

A Paradise Built in Hell

Preached at the South Nassau Unitarian Universalist Congregation – April 21, 2013

One of the first things I learned when I moved to Boston back in 2007 was that under no circumstances should I go outside wearing a Yankees cap.

As I spent more and more time in New York, I grew to understand that the fans here, while perhaps not quite as fierce as their counterparts in Boston, had no love for the Red Sox either.

This rivalry made it all the more poignant when, in the wake of the terrible bombing at the Boston Marathon on Monday, the Yankees displayed the Red Sox symbol at their Tuesday game, and played the Fenway Park favorite, “Sweet Caroline,” in tribute.

It was reminiscent of the game up in Boston just after the September 11th attacks, when the Sox played Sinatra’s “New York, New York” in solidarity with our aching city.

On Tuesday, a group of New York police officers traveled up to Boston with trucks full of food and emotional support. They came knowing that long hours and grueling shifts were in store for the Boston police officers this week, and wanting to offer respite and companionship for their comrades up north.

Again, this act hearkened back to the Boston response in 2001. One officer explained: “Right after 9/11, they were there. I remember seeing guys from Boston in uniform—in full uniform—just like that. There were asking us if we needed anything, ‘What can we do for you?’ So this is our way of paying back.”

Another officer said simply: “This is what New Yorkers do. We help.”

These were small, but not insignificant, acts of solidarity in a week marked by uncertainty, fear and mourning for so many in the Greater Boston area. It is so often in times of turmoil that we are best able to remember our connections with one another. It is so often in times of tragedy that we are able to put aside our differences and remember that we are all in this together.

As Rev. Sue Phillips wrote in her prayer: “Inside our breaking hearts is all the evidence we need that an unshakable conspiracy of goodness thrives in rubble and ash.”

I was planning to speak today about our sacred connection to the earth and our call to protect this planet that we call home. As our seventh principle tells us, we are a part of an interconnected web of existence, and what effects one part of the web will affect all other parts as well. We all come from one source—from the everything seed, as the story tells us—and we will all go back to the same source in the end. A more scientific way of looking at this would be to recognize that we are all made of stardust, and so is everything that we know to exist in this world.

So often, our seventh principle is misconstrued as being only about protecting our environment. The kid’s version reads “We care for earth’s lifeboat.” Yet, I think our interconnectedness is about much more than our connection to the earth. It is also about our connections to one

another. As Sitting-Up Mud, we are connected not only to the other mud that didn't get to sit up, but also to the other mud that did. And I think, after the tragedy in Boston this week, it may be our connections with that other sitting-up mud that are foremost in our minds today.

This has been a week of fear and isolation in Boston, but it has also been a week of connection and love. People across the country have shown their love to the city, standing in solidarity, knowing that they couldn't fix what happened, but also knowing that, somehow, they needed to hold the city in love and prayer. We made sure that the hashtag "prayforboston" was trending on Twitter in order to bring some comfort to a confused and aching city. We changed our facebook pictures to something Boston related to bring the city some extra strength. We lit candles and spoke prayers all across the world to bathe the city in love. We did what we could from afar. No matter what our feelings about that second city up north usually are, we were all rooting for Boston this week.

How true it is that "an unshakable conspiracy of goodness thrives in rubble and ash." Rebecca Solnit talks about this phenomenon in her book, "A Paradise Built in Hell." She examines the communities of support and solidarity that so often arise in the wake of disasters, arguing throughout the book that "the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, empathic and brave."

We certainly saw that this week in those who ran towards the explosions to help the victims, when any common sense would tell you to run the other way. We saw it in the law enforcement officers who put their lives on the line on Thursday and Friday to try to prevent any more harm to their city. We saw it in the Yankees tribute, and in those NYPD officers flipping burgers for their exhausted Boston comrades. We saw it in the flood of support for victims and their families, and in the words of so many who called for us to respond to this tragedy not with hatred, but with love.

