Cross – helping to bandage and care for victims of the civil war outside Benghazi.

That’s where God is, I told my yoga friend. In the hearts and hands of people like these – in moments, like these.

What I left unsaid – and the question that Solnit’s book so provocatively raises – is *what happens after* these moments have passed, after “the event” has given way to a return to normalcy? And is a normalcy that involves “looking out for #1,” a normalcy in which we look the other way, rather than help others who are in need – is that a normalcy we really want?

We can all remember the powerful sense of unity, of common humanity and mutual compassion, that connected us with one another, right after 9/11. But it wasn’t very long at all, until our society became distrustful, and more deeply divided than ever before. Following Hurricane Katrina, busloads of volunteers from all over the country flowed into New Orleans and the surrounding communities to help rebuild houses – yet I have no doubt that this very afternoon, there will be homeless people – perhaps even people made homeless by Katrina – standing unnoticed on street corners in New Orleans, as others pass them by, looking the other way.

Disasters, say the researchers, bring people together. Tragedy, they say, brings out the best in us – brings out what those of us with a more theological bent would call our *divine essence*. But disasters, by their very nature, are rare events. The challenge lies in living the way we would in times of disaster – the challenge lies in treating other human beings, the way we would, in a time of common crisis – *all* the days of our lives.

The good news is – we need not look afar, for opportunities to take up this challenge. We don’t have to go to Haiti, or Indonesia, or Japan, to find those who have suffered, those who still are hurting. Within this very sanctuary, are people who have suffered a sudden, unexpected tragedy. It is one thing for us to comfort them, in their time of loss – but what might it be like to reach out to them, months or even years later? What might it be like to offer so-called random acts of kindness, to those right around us – not even, perhaps, because we know they are hurting – but simply because they are someone with whom we share this human form, and this journey of life?

What if, the next time we pass a homeless person on a sidewalk downtown, we imagined what we would do for that same person, on that same downtown sidewalk, if it were an *extra*-ordinary, rather than an ordinary, day – say, if our Federal Building had been the one Timothy McVeigh bombed, rather than the one in Oklahoma City. If we had been downtown that day – and hundreds of people had been killed and injured – how might we treat that homeless person, *then*? Would we care about how they looked? Would we be worried that they might steal our purse or wallet? I doubt it...

I guess what I am saying is that events like those in Japan – awful as they are – bring out the best of the human spirit. Events like those that happened to Joan Didion, one ordinary winter night, at the dinner table – awful as they are – tap the

deep well of compassion, that lives in each of us. Events like those that happen in our own lives – awful, sometimes, as they are – call on us to open our hearts to one another – and to more human, more divine, than we might otherwise think we are capable of being.

Let us seek opportunities to express that spirit, and to offer that compassion – today. Let us be the kind of caring, loving human beings that we each can be – right here, in our *daily* lives.

The opportunities are everywhere. The time is now. Life can change in an instant. Why wait for it?

To serve humankind in fellowship – thus do we covenant with each other, and with God. May it be so.