

*“We’d love to come,  
but the weathermongers  
have paralyzed us with fear.”*

## *Balancing Act*

*A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga  
August 24, 2008*

### *CONNECTIONS*

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere, I’m the minister of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. Connections is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we’re all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning.

Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

*HYMN 361, Enter Rejoice & Come In*

### *GREETINGS*

**David.** I’m David Reed and I serve on the Board of Trustees. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted.

- Please note the emergency exit over here to my right,
- now is the time to put your cell phone in “Worship Mode,”
- childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery,
- After the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area right back there.
- If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you’d like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what’s

going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

One of Kate's favorite composers is Michael Scott. She says his melodies and chord progressions renew her spirit. Without being so difficult she cannot enjoy the music. Today she brings us a composition of his that's pertinent to the season. This is "The Last Days of Summer."

*PRELUDE: Last Days of Summer*

*LIGHTING THE CHALICE*

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,  
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

*STORY: Keep the Man Down!*

*As You Go*

We hold you in our love as you go, as you go  
May your heart be at peace as you go  
To nurture the spark of your precious life  
We hold you in our love as you go.

*OFFERTORY: All I Ever Wanted [Brickman]*

Anyone here know Rube Waddell? He was a pitcher for the Philadelphia Athletics in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Like Babe Ruth, who was originally a pitcher, Rube Waddell was a strong hitter. One day, the Athletics were playing Chicago and he was allowed to swing for himself. The score is 2-1, Chicago, the eighth inning, two out, and tying run on second.

After Rube missed a slider, the catcher saw a chance to pick off the runner at second and threw the ball in that general direction. The second baseman bobbled the ball, it flew into center field, and the runner took off for the plate.

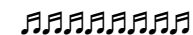
He would have made it, too, in plenty of time, but as the throw came into the plate, Waddell stepped in and swung at the ball, bashing it over the right field fence. He was promptly declared out for interference, and the inning ended.

"Why did you do that?" screamed the manager, Connie Mack.

"They'd were throwing curves at me all afternoon," explained Waddell sheepishly, "and that was the first straight ball I'd looked at!"

We'll collect the morning offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. Be assured that no one will knock away what ever you throw at the plate. No curves, no sliders. If you have a check for your annual pledge, please mark it that way. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items, which go to the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a candle of personal joy or sorrow, you may step up here and I will assist you.



Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience everyday. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Kate, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,  
For all gathered here, and those far away,  
For this time we share, with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

*Dona Nobis Pacem.* Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

After July 28<sup>th</sup>, I suspect the attack at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church has been on your mind. The people in that church have been in my thoughts and prayers. I don't really know what they are feeling—I have never witnessed a shooting, never lost a loved one to gunfire, never saw combat while serving in the army.

But I have been physically attacked and my home has been violated. And in this experience, I have just a small idea of how the people in that church felt when they were attacked and their personal and communal sanctuary was violated.

Initially they were stunned. Some reacted quickly and a bigger tragedy was averted. Then they were scared or angry or both. Many sought retribution as a balm to assuage their grief. In time, I suspect everyone involved will come to grips with the event and make some sort of peace with it.

Some will hold on to their anger longer than others, picking at it like a scab. Others will forgive as much as they can and quickly move on, as if they wished to be unsullied with the pain it brings. I believe most people will fall somewhere between those two extremes, and I believe this is all normal behavior.

So today, let us pray for the families and friends of those who died, as they will surely need our support for a long time. Many victims are still alive, but were severely traumatized and we ought not forget them, for they will need our support for a long time. Perhaps with

some distance, after some time has passed, we might be able to pray for the shooter. Right now, that seems a formidable task, something we have no right to ask of ourselves.

And we ought to pray for ourselves and our friends and neighbors, so that we come to a place of understanding, a place of acceptance, a place of peace. We won't be the same as we were—ever. But let us pray that we learn more to accept the world on its own terms and let us pray that we can mend and repair our relationship with it, and with other people.

