

The Shoulders On Which We Stand
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“Unitarian Universalism” I’ve heard various of my colleagues say, “is not an interfaith organization.” We a faith that draws from many different sources, but at our best, Unitarian Universalism is more than the sum of its parts. And I’m even more convinced after this past week that it really matters what stories we choose to tell from our history, and that our stories really matter. We are inheritors of a tremendous legacy of women and men, who blazed the path we now walk.

There are three recurring themes in the Unitarian half of our history: freedom of religious thought, the unrestricted use of reason, and tolerance of difference views and practices. Freedom, reason, and tolerance.

There are two recurring themes in the Universalist half of our history: Hope and Love.

And Unitarian Universalists, as people do – as we all do, because it’s the way our brains are made – make sense of what happens in the world by spinning stories in our minds, by telling those stories to each other, through songs and hymns and readings and poetry and sermons – lots of sermons – on freedom, and reason, and tolerance, and love, and hope.

And some stories are easier to fit than others.

So here’s the question: in the face of news like we keep hearing, news out of Parkland, Charlottesville, Las Vegas, Pittsburg, Tallahassee – how do we, as Unitarian Universalists, fit these awful things into our story of being called into freedom, reason, tolerance, hope, and love? How does our faith lead us to frame the stories we tell ourselves and each other?

I’m going to talk this morning about a story that happened just a week ago Saturday: the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburg. Eleven Jewish people were killed, by a man with a gun, as they were at Shabbat service on Saturday morning.

And people are busy putting these facts into a story that fits their framework.

Some are framing the story like this: The synagogue didn’t have adequate security. If they had, they could have stopped the gunman. This story’s premise is, this is just a dangerous world, and it’s your own fault if you leave yourself vulnerable to getting hurt or killed. It’s on you, the victim or potential victim. It’s your job to make sure you are safe.

Another story goes like this: It would be much less likely for these kinds of ASSAULTS to claim so many lives, if it weren’t so easy, and legal, for people – even those known to be violent or suffering from mental illness – to own or access ASSAULT weapons. This story’s premise is, yes, we have potentially dangerous people among us, but if we limit the amount of harm they can do, it makes all of us considerably safer. It’s government’s job to pass and enforce safe gun laws.

Another story looks at the climate of anger and fear toward Jewish people and other minority groups. The people promoting conspiracy theories linking Jewish people to protest, violence, liberal immigration initiatives, etc., are creating a climate in which extremists feel they are

doing their patriotic duty by killing people – any people – who are Jewish. This story’s premise is, if public figures demonize and scapegoat a population, they set up a climate where violence upon those people becomes increasingly common and acceptable. It’s the job of public figures and political leaders to at the very LEAST, refrain from spreading such hate and divisiveness.

As I look over these story lines, I have to admit that there are elements of truth in each of them. Each premise has merit. Each conclusion has merit. Each possible solution has the potential to be of help in at least some degree.

I also have to admit that none of the solutions suggested by these stories is going to stop people from feeling they need to kill other people because of their religion or ethnic heritage.

I also notice something else about each of these stories.

If these are my stories, any or all of them, what is my job? To try to get everyone to beef up security. To try to get legislators to pass more effective gun laws. To try to convince public figures to use their bully pulpits to bring people together rather than promote fear, anger, and hate. In other words, my job is to get everyone else to do theirs.

Wow. I am struck simultaneously with the enormity of the task that implies – how much noise can I make, how many rallies, how many letters to the editor, how much influence do I or can I really have? – and the enormity of the hubris that implies – that I know what others should be doing and it’s my job to make sure they do it.

No wonder I sometimes feel helpless and depressed.

And then, yesterday morning, I opened my Facebook group for UU ministers in preliminary fellowship, and was gifted with a different story. A story so obvious, once I heard it, that it entered into my bones. With permission, I share this experience from Rev. Kevin Tarsa:

He says in his Facebook post, “I know that many of us are being invited to offer words/prayers at Solidarity Shabbat services. In the event that your opportunity is yet arriving, I share the words I offered tonight, in the hopes that they might serve you in some way. I was THE interfaith representative among the speakers, it turns out.” This is what he shared:

Words offered by the Rev. Kevin Tarsa,
Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains, Grass Valley, CA

Thank you for inviting the community and opening your doors to all
when *closing* would be an understandable response.

Thank you for living the way forward in love and in hope.

Know that
our hearts break
with you,
our neighbors and friends.

Our hearts break
with you,

ruptured by the harsh echoes of gunshots, yes,
rent by the rawness of fear-driven hatefulness, yes,
fractured by the splintering rhetoric that tears at the fabric wrapped around our shared
circle, yes,
fabric woven carefully with tender courage and hope
by many hands and hearts
across untold barriers,
to bind us to one another
and remind us together
that we are always more connected than we know.

