

“What We Stand For”

**a reflection on last Sunday’s tragic shooting
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, August 3, 2008
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

Last Sunday morning, in a sanctuary, during a worship service designed to be a celebration of life, Greg McKendry and Linda Kraeger lost their lives. They were killed, because they were Unitarians Universalists.

There is no way to sugar-coat that inconvenient truth. They died because they had the audacity – because they had the courage, and the conviction – to attend a particular kind of church – a church that stands for something very radical ... and very important. They died because of what they stood for – because of what we stand for. Because of ideas like the ones we just said aloud, together, in our UU Purposes and Principles.

The gunman, whose ex-wife had been a member of the Tennessee Valley UU Church, admitted to police that he specifically targeted *that* church – that he specifically targeted our faith – because of, and I quote from police documents, our “liberal teachings.”

What might be meant by that incendiary phrase – our “liberal teachings”? We know that Unitarianism, and Universalism, have always been classified by scholars as “liberal religions.” What that means is that we do not base our theology, we do not base our beliefs, primarily on so-called “revelation” – on some “ultimate truth” that was handed down at a remote time in the past, to a specific individual or unique prophet, such that *we* may experience it, only indirectly.

Liberal religions – and there are others besides Unitarian Universalism – put their faith in human reason and understanding – and in what we have just referred to as *each* individual’s “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder.”

Liberal religions admit that there is wisdom in all of the world’s faiths.

Liberal religions choose to affirm “the *inherent* worth and dignity of every person.”

Liberal religions seek justice and liberty “for all,” they “confront powers and structures of evil with ... compassion – and the transforming power of love...”

The shooter is right. We are a liberal religion. And the words we just read, from our hymnal – these are *radical* words – these are radical concepts – and therefore, they are dangerous words, dangerous concepts. For as long as people have been brave enough to say such things out loud, these ideas have threatened not only the insecure, but the status quo upon which society rests. Universalists, and Unitarians – and others who have been called by their own personal, direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder to speak and preach about radical equality – to speak and preach about a God whose love is unconditional (think about it: *a God whose love is unconditional*, rather than conditional) – people who say things like this, people who stand for ideas such as this, have always been targets for contempt, ridicule, hatred, and, yes, violence.

For centuries, for millennia, history has been engraved with the names of those who were killed for holding such beliefs. Some of those names are very well-known. Some, like Greg McKendry, and Linda Kraeger, are not. Yet today we stand in solidarity with *all* of them – all throughout history who have died – and all who have lost a job, or been disowned by their family; all who have had their homes burned, or their property defaced; all who have been beaten, and cursed, and spat upon because they stood, in the words of our Unitarian Universalist Association President, Bill Sinkford, “on the side of love.”

Monday night, in Knoxville, Rev. Sinkford told more than a thousand people gathered at a service of remembrance and healing: “None of us can allow our pain and anger to keep us from *living our faith*, from welcoming all people, and from standing on the side of love. We will not let that happen.”

Say that now, with me: “We will not let that happen!”

No madman, no weapon, no government intimidation or agency, no social or peer pressure, no societal dysfunction, will make me change what I stand for. I have come, in the course of years of spiritual searching – to a belief in Universalism – a belief in the unconditional love of my God, and in the beauty and goodness of the Spirit of Life – through my own, direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder – and I will continue to stand for what I believe.

And so, I say again: *I will not let that happen*. What I stand for, what we as Unitarian Universalists stand for, is too precious, too vital, to let ourselves do anything else but, as Bill Sinkford calls us to do, *live out our faith* – and publicly.

Ah – therein, lies the rub.

I know – having been a Unitarian Universalist for more than a quarter of a century; having been a UU minister now for a dozen years – how hard it is to live out our faith, publicly. Ours is a minority religion. There is no way around that truth. And while I would not *dream* of comparing the scope, or the degree, of suffering Unitarian Universalists have encountered, over the centuries, with those of other minority religions – nor the scope, or the degree, of prejudice we have experienced – I would be less than truthful, less than faithful to the memory of so many of our ancestors, who sacrificed so much that we might be free to worship as we see fit – if I did not remind you that some of our kind have died – and many more of us have suffered – *because* of what we believe. Because of what we stand for.

Yet today, I am asking you to stand with me, publicly, as Unitarian Universalists – to stand publicly, for inclusion, in a time in our history when division and exclusion are the dominant forces acting in our society – to stand publicly for love, in a culture where fear and hatred are the dominant emotions.

