

A Saving Faith

A Sermon by the Revs. Phyllis L. Hubbell
and John P. Manwell
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
Adelphi, MD, May 17, 2009

READINGS

1. (Shantida) “Then I found UU and it was like they saved my life. . .”

Rev. Jane Bechle divides her time between the UU congregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the tiny UU congregation in Springfield, MO. When a man armed with a gun burst into the UU church in Knoxville, TN last summer and started shooting, there was an outpouring of support from UUs all over the country. Many, including the little congregation in Springfield, held vigils. Local radio station KSPR spoke with Bechle and wrote this story:

Call it a hate crime – a man armed with a shotgun burst into a Knoxville, Tennessee church killing two people [and wounding six others]. The target was a Unitarian Universalist church, and the shooter is believed to have chosen it because of its liberal views. Springfield’s church of the same denomination is reacting tonight.

The members are devastated, as you’d probably expect. But they’re certainly not discouraged and they’re fighting back, by doing just the opposite.

“The people in Tennessee didn’t tear that man to pieces; they just held him so he couldn’t do anything else to harm himself or anyone else,” [said Rev. Jane Bechle, describing] the philosophy behind the Unitarian Universalist church.

“It starts out with the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” explains Bechle. Even the one who killed two church goers and injured seven more in Knoxville over the weekend. . . .”

After twenty years as a Methodist minister Bechle says her beliefs took a sharp left turn while the church’s veered right. “Then I found UU and it was like they saved my life. . . .”

Because Unitarian Universalism is about opening doors to absolutely everything. . .

But members say acceptance of all religions and all lifestyles – including homosexuality – make their church somewhat of a target for hate. Church members say they’re had their rainbow flag stolen eight times just this year. . . .

The Reverend [says], “you ask me if I’m afraid, I’m not. It means we’re doing what we’re supposed to do, and you have to expect there will be consequences, but it’s sad.” Sad, she says, not discouraging.

The church is prepared for a peaceful retaliation. “You fight back with love if you call that fighting back.” So, in the spirit of love, the First Unitarian Universalist church . . . in Springfield will be holding a remembrance service [on Friday] for its sister congregation in Tennessee. The public is invited to come. . . .

2. (Ellen Cotts) “A Plain, Unmarked Envelope”

Another colleague, Aaron White, spoke in a sermon about the transformative power of our faith. He shared this story:

Years ago, a UU minister received a letter from a high school senior living in a rural town in Georgia. She just couldn’t reconcile what she was told or experienced in church with her own beliefs. She felt alone. She concluded that something must be wrong with her. She even considered suicide.

Then, while working on a school project, she came across Unitarian Universalism in the encyclopedia. She had never known such a religion existed. She wanted to know more, but was afraid of what her family and friends would think if they learned about her interests. She wrote to the nearest UU church asking for pamphlets with more detail about our faith, but she added, “Please send [them] in a plain, unmarked envelope.” Thus began years of correspondence with the minister, Stephan Jonasson. Years later, she would tell him that “Unitarian Universalism saved my life, both figuratively and literally.”

3. (Tim Illig) “A Company Person or My Own Person”

Rev. John Cullinan serves our church in Los Alamos. A couple of years ago, preaching at the UU church in Milwaukee, he described his own journey:

Not so long ago, I was . . . experiencing . . . [a] crisis. I went to work in an atmosphere that demanded ownership of my soul, piece by piece, in exchange for . . . security. Work handed to me what it saw as clear “either/or” choices. I could be a company person or a family person, a company person or a religious person, a company person or my own person. . . .

I had been unemployed before, and I feared being in that state again, so I assented to their demands, in name if not in spirit, and began to feel myself being increasingly torn between what I thought I needed and what I knew was right. . . . I could see no way out. . . .

[But] I was lucky enough to have found my way inside the door of this church before I’d had the crisis. I had a place to ground me, to keep me connected with people who understood that there was more to life than profit, to keep me connected to people who understood that the corporate mentality did not grasp anything close to the truth about the nature of the “real world,” to keep me connected to the family that [the corporate] world insisted needed to be sacrificed in the name of security and success. . . .

I lived for Sundays so that I could be who I knew I was meant to be. And eventually, answering a call to service in ministry, I found a way to carry that Sunday reality with me as a way of life.

Unitarian Universalism saved me. My Unitarian Universalist congregation saved my life.