One of those people who ran back into the chaos on Monday was peace activist Carlos Arrendondo. You may have seen his picture. He's the guy in the cowboy hat whose image has gone viral this week. Carlos was near the finish line of the Marathon when the bombs went off, there to meet a runner who was doing the marathon in honor of Carlos's son, a soldier killed while on duty in Iraq in 2004. When the explosions happened, Carlos's Red Cross volunteer instincts snapped into action. He and others around him removed the barriers separating them from the victims and ran in to see what they could do to help. The now famous image of Carlos shows him pinching the severed artery of a man who had lost both legs. Carlos's actions saved this man's life. When asked about why he ran in to the chaos, Carlos humbly replied "My first reaction was to, you know, go and do my duty... I was only doing what I could."

Mr. Rogers famously advised parents who were talking to their children about disasters to tell them to look for the helpers. I think we could all take that advice: look for the helpers, look for the hope, look for the sacred community that so often arises in the midst of chaos and pain.

Solnit recounts a story in her book of another unusual kind of community that sprung up on September 11, 2001. A young woman named Astra Taylor was working in TriBeCa that morning. After spending a few hours trying to figure out what to do and where to go, Astra

joined the thousands of people who were waiting to cross the Williamsburg Bridge. There was fear that the bridge might be a target for further attack, and so the police held people back for some time, waiting for a signal that all was safe.

Astra describes the experience like this: “We were probably milling around for two hours, waiting to cross the bridge, getting hot, and that was the moment where you were feeling your small softness. You’re just this small, soft human amongst all these others just wanting to cross the water. Finally we were allowed to cross the Williamsburg Bridge, and the people who met us on the other side were Hasidics. They met us with bottles of water. The feeling on the street was a sense of community and calmness. There was a sense on the street on September 11 of calm, of trusting in people around you—kind of being impressed with how intelligently the people around you were handling the circumstances. There was camaraderie, no hysterics, no panic, you felt that people would come together. . . . I felt connected to the people on the street and I felt impressed by them. I also felt that reality is not what I thought it was. I still have a lot to learn. The reality that people would do this, commit this act of terrorism but also the reality that people in the street are trustworthy, that people would help you and that you would help.”¹

I’ve heard so many similar stories from this past week in Boston. One of the struggles that arises when a disaster is a result of human action is that we have to deal with these two sides of human nature that we are witness to. On the one hand, violence and hatred; on the other, the helpers and the hope. To be honest, it’s not something we can totally reconcile. We have to sit with the fact that we are connected to both the hatred and the love, that we too contain both of those impulses within us. And then we have to choose love, and hope that others will follow.

The Hasidics of Williamsburg certainly chose love on that hot, September day. A group that so rarely interacts with the outside world—much less with those worldly folks who work in Manhattan—offering water and comfort, community and calm.

Just as Carlos Arrendondo and so many others, both at the site of the bombings and far away, chose love this past Monday. People who may never meet again, people who may never have met, offering prayers and comfort, community and calm.

We need this love in a world that is too often inundated with fear, in a world that sometimes seems to be nothing more than a string of disasters.

I know that I have been afraid more than once this week. I was up in Boston on Monday for school, and was in class when news of the explosions downtown reached us. Phones started to go off with text messages and phone calls, as everyone wanted to make sure that everyone else was all right. Those who weren’t busy reassuring loved ones were frantically looking for any news. There was no sense of the scope of the explosions, and no sense of whether or not there would be more. While there was little chance that the secluded hill our campus is on would be a target for anyone, that fear was still very present in the room. It was the same illogical fear I had felt so many years ago in my little high school in rural Minnesota just after hearing that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center; the same fear I am sure many of you felt that morning: what if we are next, what if they strike again?

¹ A Paradise Built in Hell, Rebecca Solint, 193-4

I felt this fear again on Friday, when Boston was in lockdown. I hesitated for a moment before leaving my apartment in Brooklyn, thinking—wait, is it really safe to go outside?

And that's why these extraordinary communities that arise in disaster are so important. Because we cannot live if we are paralyzed by fear. We cannot savor the gift of life if we get caught in the storm of hatred and suspicion. We cannot truly embrace love in times of peace if we cannot also truly embrace love in times of violence and chaos.

My friends, let us remember always to look for the helpers, to look for the hope. Let us be reminded in the midst of disasters both near and far that we are all connected, we are all part of that mysterious and powerful interconnected web of existence. Let us not be overcome with fear, but rather, let us be overcome with love. May we always find that paradise built in hell, knowing that in the end, love wins.