

## **THE TRAUMATIC DEATH** **January 9, 2011**

Thank you for deciding to come today. I know it was not easy, for this is not an easy subject. It is, however, part of a larger project.

Because I am only with you one Sunday of the month, I want these Sundays to be meaningful. The first two years I served as your ¼ time Consulting Minister, I focused on organizational matters. And I encouraged your leaders to take a bold step in hiring Dawn Daniels to lead the services when I am not here. They did so, and I think all will agree that it was a very good step. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan began to grow, and has continued to do so.

At the first meeting of the Worship Team this year, I suggested that it was time to work toward deepening your spiritual life, and I was willing to work on that project. They agreed, and I tried to meet that charge. Because our greatest spiritual challenge is the knowledge that we will die, and the grief that we experience at the loss of loved ones, I suggested that it was time to explore the issue following the Winter Holidays. They agreed, and I have taken on that task.

You did not get to vote on this. I don't know if we would have obtained a plurality if we put it up to a vote. However, one of the tasks of a minister is to give their beloved congregants what they need—which may not be what they want at that particular time. We hope that we have built up enough trust in the hearts of our congregants that they will give us the benefit of their presence to hear difficult words as well as beautiful, celebratory words.

There are three sermons—covering the three types of death that I perceive: Traumatic death, Not-Good Death, and Good Death. They begin with the most difficult, so that you can look forward to an easier experience when I am again with you in March, and an even easier one in April.

Let us begin our journey.

On October 30, 1985, I received an early morning telephone call from a police detective in Austin, Texas. He told me that my 28 year old daughter, Kathleen, had been murdered. Until that moment I thought that the expression, “I felt as if I were kicked in the gut”, was hyperbole. I assure you that it is not.

Kathleen was a graduate student in theater at the University of Texas. She supported herself as a paralegal in a large law firm. She did not live a life that invited violence. Her only fault was agreeing that a neighbor in her apartment building could use her telephone.

I need not go into the details of her death at this time. The story is only relevant to illustrate the elements of what I have named “The Traumatic Death.” It was sudden, it was violent, and it came at the hands of another human being. It brings to the

surviving members of a family what I believe to be the greatest shock one must endure.

I think that there are four types of death that meet these criteria: murder, suicide, death by vehicular homicide, and death in war. Such deaths are sudden, violent, and at the hands of humans. Any violent death is shocking; however, I believe that death at the hands of another person has an element of horror not present in deaths due to natural disasters.

As a preview of the next sermon, I name the elements of the Not-Good death as the death of a young person, or the death of an older person who continues living after the personality has departed; deaths filled with pain, or after a debilitating illness, and sudden deaths that allow for no farewells. This would include those caused by natural disasters.

And, to look further ahead to the Good Death, those deaths come at an appropriate time, usually after a long and full life. There is either no pain, or a very short period. There is time for farewells, but no extended suffering. It is the death we all long for, when we grow to the point that we can contemplate our own death.

To focus again on today's topic, let me state the obvious:

The traumatic death of a loved one is one of life's greatest tragedies. It is the kind of thing that causes one to say, when awaking the next morning: "The world has changed. Nothing is the same after this." This is, I believe, especially true if one's outlook on life is generally positive. My UU husband, John, used to say, "I believe that the Universe is basically benign." And I wanted to agree with him.

However, traumatic death causes one to ask questions about such basic beliefs. While a theist may well react with anger at God, who, being all-powerful, allowed such a dreadful thing to happen, we liberal religionists, especially those of us who no longer believe in a personal God, don't have that outlet. However, we may end up rejecting a belief that the Universe is basically benign.

And, if we believe, as we say we do, that "every person has worth and dignity", we may find it difficult to include the perpetrator of a violent death in that affirmation. I believe that whatever our theology, whether inherited from our childhood, or carefully devised as an adult, when faced with a traumatic death, we must ask—and answer—questions.

I answered the question about the first principle by affirming that every person was born with worth and dignity. They may be scarred by mistreatment, oppression, or cruelty. They may respond in kind. Their worth and dignity may be very hard to find.

However, even now, the Universalist side of my faith assumes that deep within the most violent person is the spark of life that seeks redemption. It may seek in vain, but it is there. However, this journey toward meaning is one that each person makes individually. Others may find a different answer.

Suffering through the loss of a loved one to traumatic death is a life-changing

experience. The world has shifted. One's perspective on it has shifted. One knows in one's bones that life is fragile, exceedingly fragile. It will never be taken for granted again.

The question of "Why" haunts the survivor. Why my loved one? He or she was young, and/or innocent. She or he harmed no one, and tried to help others. IT ISN'T FAIR!

