

“That Which Sustains”

~ by Dawn Daniels

I was already dwelling on the subject of sustenance, preparing a service with a particular focus on the food that we eat, when I received word of the tragic event that had occurred at the Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Last Sunday morning, as a group of children were giving a musical performance in the worship service, 58 yr. old Jim Adkisson, an unemployed man who was reportedly angry at “liberals”, pulled a 12-gauge shotgun from a guitar case and opened fire on the congregation. Six people were wounded, several critically, and two were killed. Half of the victims, including one of the fatalities - Linda Kraeger - were from the Westside UU Church in Farragut, TN. The other dear soul killed was Greg McKendry, who reportedly took a shotgun blast full in the chest as he stood, with arms outstretched, trying to shield other people from the line of fire. The gunman was quickly tackled and wrestled to the ground by four congregants before he could accomplish suicide by cop, but not before he had ripped apart their sanctuary and their hearts.

That is as much of the actual facts of the story that I will tell this morning. It is still too raw. It is a story that is still playing out, still becoming the story that it will one day be for all of us.

I knew even as I was reading the email that brought the news of this tragedy in Tennessee that I would not be talking about food this morning, at least not in the way I intended. But the notion of sustenance stayed with me, possibly because I was struggling so to sustain myself, my spirit, in the aftermath of hearing about the shootings. The grief felt just like the line in the Rilke poem “one moment your life is a stone in you” – I felt leaden, weighted down by sadness and helplessness.

Sustain is an interesting word. I knew what it meant but I went to the dictionary anyway because that’s what this word-geek storyteller does when she’s trying to make sense out of the senseless and suspects there’s more meaning to be found if she just digs deeper. This is what I found – listen to this list of definitions and see if you hear the paradox:

To sustain:

- **to nourish** somebody;
- to support something from below
- to provide somebody with moral support
 - to withstand something, to manage to withstand something and continue in spite of it.
- to be affected by something, to experience a setback, injury, damage, loss, or defeat; to suffer
 - to maintain something, to make something continue to exist
- to confirm something as true or valid
- to buoy up
- to keep up, to prolong

Sustenance: the act of sustaining.

- something that gives support, endurance, or strength

Did you hear it? A paradox – a polarity. Sustain means to nourish and to suffer . . .

Roger Housden writes in his book *Risking Everything*: “Suffering is part of how it is on earth; it is an inherent part of the fabric of existence. And if we are lucky, it will break our heart open. That is the crack that lets the light pour through. That is the way the world cleanses itself.

Not only that: our failures, our losses, our sufferings of all kinds, are inextricably woven into everything else – into the flowers, the sunrise, the great achievements of humankind, and into our own successes, too. It is all one great swirling, unending, creation, and every last drop of our life, its darkness as well as its light, has its part to play.”

If we are lucky, it will break our heart open. Does this mean that our suffering will find its way around to nourishing us? While I know this to be true from my own experience of the life altering grief of divorce, it is difficult to remember this while in the midst of a new storm of pain and loss.

For me, this week I found sustenance in story, song and poetry as I searched for ways to milk meaning from this grief. I was sustained by my eight-year-old son’s joy at his first performance in a play and by the gracious words of support from my minister.

And I was sustained, nourished by that wild place in my back yard that only the kindly would call a garden, which blesses me each and every time I stop my frenetic doings and kneel down and put my hands in the dirt.

I was sustained by my faith and by the witnessing of this faith – our faith - being lived out in the aftermath of this tragedy in Knoxville by the very souls most directly affected by the violence – a violent act that was committed at least in part because of what we as Unitarian Universalists commit to as covenant.

If ever there was a morning for affirmation – it is this one. The Rev. Dr. William F. Schulz, the former director of Amnesty International, USA and former president of the UUA, wrote these words in 1990:

“Unitarian Universalism affirms that Creation is too grand, complex, and mysterious to be captured in a narrow creed. That is why we cherish individual freedom of belief. At the same time our convictions lead us to other affirmations . . .

That the blessings of life are available to everyone, not just the Chosen or the Saved;

That Creation itself is Holy -- the earth and all its creatures, the stars in all their glory;

That the Sacred or Divine, the Precious and Profound, are made evident not in the miraculous or supernatural but in the simple and the everyday;

That human beings, joined in collaboration with the gifts of grace, are responsible for the planet and its future;

That every one of us is held in Creation’s hand — a part of the interdependent cosmic web — and hence strangers need not be enemies;

That no one is saved until we All are saved, where All means the whole of Creation;

That the paradox of life is to **love** it all the more, even though we will ultimately lose it.”

Grief, like love and joy, unites us all. It is a gift that reminds us of the inimitable preciousness of life.

My sermon ends here, I have no more words. I would like now to follow a path of story and song that will lead us into silence together – a silence of remembrance for the lives lost and damaged in Knoxville last Sunday. I will first tell a story of grief and healing from the Navajo people titled *Sowing Peace* which will be followed by a single unaccompanied voice singing “Voice Still and Small”.

Then we will be silent together.

Presented Sunday, August 3, 2008 at the UUFCM.