Yes,
our hearts break
with you,
vibrating in resonance with your hearts,
yet our hearts break most of all,
for the losses – *your* losses - that we who are not Jewish cannot know completely,
losses which must call forth the weight of centuries,
losses in which the religious ancestors of so many of the rest of us likely had a hand,
losses heightened by our own Gentile silences, now and over the ages,
and by our unwillingness to risk our own safety.
For all of this I say, with all who would join me in spirit,
I'm am sorry,
so sorry,
...knowing it is not enough.

Our hearts break
with you,
this week,
and my prayer
for all of us
is that our hearts are breaking open.

that our hearts are breaking open
to a love courageous enough to say
“No!” to all that hinders love,
and wise and brave enough to say
“Yes!” to all that love asks of us,
yes to every opportunity for wholeness
and healing...

The prayer goes on, but I'm going to stop there, and read you what Rev. Tarsa told us UU
colleagues about his experience when he offered those words in that assembled group of
people. He says,

I would name that when I said, "I am sorry" - after naming the hand that the religious ancestors in many of our traditions likely had in the losses faced by Jewish people over the centuries, and after naming our own Gentile silences and fear of risk - a tremendously powerful moment unfolded in the room. I had expected it to be meaningful, but was not expecting such depth of spiritual/emotional response. A question surfaced immediately and silently in my surprised heart in response to what I was sensing: Has no one ever told you, as Jewish persons, as a Jewish community, "I am sorry" in this way? It felt like not.

It would have been easy simply to convey that yes, I am sad too, angry too, worried too, as if the pain is equally mine and I am divorced from all responsibility for the violence inflicted by others "out there." Our UU work to help those of us who are white to recognize our white privilege and the subtleties of white supremacy and white fragility, prepared and allowed me to speak from a different place tonight in the home of our Jewish neighbors. I commend that different place to you.

with care and gratitude,
Kevin

Rev. Tarsa's story, that he expressed through his prayer, is an unexpectedly powerful one. It is a story built upon the premise that each of us carries the stories of our culture in our deep-seated places, and we individually and collectively act out of the understanding of the world that those stories give us. Our culture is made up of millions of individual actions based on the stories we operate from. Some of our religious ancestors have woven stories that have ended up deadly for people of Jewish heritage and faith.

This story tells me that it is my job to open the eyes of my heart, and examine the stories that have been handed down to me from the culture I have lived in all my life. Examine those stories, not from the point of view of the intent of the white ancestor, but from the point of view of the consequences of those actions. Ouch. That is hard.

Our siblings of color, our Jewish siblings, our differently-abled siblings, suggest that this is my first and main job, as a white person: to look first deep inside myself and tease out the stories embedded in my assumptions about the world. And keep on doing it.

We will change the culture only as deeply as we change the stories, the stories we embrace from the past, the stories we tell ourselves. It is our job – it is OUR job – to acknowledge the fact that as story dwellers, we only change the outcome when we examine our stories.

At some point, we may realize that in some sense, we do own the sins of our fathers, *until* we take an honest look at what really happened, and challenge the premises and assumptions that don't fit. *Until* we realize that their sins will not be ours any more, as long as we change the story that we inherited from them.

It is our job – my job – to write a new story. To write it through my words, and my thoughts, and how I frame events in my mind. To write a new story through my actions. A story where I rise up out of my too busy, too tired life, and risk my own comfort, my own safety, and begin to let my heart break open.

And then embrace the story that affirms that each act of kindness, of understanding, of interrupting injustice and hate and harm, Matters.

That is our Unitarian Universalist story. We can do good, and it matters.

Mike Ericksen has said, "I truly believe we can either see the connections, celebrate them, and express gratitude for our blessings, or we can see life as a string of coincidences that have no meaning or connection. For me, I'm going to believe in miracles, celebrate life, rejoice in the views of eternity and hope my choices will create a positive ripple effect in the lives of others. This is my choice."

We can choose which stories to embrace, to adopt as our own, to tell and re-tell, to make part of the fabric of our individual and collective lives. May we choose wisely.

May our stories always speak of common humanity. May the stories we tell and re-tell be the ones that appeal to the angels of our better natures. May the shoulders we stand on be the ones that inspire us to be the love we want to see in the world.

May we say "No!" to all that hinders love.

May we be wise and brave enough to say "Yes!" to all that love asks of us,

"Yes" to every opportunity for wholeness and healing.

Amen, and Blessed Be.