4. **(Tosha O’Neal)** “This Faith Changed My Life Forever”
Rob Hardies, Senior Minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, tells of his discovery of Unitarian Universalism in these words:

In May of 1993, I graduated from college in Upstate New York. The day after commencement, I tossed my diploma and my few personal belongings into the backseat of my car, drove off, and didn't stop until I arrived in Portland, Oregon, 3,000 miles later. The reason for my eager and immediate departure was that earlier in my senior year I had realized that I was gay. Anxious for a new start, I left to begin a new life of honesty and integrity. Portland – a hip, young,

progressive city -- seemed the perfect place to begin that new life. Or so I thought.

Not too long after I arrived, the Oregon Citizen's Alliance – a right-wing Christian group -- put a referendum on the state ballot that would've prevented gay folks from being public school teachers, and would've outlawed sexual orientation as a classification eligible for civil rights protection. A few weeks later, the Religious Right's well-funded campaign hit the airwaves with advertisements that said gay people were sinners and pedophiles. Polls showed the measure leading by a healthy margin.

But there were signs of hope, too. People who worked to defeat the hateful measure hung signs from their windows declaring their home or business a "Hate Free Zone." As a sign of solidarity with gays and lesbians, they draped their doors and mailboxes with pink ribbons.

One day, while walking through the streets of Portland, wondering how it came to be that my inherent worth and dignity had become the subject of public debate, I turned a corner and saw a church. An old church whose red brick walls and white columns were dotted with "Hate Free Zone" signs. A large church that occupied a whole city block, and that had wrapped that entire block building, street lights, trees and all in flowing ribbons of pink. This is how I stumbled upon the First Unitarian Church of Portland.

Amazed that a church would show such demonstrable support for gays and lesbians, I inquired within. I discovered that on the day the ribbons went up the minister of the church had held a press conference declaring the church's support for gay people. Coincidentally, the Women's Alliance was meeting at the church that same day. Now, you've got to understand that the Alliance decided to adjourn their proceedings so they could stand behind their minister at the press conference. That night on the 6:00 news, it looked like all the grandmothers of Portland had rallied to the defense of their gay and lesbian grandchildren. Over the course of the next few months, the church worked together to beat that hateful initiative. And beat it we did.

Friends, this is the Unitarian Universalism that I fell in love with. A generous faith that proclaimed loud and clear the Universalist gospel of God's love for ALL people. A vigorous faith, that made that scandalous love manifest in the world through concrete action. This is the faith that, at the age of 22, I committed my

life to. . . [T]his faith once changed my life forever. And I know it can change others too.”

SERMON

1 – Rev. Hubbell

Those of you here this morning who are Unitarian Universalists, I want you to think back to the first time you found yourself in a UU church when you knew you were home. When something you found here hit you right where you lived. Was just what you needed to hear that day. When something you heard or experienced inspired you to make a change in your life. Maybe even saved your life.

For me, the first time was a service at All Souls Unitarian Church in D.C. I don't remember much about that service. But I stood surrounded by a multi-racial, multi-cultural congregation. We were Christian and humanist, atheist and Buddhist called to worship and work together that we might heal our poor broken city. David Eaton, their minister, inspired me; the choir lifted me.

That day at All Souls, I signed the book. As I was writing this sermon today, I realized how much this religion has given me that I was yearning for back then. My life was shallow and I knew it. I had friends and a condo, and vacations every year. I ate at L'Auberge Chez Francois, took in plays and concerts at the Kennedy Center. But homeless people lay on grates in front of my office. The Civil Rights movement had stalled and resegregation was already well underway. And we knew the environment was in serious trouble.

My religion took me on a journey home, home to where my soul longed to be. Oh, it wasn't a safe harbor I found that day. Unitarian Universalism has led me over and over again into uncharted waters. It called me to leave my nice

secure job with a comfortable, fully funded pension for the challenging and risk-filled life of a minister. The members of Baltimore challenged me to do something about homophobia. I learned first hand about the shameful way many Americans treat transgendered people.

And it's still doing it. This year with you has challenged me to eat more humanely and more lightly on the food chain. John and I have decided to stop signing civil marriage licenses. I'm sixty-five, but life is still exhilarating. And scary. And good.

2 – Rev. Manwell

Saving. Faith.

Not words we put together very often. Not words we even use very often. But we are here to tell you today that ours is a saving faith.