*Dona Nobis Pacem.* Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place  
When our heart is in a holy place  
We are blessed with love and amazing grace  
When our heart is in a holy place

*HYMN 318, We Would Be One*

*SERMON: Balancing Act*

At some point in early July, I began to learn what I would preach about this year. And it is a learning process. I don't have every sermon planned out for every Sunday. Along the way, I learn what I need to preach about. It's a matter of learning what you need to hear and what I need to hear and what generally needs to be said. So on July 15<sup>th</sup>, I sent Wendy Sapp my August service titles for the newsletter.

I had planned to preach on this book. This is *Saving Paradise*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. The authors made a curious discovery. They discovered that in the first thousand years

after Jesus died, no artistic rendering of his death was created, or if created, did not survive. It wasn't until 1987 that someone carved a crucifix. Knowing that art undergirds culture, they set out to research what Christian artists did create in that time and what that meant about the early church.

I tell you all this as a sneak peek into next week's service, because that's when I'll preach a sermon, "Jesus Took a Thousand Years to Die." Today I will offer a few thoughts about the shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church on July 28<sup>th</sup>. I wanted some time to think about the event. But time didn't help much. I happen to agree with Kurt Vonnegut who said that nothing intelligent can be said about the unspeakable actions of human beings. What can anyone say about "the event"?

Drawing wisdom from the Unitarian side of my spiritual heritage, I determined that the best way to consider "the event" was rationally. Rational thinking allows some perspective, even at this early stage.

I learned in early August that when I returned to this pulpit, I would seek to understand, to interpret, to come to grips with, to find a place in my world for "the event."

"The event." That's the term used by Chris and Suzanne Buice. Chris is the minister of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. They use "the event" when they talk about what happened at the July 28<sup>th</sup> worship service at that church. "The event."

They can't talk about it with any other words, because no other words adequately reflect everything they have experienced and will experience. "The event" doesn't actually do a very good job of conveying the revulsion, the fear, the anger, the incomprehending, open-mouthed amazement, the "I'm horrified and cannot understand this" attitude among the members of that church community and others who were close by. "The event" is a pretty generic term. It doesn't convey much of anything. So it conveys anything and

everything. But "the event" is all they have.

I have no doubt that "the event" will reside in their consciousness for a long, long time. Probably less so in my mind, and maybe yours. It didn't reside very long as a news story. It lasted about a week on the front page of the Knoxville News-Sentinel. Here in Chattanooga, the story is followed by the Times-Free Press as it develops, and it usually appears on the last page of the Metro section. On Wednesday, the Times-Free Press reported the shooter had been indicted. Time moves on and newspapers are obliged to bring us new stories.

This week, in Madrid, 140 people were killed in an airplane crash. On Thursday morning, at the high school attended by the daughter of Chris and Suzanne Buice, one student shot and killed another student.

How much time did we spend pondering the Madrid airplane crash? I'm guessing not too long. Another airplane crash. In Spain. With Spaniards. But I sorta have a connection to that "event." My daughter spent a semester working in Spain and probably flew into and out of that airport. Any other day, she could have been on that plane, coming home. And that airplane crash became "an event" for me.

Can you see where I'm going with this? There is a proximity effect to "events" such as these. The closer you are in geography, in time or in spirit to "the event," the more profound it seems, the larger it looms and the longer it hangs around and haunts you. But two people dead in a Knoxville church are two people dead in a church, regardless of the proximity effect. The tragedy is same tragedy had it been a Methodist church in Wyoming.

That's my rational brain talking. It doesn't help much, I know.

In the last ten years, fourteen incidents of gun violence occurred in a religious setting. On July 29<sup>th</sup>, the day after "the event," the

chances that a gunman would enter our church and shoot us did not increase. Because Jim Adkisson chose to shoot up the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church does not mean that we are next. Or fourth in line.

Nor does “the event” increase the chances anywhere else. Again, that’s my rational brain talking.

Against some things we have little power unless we radically change our ways. Airport terminals went through such a change a few years ago. But we are not an airport terminal; and we really cannot install metal detectors, pat down people as they enter and station armed guards around this room. Other churches don’t do that. The mall doesn’t do that. Restaurants don’t do that. UTC doesn’t do that.

Against some dangerous things, we just have to hope for the best, and I think an attack by a gunman is one of them.

Tell me this: Should we prepare for the possibility that someone with a baseball bat will attack us? An attack with a baseball bat seems pretty easy to defend. But it doesn’t seem likely. In truth it is no less likely than an attack by a gunman.