John said, more than once, that even though, intellectually, we know that life is not fair, deep underneath we still believe it should be. We want life to be ordered, to have a logic to it, to reward good behavior, and punish wrong-doing. We want justice. Traumatic deaths remind us that justice may be even more fragile than life itself.

I will take a short diversion here to say that those prosecutors who insist upon seeking the death penalty for killers "so the family can have closure" are full of crap. (Crap is an esoteric theological term whose meaning I will leave to your imagination.) No one achieves "closure" because of the legalized killing of a killer. If, by closure, one means that one can continue one's life with some degree of peace, and achieve some degree of happiness in the doing—that can only be done by making meaning out of unimaginable pain and loss.

Note that I did not say "finding meaning," as is advised in some literature. I think meaning is not "found", rather it is made. I first sought to find meaning in feminist theology. It was helpful to read Rosemary Radford Ruether, Starhawk, Elizabeth Schlusser Fiorenza, and Mary Daly among others. Their analysis of the shortcomings of our society opened my eyes in many ways. However, I am unwilling to label half the human race—the male half—as the bad guys. The feminist theologians did help me to form a personal mission statement. It is: "I will spend the rest of my life trying to make my small corner of the world safer for women and children, knowing that doing so will make it safer for men as well."

When I completed my mission statement, my life had a purpose again. I had begun to make meaning out of the most painful experience of my life. I began to heal.

Healing from trauma is a life-long process. There are no shortcuts, whether through a court room or a psychiatrist's couch or a prayer at the altar of every church in town. All of those may provide help in the healing process.

However, there is no magic formula or ritual that if taken or performed brings life back to pre-trauma normal. The world has changed, and the survivor must change to cope with it.

One must learn to live with deep grief. One must learn to be gentle with oneself. I think everyone who is faced with this kind of tragedy plays the "If only" game. If only I had not sent him on that errand. ... If only I had not taught her to be helpful.... If only I had read the signs of desperation earlier. ... One day, some months after my daughter's death, I was home alone. I had been playing the "If only" game, literally wringing my hands and weeping. Then something clicked, I sat up straight, and said,

“I’m going to stop shuffling the “If” deck.” And I did.

I don't know where that message came from. I'm not going to say it was a divine message. I had never heard the phrase, “shuffling the if deck” before, and the language does not sound angelic. However, something stopped me from that downward spiral. I hope that others also get that message when they need it.

Healing from grief does not mean forgetting. One simply does not forget.

In truth, I have found, and the now more extensive literature teaches, that it is better to deliberately remember. As grief anniversaries approach, please don't make the mistake of thinking you can skim over them, as if they weren't there. Even if you can deceive your mind, your body will remember. It is far better to plan a ritual of remembrance than to suffer from depression.

Friends of those who suffer loss are often at a loss for words. It is even more difficult when the loss is traumatic. There is a formula for comforting grieving people. It is, “I'm sorry. I'm sorry for your loss.” Then stop. Be silent. Let a hug happen, if that is what is needed. Wipe away tears if that needs to happen. Hear the words of pain, if that is what needs to happen. You need not say much, or anything. You need only to be there for your friend.

I don't think any of you who are liberal religionists would make the mistake of saying, “He/she is in a better place, now.” That may be comforting to the members of some faiths, but it does not ring true for many people. And it relates to one of our unanswerable questions—what happens after death?

This creedless faith has no easy answer—rather we have many answers.

The theists and mystics among us may well believe in a continuing of the personality in a different form. Atheists are sure they are wrong, and may say, with finality, “When you're dead, you're dead!” Others talk about the recycling of our molecules as our bodies feed the Earth, and we have a few who believe in reincarnation. The truth is, we cannot know, with certainty, for none have returned from that long journey one makes alone to tell us.

Thus, the assurance of life continuing “in a better place” is not a part of our faith. What we do know is that what we do here on earth can make a difference. We know that our friends and family will remember us—with affection we hope. Some of us are gifted with a talent for music making that gladdens the heart. We will be remembered. Some of us are teachers, who build their immortality day by day, classroom by classroom. Some of us are builders, some chefs, some artists, some writers, some parents. All will be remembered.

Our work lives after us, our love lives after us. Let us remember those who have gone before, as we would like to be remembered.

I offer you now an opportunity to speak the names of those people you loved who died a traumatic death.

I have asked Beth to play some soft music as we remember. As each name is spoken, I ask the congregation to respond, "May their life be remembered." I will offer this opportunity at the other two services also.

Let us begin.

Music plays, names are spoken....

Let us close this section of our worship service with the words of Mary Oliver;

In this life you must be able  
to do three things:

To love what is mortal,  
To hold it against your bones,  
knowing your own life depends on it;

And when the time comes  
to let it go  
to let it go.

Shalom and Saalam.  
Blessed Be and Amen.