Some of you know that already. You felt rejected in other traditions because you insisted on thinking for yourself; or because you were gay, or lesbian. Or maybe you just didn't feel at home in a tradition that insisted that it had all the truth. You found our UU tradition, with its aspiration to welcome to all who come through these doors. You came, and you found a place at the table.

You felt saved, not from damnation, but from rejection. You felt saved from an isolated place in life, into a place where you could share the love you have to give. You felt saved from meaninglessness, and freed to grow and stretch and become all that you could be.

Others of you just dropped in, and felt at home. But it took awhile before you really felt your life had been changed. Maybe you worked with the homeless, at Warm Nights. Maybe you worked with fellow members out in the community. Maybe you got passionate about making Paint Branch a Green Sanctuary. It took time, but you began to realize that something had happened. This place became the home of your heart.

A few, like me, grew up in our tradition. I don't think that religion can be hereditary. Oh, the habits can, the culture. But if the religion is to make a positive difference in our lives, we have to make it our own. That happened for me over a long period, as my religion kept inviting me into a broader place. Then in my fifties, it all fell into place. I came to an experience of what I now understand as the love of God – that is, the realization, thanks to other people, that I am loved, and lovable, and more important, that I have a lot of love to give. The love of God had been for me mostly an intellectual concept. When it hit home as a personal experience, my life began to change.

It kept on changing when I found myself in a church close to the heart of a vibrant gay and lesbian area. It was in leading the church's outreach to these neighbors that I came to understand, in my very core, that we are all brothers and sisters, made in the image of the same God. Gays and lesbians. African Americans. The Deaf, the blind, the paraplegic, people from every nation and every culture, all made in the image of the same God – that God of so many names, so many different faces, in whom all of us are one.

That experience has stretched me, continues to stretch me. It has saved me from narrow smugness, from the distortions of my stereotypes, from the confines of my own privileged culture. It is my Unitarian Universalist faith that has nourished me, encouraged me, trusted me, ordained me to its ministry, and sustained me even as it keeps on stretching me. It has been for me a saving faith.

I know that I am a Unitarian Universalist now, not just because I'd been born that way, and raised that way, but because my heart belongs here. I am at home in this religion of both reason and love.

But don't let anyone ever tell you that Unitarian Universalism doesn't demand anything of you. Signing that membership book is only the beginning of a lifelong journey. What do we demand? We demand a commitment to grow, and keep on growing, all our lives into that love which is the fullest expression of our humanity. We commit ourselves as a congregation, to what I call radical hospitality, that is, welcoming the stranger, no matter how different. Not to requiring that stranger to become like us, but rather, accepting that we will both change and enrich each other's lives as the result of the life we come to share, here in this church. That is what we have always done, though sometimes dragging our feet; that is what our Unitarian Universalism commits us to keep on doing.

We are saved by the love we offer to every stranger who walks through our doors. We are saved by the love we have for each other. We are saved by the love that, together, we take out into the world around us. We are saved by love.

3 – Rev. Hubbell

We are saved by love. A wider, radical, love that leads us to places we could never have imagined, along with people we never knew. A love that cherishes our questions and our doubts, as the foundation for new growth. A love that reminds us of what is ultimately important in our lives, in a world that constantly entices us to the trivial. A love that cherishes every last one of us, with all our flaws, for what we yet might be. A love that cherishes this magnificent planet that feeds and shelters and heals us and our companions that are its inhabitants. A love that grieves when we fall short, but opens wide its arms when we rise again.

This Sunday is a celebration of the power of that deep love -- a love for life, a love for people, all people, even you, even me, it is a love for this planet and every being on it, every plant and every tree. It is a reminder of the transformative power of radical community, held together by the belief that "all are worthy, all are welcome."

People come through our doors, generation after generation, believing that there is no place for them in religious communities -- that they are somehow outside the circle of love, places that hold themselves out to be upholders of all that is good and true and holy. Or they have seen their family and friends persecuted and despised by church people. Here they find people who believe that they are holy too.

Here we are called to be the best we can be, week after week, year after year. Here we are told that we can make a difference in the world, that our lives can mean something. Here we are part of a circle of loving, imperfect people.

In this place, this place made sacred by the tears and the laughter of women and men, we save lives by love. Here in this place, embraced by the spirit of life and the spirit of love, we are saved by love.

We are saved by love.

Let the people say amen.