To ask you to publicly proclaim what we stand for, I know, is to ask a lot. But I am not the only one asking.

Listen to words spoken this spring, in a New York UU church, by author and Harvard Professor of Comparative Religions Diana Eck – who, I should point out, is not a Unitarian Universalist:

“I believe,” she said, “that Unitarian Universalists have a very important role [to play] in this new, religious America... You are, in my estimation, the church of the new millennium. In this era, Unitarian Universalism is not the lowest common denominator – but the *highest common calling*...”

“In a world divided by race, and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a church like [yours] – committed to the oneness of God, the love of God, the love of neighbor, and service to humanity – is a beacon. [Your] theology – and yes, you have one – does not reduce the mystery of the divine ... but amplifies it, broadens it to include the investigation of the many, many ways in which the divine is known...”

“The world,” she concluded, “is in need of your theology...”

No, I am not the only one asking you, this morning, to stand, publicly and proudly, as Unitarian Universalists – and neither is Diana Eck. Hear *this*

statement, released last Sunday afternoon by the Human Rights Campaign, America's largest civil rights organization working for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender equality:

“Unitarian Universalist churches have been spiritual leaders for all of us. They have offered sanctuary for LGBT people, when most other denominations wouldn't, and have provided space for those shunned and marginalized by the larger culture.”

You've heard the question, “What Would Jesus Do?” I submit to you that that is *exactly* what Jesus would do! Yet – and, my friends, here is another inconvenient truth that must be told – one of the most controversial, so-called “liberal teachings” that drove a misguided man to begin shooting into a sanctuary full of people last Sunday, is our public witness for the inherent worth and dignity of all people – including our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

A few months ago, the minister at the Tennessee Valley Church wrote an editorial in the local newspaper, simply advocating fair and equal treatment – *justice* – for gay people in our society. The church itself is well-known in the Knoxville community for sponsoring the Spectrum Café, a safe social gathering place, for young people of all sexual orientations, colors, beliefs and origins.

No – I am not the only one asking you to stand publicly and proudly as Unitarian Universalists today. People *throughout* America – those who are discriminated against, and those who are not – are longing for institutions, and looking for individuals, who are willing to take the risk of standing, with courage and conviction, for a more just, and compassionate, world.

And so again, I call your attention to the words of Bill Sinkford – which I had printed in your bulletin, so you could take them home with you, and put them on your refrigerator: “*None* of us can allow our pain and anger [-- and, I would add, our fear --] to keep us from living our faith, from welcoming all people, and from standing on the side of love. We will not let that happen.”

Say it one more time, with me: “We will not let that happen!”

This past week, through the modern miracle that is the internet – a miracle which, I feel compelled to add, because we could use a light moment this morning, was conceived of and created by a Unitarian Universalist (and that's the God's truth – you can look it up!) ... through the miracle of the internet, I was able to follow the events in Knoxville by reading the local paper, and watching the local news. I was able to listen to the memorial service on Monday night.

All this was very important to me, for as many of you know, I went to college in Knoxville. I have some wonderful memories of the church there, and I know that community well. I know folks who were in that sanctuary last Sunday.

There were many things that I saw, and listened to, and read, online this week – but one, I think, will stick with me forever. It was one of the greatest testaments to what we stand for that I have ever heard.

One of the television stations was interviewing a couple – they appeared to be in their late 30's – who had a daughter on stage, in the play, when the shooting began. (In case you didn't know this particular detail, TVUUC was holding a special, intergenerational service last Sunday – a children's production of the musical "Annie.")

As the reporter concluded his interview with the couple, he asked about their daughter – who thankfully, was unharmed in the shooting – and asked whether they would be back at church next week – *today*.

The mother responded without hesitation. Not only would they be back, she said, but they would be *joining* the church. She said they had been thinking about becoming members of the congregation for a while ... and they knew that now, was the time.

The father nodded in agreement, and added, "Now is no time to run..."

Friends – the world needs us. Now is no time to run. More than ever, the world needs us – and what we stand for. This morning, I pray that we will remember – and choose to live out – the words of John Murray, the first Universalist preacher in America:

"Go out ... [and] give the people something of your ... vision. You may possess a small light – but uncover it. Let it shine.

"Use it, to bring more light and understanding, to the hearts and minds of men [and women everywhere]."

Folks, what we stand for is precious. And so, let us stand, together – today, tomorrow, and in all the days to come.

Amen.