What’s different about it is that our response is speedier to a bat attack than to that of a bullet. Only Superman can dodge a bullet. Another difference is that we sense a greater chance of death from a bullet than from a bat.

OK, that’s about all my rational brain has to say about “the event.”

My irrational brain is pretty old; it goes waaaaay back to my caveman ancestors. Irrationality is actually not a part of my brain; my brain is rational by definition. My irrational nature is where fear and love and hunger and hate and other primitive emotions reside. That part of me doesn’t stop to think; cannot think. That part of me only *reacts*.

And the primary reaction I had was fearful and defensive. I’m glad to say that it didn’t last too long.

You know, guns are very good at instilling fear. I learned that because my rational brain said to my irrational nature, “Would you be as frightened if the attacker used a baseball bat? You can die from a bat as easily as from a bullet, you know.”

Notes left behind by gunmen are also good at instilling fear. I learned this because my rational brain continued, “Would you be as frightened if the attacker had left a note saying that he just couldn’t abide people who lived in eastern Tennessee?”

“But I’m afraid of copycats,” my irrational nature said. “And someone shot out our window. Right there!”

My rational brain, in its best soothing voice, said, “If you think about it—if you just stop and think about it—you’ll see that there is no connection between ‘the event’ and your shot-out window. Your window was most likely shot by a punk with too much time and too little self-esteem.”

Guns, notes and copycats instill fear. We fear guns because they are faster than we are and deadly; a note from a frustrated gunman can falsely divide people between liberal and conservative; copycats can make us paranoid and convince us that someone’s out to get us, that we’ll be next.

All that was cooking on my irrational stove until my rational brain came into the kitchen and turned the heat down.

I am not dissing you if you are scared. You have every right to be sacred, and not just over “the event.” With all the danger you face every day, no one can say that you ought not be scared. I just don’t think I can protect you. Or me. That’s all.

So since July 28<sup>th</sup>, all these thoughts have been banging around up here. “The event.” Guns. Copycats. Rationality. Irrationality.

And of course, the media was all over me. They couldn’t wait for today to hear what I had to say about “the event.” So if I looked like a deer in the headlights, that’s about how I felt.

At one point, I thought, “What would Jesus do?” And then I thought, “Which Jesus? The angry Jesus who threw the money– changers out of the temple? Or the quiet Jesus who stood before Pilate and said nothing in his own defense?”

For me, the authentic Jesus said love your enemies and pray for your detractors. He advised his followers to put their swords in their scabbards. It seems that Jesus says that you are gonna have enemies who would hurt you. You can’t do anything about that, so pray for them.

“Well, what would Buddha do?” I thought. For me, the authentic Buddha said that misery is part of life, and to be free of it, one should rid oneself of ego–centric desires. The Buddha wished happiness for all beings and preached that we should endeavor to see the world for what it is and not color it with our prejudice. It seems that the Buddha advises us to make peace with the way of the world and do not try to bend it to our will.

Jesus & Buddha both advised vigilance. Jesus & Buddha both offered a message of hope. Jesus and Buddha both said that we cannot change other people, only ourselves.

We live in a society that doesn’t exactly endorse violence, but fosters it through the easy access to weapons. No one condones violence, but everyone expects it. This isn’t Denmark. When’s the last time you read a news story about a shooting in Denmark?

We are a heterogeneous society. We are not all on the same page—about anything. Especially language. There are about 337

languages spoken or signed in the United States. This is not Japan. There are three cultures in Japan and one language. The Japanese make a fetish of getting along.

We are a society of individuals. A bunch of me’s; not too many we’s. We seem to think we have *rights*. And when we demand our *rights*, we don’t seem to consider our responsibilities with the same enthusiasm.

So given our individualistic nature, our heterogeneity, our access to weapons, we can expect shootings to occur. And they make the headlines for a couple of days.

So what can we do about this? How can we protect ourselves without hiding in our homes?

I believe we cannot live in a fortress. Well, we can, but it would tax us unmercifully. We would be constantly on the lookout for Jim Adkisson. A constant defensive posture is impossible. We have to sleep; we have to eat. Did you notice how much effort the children expended to keep me down? How much effort do you suppose it would take to keep yourself 100% safe? You just can’t do it, and we’d go nuts if we never left the house.

