

Hope

A Sermon by Jan Carlsson-Bull
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Hope is the reason why I spent the better part of this past week on the shores of Elk Lake near Traverse City, Michigan. I'll explain.

It was the second annual Board retreat of our Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry. This is an integral part of my ministry and, by extension, yours. So I want you to know what it is, why I'm so committed to it, and the spiritual underpinnings of trauma response ministry.

For me, it began three years ago today, September 26, 2001. It was just fifteen days after the perilous events in New York City, Washington, DC, and western Pennsylvania. As a minister at All Souls in New York City, I had to do something downtown. Our congregants at All Souls were being tended to, and I was part of that, but I needed to carry my ministry to the epicenter of the devastation.

The organizational structures of trauma response chaplaincy in New York City at that time were in complete disarray. It was anyone's guess who would get under the temporary tent flaps that surrounded Ground Zero. As Unitarian Universalists, we had no pre-established means of identifying ourselves as ministers, let alone chaplains competent to provide spiritual care in a disaster beyond our imagining. Yet several of my colleagues were already down there. They were allowed in by virtue of being a police chaplain or a fire chaplain. Some got in through dumb luck and arbitrary screening systems.

With some savvy assistance from my colleagues and the bravado of Bob Ossner, a self-described Protestant fundamentalist fire chaplain from Chicago, I spent the night of September 26 at Ground Zero, at what was known as "the pit." I was the only chaplain in that sector of what was still called the rescue operation. All around were firemen, policemen, crane operators, asbestos technicians, structural engineers, and FBI agents. What did I do? Mostly, I listened, after a brief introduction of "How ya doin'?" I was identified by a hardhat with the words chaplain hastily printed on it with magic marker. Bob had said to me, "Anything that's found that says a life was here...anything...is a blessing. It's closure for one more family." And we pray around that discovery, in an arms-over-shoulders huddle, we pray. In the eerie light of dawn, that's exactly what we did.

As I stood at the edge of the pit, I hoped against hope. Not just that there might be some life movement there. None of us really thought there could be. I just prayed that this carnage, this testament to how low humankind can sink, would not be the stuff of unbridled revenge. I prayed that our penchant for counter-violence in the name of upholding democracy would not diffuse our consciousness of these events as a global assault. Citizens of 115 nations perished that day, women and men who bore testament to the global reality of the "World" Trade Center. I prayed and hoped that we might find a way to contain further violence without wreaking international havoc.

A few hours after sunrise, I headed back toward St. Paul's Chapel, the host site for the recovery operation. Almost there, I spotted a crew of sanitation workers. I walked up to them and thanked them for the work they were doing. "It really feels good to hear that," they said. One fellow looked at me with a tired smile. "Clean souls rest easy, Rev. Clean souls rest easy."

In the months that followed I continued my ministry at All Souls and extended it to the Family Assistance Center, set up in the expanses of a hangar-like structure on Pier 94, stretching out into the Hudson River. It housed the array of service providers for surviving family members and New Yorkers numbering in the thousands who had been displaced from job or home or both. The Red Cross was one of many service providers that took up residence there.

As a Red Cross volunteer chaplain, I served as a receptacle of stories, stories which needed telling again and again if hope was to be restored in lives and neighborhoods and a city. One morning in mid-October, I was wandering about the formidable expanse of this site and sat down next to a young man in his mid-20s. Let's call him Chad. He had worked in the South Tower, the first tower hit and the last to collapse. Chad was high enough up so that escape was the upshot of a heartbeat decision and was narrow. He had lost friends and co-workers, many of them. While shaken, he wasn't shattered. While reflective, he didn't allow himself to freeze into the terror of those unforgettable moments.

In the high-tech high-rise world in which he had worked, this young man—handsome, articulate, tired-eyed but with a residue of sparkle—had made it a habit of bringing his guitar. And Chad played. He played his guitar during lunchtime and coffee breaks. His colleagues had loved it. As his story continued to unfurl, so did his smile. He spoke of his desire to write music. What genre he wasn't quite sure, but he wouldn't be boxed in to pop, hip-hop, whatever. Chad would define his own genre. Then his voice dropped. "In the last weeks," he told me, "I just haven't been able to write anything." "And now?" I asked. "What about now?" "Most of the time I can't even play," came the reply. "Hmm," I murmured. "I'm guessing, Chad, that everything you've seen and heard and felt is stirring inside you into songs that will remind us, as only music can, of what happened." "Really," he said. "You really think so?" "Yes," I replied. "I really think so, and I'll be waiting to hear them." His smile settled into a mellow glow and an unspoken promise that we all will hear those songs.

I have no idea what Chad is doing, what kind of job he found, if he's playing his guitar in his new workplace, or if the notes stumbling around inside him have coalesced into that first song. I just held hope that there were songs in gestation that would carry haunting echoes of that time before easing their way into the rest of his life.

That same month, some of my ministerial colleagues and I began to confer about the desirability of forming a distinctively Unitarian Universalist ministry for trauma response. We knew that this could happen again. We knew that we needed to be ready and organized. We drew on the expertise of those among us who were seasoned in responding to crisis and disaster—from the April, 1999 shooting rampage in Columbine to the December, 1999 fire in Worcester, Massachusetts that claimed the lives of six firefighters. We filtered our varied experiences at Ground Zero and the Family Assistance Center and with congregants whose spiritual grounding had been shaken to the core. With support from All Souls' Emergency Relief Fund and personal contributions, we launched the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry as an independent non-profit and soon became an affiliate organization of our Unitarian Universalist Association.

Our mission is to provide multi-faith and culturally sensitive spiritual care to survivors of mass disasters and other trauma. We offer resources that include education and training on congregational preparedness, liturgy resources, and informed response to the needs of our children and youth. We collaborate with organizations that are similarly focused. By invitation only we deploy trauma response teams to sites of disaster and crisis.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Charley, two of our members went to Florida at the invitation of Florida's District Executive to work with colleagues and congregational leaders. Another member of

our response team will visit Florida next month to lead a workshop for Directors of Religious Education. This past winter, I was part of a response team that traveled to Long Island at the invitation of the minister of a congregation that had been shaken by the suicide of a well-loved youth leader.

What prepares and sustains us to do this work? Education, training in the specifics of trauma response, collegial support, and a theology grounded in hope. What is it that is so hard to find when we're reeling from a disaster that defies our imagination? What is it that is so hard to sustain when we're uprooted by a loss in the form of an accident, a suicide, a homicide, that jars our sense of normalcy and wracks us with grief? What is it that is so hard to practice when our souls and surroundings seem to give every evidence of futility? Hope, hope, and hope.

John Schneider's teachings ring true for me. A seasoned trauma psychologist, John was among our hosts in Traverse City and among those who have helped us further define and practice the ministry of trauma response.

"Perhaps the most important dimension of witnessing [particular moments that jar and uproot]," he writes, "is our ability to hold hope for another.... Sometimes people say, 'I can't imagine ever recovering from this' or 'Do you ever think it will be better?' or 'Can I make it?' To say at such times that we do believe it can be better, though all evidence seems contrary at the moment, is an offer to 'hold hope.'"

"Holding hope," he continues, "can be a spiritual covenant we enter with a person....It may not be until later that people feel empowered enough to hold their own hope." In the meantime, we carry, sometimes we embody by a non-anxious presence, "the belief that within each person, no matter how powerful the truth, given the resources and time provided to deal with that truth, we have the strength and potential to handle it."

Hope is a spiritual posture. It is the spiritual underpinning of our trauma response ministry and the bottom-line reason that I'm engaged in this ministry.

The person who led our retreat is Professor of Pastoral Theology at Starr King School for the Ministry. Dr. Rosemary Chinnici is also Sister Chinnici, a member of the Sisters of Loretto, a women's religious order within Roman Catholicism. She is witty, brilliant, and full of P and V, petulance and vigor. We could not have a more able and committed facilitator and consultant. On the first leg of my return flight, from Traverse City to Chicago, Rosemary and I were on the same plane—in different seats but the same plane. I was mulling over this sermon, with a page of notes that looked like a Jackson Pollock painting, not nearly as well done of course.

Time for some respite, said I, reaching for one of those airline magazines. I gravitated to a sidebar story of a spiral staircase in a chapel in downtown Santa Fe. I had seen photographs of it before and was intrigued. The stairway, connecting the ground floor with the choir loft, is marked by two 360-degree turns and no visible means of support. Aesthetically compelling and architecturally bewildering, it has become a hub of legend.