I am pretty sure that we can not 100% protect ourselves. We can increase our vigilance and preparation. And we can accomplish a few simple common–sense steps. The chance that you will be a victim of gun violence is greater if you keep a gun in your home. So turn your guns into the police department. Don’t sell them to someone else, because doing so only makes someone else more prone to gun violence.

I have not consulted with the board before I say this, but I believe they will back me up. Don’t ever bring a gun to this church—not no way, not no how; even if you are licensed by the state of Tennessee, the United States government and have a dispensation from the pope.

Don't ever, ever bring a gun to this church.

Same for a knife or a slingshot or a frying pan or anything you intend to use as a weapon. Leave it at home and come unarmed. Period.

We can increase our vigilance among the ushers and do a much better job of greeting people we don't know. We can educate our children to avoid violence. We can hope for the best.

What we cannot do is fight fire with fire. I am appalled when I hear people suggest that if we were all armed, we could defend ourselves better. I am appalled when I hear people suggest that the way to end gun violence is to increase the supply of guns and arm more people.

That type of inane response only works in the movies and on TV. In real life, we aren't cowboys, we aren't marksmen, cool under fire and able to disregard the surge of adrenaline while we take aim across a room of panicked people. No one in this room is James Bond. Or Janet Bond. No one.

I made these same remarks after the gunman shot up the Virginia Tech campus. My rational brain says, "You cannot blame guns entirely for this." My irrational nature says, "I'd rather face Jim Adkisson when he's swingin' a baseball bat than when he has a shotgun."

We need to find a balance between fear and love. Those are the two big opposites here. When directors dissect a play for its theme, they look for polar opposites. In this play called life, I believe the big two are love and fear. We cannot love everyone to the point of laying bare our bodies or souls to danger, yet we cannot close ourselves off and live in a cave. We need to find a balance that allows us to relate to each other and protect ourselves from harm.

I cannot find that balance for you. I just know that it can be achieved and I will support you in working on it.

Some time ago, in a moment of rashness, I said that the job of a minister is to find God, the word God meaning your ultimate reality. For me, that word does not refer to some paternal, bearded guy sitting on a cloud. But there is no other word that carries the weight of ultimacy as does the word God. So I use the word God and you can interpret it how you will.

So I said that a minister's job is to find God. Today, I qualify that with the phrase, "or at least look for God."

In "the event," I am still looking. I caught a glimpse of God in the actions of Greg McKendry, who put himself between Jim Adkisson and his target. I'll bet it was God who kicked John Bohstedt in the butt so that he could tackle Adkisson before he reloaded. I thought overheard God in the words and actions of ministers and others who sought to comfort the congregation. So I know God was there in the pews. I know God was there when the kids began to sing "Tomorrow."

But I think God was just as shocked as we were at "the event." I think God is more horrified than we know at "the event." In every church and synagogue and mosque and temple on earth, people throw a party for God once a week or so. And I just know that God is real sorry that one of those parties was crashed by violence.

This may be another lesson for God in his education. This life, this world, is comprised of good things and bad. Some of the bad, like a plugged-up toilet on Saturday night, is a real mess. Some of the good we never see. Some of the bad, like polio, we can cure. Some of the good, like ice cream, we seek to repeat.

I offer you three words of wisdom from a man who grew up in Indianapolis Indiana—my home town—Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut actually went to school with my mother. But during World War II, as a prisoner of war, he survived the fire-bombing of Dresden by taking refuge in a slaughterhouse. He wrote about that time in his

book, *Slaughterhouse Five*. He wrote, “So it goes.”

That line appears 106 times in the book, which might make you think that Vonnegut is fatalistic, believing that we are unable to affect our own existence, unable to alleviate our own miseries. But I think he is realistic, noting that humans just do unspeakable things sometimes and there is nothing intelligent that can be said about the fire-bombing of Dresden.

Or “the event.”

So it goes.

*HYMN 354, We Laugh, We Cry*

*EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE*

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of its truth  
the warmth of this community  
nor the fire of our commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
and share with all the world.