We landed at O'Hare. I hailed Rosemary. "You're a member of the Sisters of Loretto, right?" I queried. "Yes," she affirmed. "Well what can you tell me in the next five minutes about that spiral staircase at the Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe?" "Oh that," she quipped. "I'll tell you what happened, the myth and the reality."

In 1820, just eight years after the founding of the Sisters of Loretto in Kentucky, the order was asked to send a delegation to New Mexico and found schools there. The arduous journey was made by wagon train. Four of the six sisters who set out from Kentucky made it to Santa Fe. Those four stalwart sisters founded the first school there. In the process, they oversaw the construction of a chapel. There was a chancel, a seating area, and the choir loft constructed by leaning ladders against the rear walls. All seemed complete until the reality dawned that there was no way to reach the choir loft once the ladders came down.

The sisters prayed to St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpentry. An itinerant carpenter appeared and built the staircase, the spiral staircase with two 360-degree turns and no central source of support. The wood that he used was not native to the area around Santa Fe. In the middle of the night, he disappeared, before he could be paid for his work.

Myth takes over. It was surely St. Joseph himself who built the staircase. How else to explain the extraordinary coil with no visible means of support?

About ten years ago, a family was moving from a house in Canyon City, Colorado. In the process of cleaning out their attic, they discovered the original plans for the staircase, along with other records documenting what had happened. One of their relatives had been the itinerant carpenter. He had gone to Santa Fe with his own supply of Colorado pinewood and at the sisters' request, had constructed the spiral staircase. Just after its completion, a letter came from home. His wife was ill. In the middle of the night he headed north, before he could receive any compensation for his remarkable feat. Subsequent research has revealed his likely familiarity with the construction of similar staircases in France.

When Rosemary was a child, she ventured to this chapel with her father, a structural engineer. Invited to ascend to the choir loft, her readiness to do so was dampened by her father's voice: "Don't put a step on that staircase. There is no reason why it should even be standing." Nonetheless it stands and it holds.

Hope is like that. It's not a miracle, but how it evolves is commonly inexplicable until much later, sometimes generations later.

Hope is the recognition of promise imparted by a sanitation worker at Ground Zero. Hope is a song that resides nascent in a young man who once played a guitar in a building that stood there. Hope is a spring that waters a ministry called trauma response. Hope is a spiral that ascends to a choir loft in a chapel visited by an itinerant carpenter. Hope is a signal that the God of faith and love moves through the heart of the universe and that God's heart breaks when ours does.

The poet of the Biblical book of Lamentations understood perfectly.

He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
And made me cower in ashes;
My soul is bereft of peace,
I have forgotten what happiness is;
So I say, 'Gone is my pleasure in life,
and anything I might hope for from God.

(adaptation, Lamentations 3: 16-18)

And a few verses later:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
God's mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
Great is thy faithfulness.

(adaptation, Lamentations 3:22-23)

What was he thinking in this roller-coaster reflection on what was clearly a case of despair? Ann Sill, a poet from Philadelphia, considers the apparent turn of heart of the poet of Lamentations.

"God's love does not solve our rage," she writes. "Nor does our despair unravel that love. Hope begins in the juxtaposition of the two, in the very collision of human despair and [divine] love. The swirling confusion, indeed the grace, is that neither one is diminished in the presence of the other."

Hope lies at the improbable intersection of despair and love. This is not denial. This is not sugar-coated optimism. This is not magic or myth. In the words of Wendell Berry,

"This is no paradisaal dream.
Its hardship is its possibility."

Hope lies in the promise of the possible and the presence of each of us for the other. We are holders of hope. As holders of hope, we are healers in a fractured world. Ours is the ministry of hope. Ours is the shared ministry of hope. May it ever be so and moreso.

Amen.

Sources: The Bible, *Lamentations* 3:16-23, Revised Standard Version (adaptation).

Wendell Berry, "The Wisdom to Survive," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 465.

John Schneider, "Validation: The Tool That Heals," from *Dying to Live or Living to Die: How Grief Differs from Depression*, Seasons Press, Old Mission, MI, www.seasonspress.com, 2004.

Ann Sill, "When Words Fail," *The Other Side*, November-December 2001, 14-17.

"Staircase of the Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico – The Myth and the Reality," as told to me by Sister Rosemary Chinnici, O'Hare International Airport, Chicago, September 24, 2004.

<http://www.newyorkmetro.com/news/articles/wtc/1year/numbers.htm>