

THINKING OF HOSPITALITY, IN A DIRE TIME

A Sermon Preached at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer
on January 2, 2005

This year, New Years festivities everywhere were less festive, coming as they did so soon after the somber, almost unimaginably awful news from Southeast Asia.

I planned this day to talk about hospitality, and I will, but I'm going to get there by way of the catastrophe and its aftermath, with some theologizing along the way, this being church, after all.

I want to thank Jane Williamson for passing on an article from Reuters with the headline, "Faiths Ask of Quake: 'Why Did You Do This, God?'" I quote, "Perhaps no event in living history has confronted so many of the world's great religions with such a basic test of faith as this week's tsunami...."

"In temples, mosques, churches and synagogues across the globe, clerics are being called upon to explain: How could a benevolent god visit such horror on ordinary people?"

"Traditionalists of diverse faiths described the destruction as part of god's plan, proof of his power and punishment for human sins.

"This is an expression of God's great ire with the world,' Israeli chief rabbi Shlomo Amar told Reuters. 'The world is being punished for wrongdoing....'"

A Hindu priest in New Delhi said "the disaster was caused by a 'huge amount of pent-up man-made evil on earth' and driven by the position of the planets."

Let me concede that this point of view was common here in Massachusetts and elsewhere in colonial days. Well, maybe not the part about the planets so much. But when natural disasters struck hereabouts 350 years ago, you can be pretty sure my first predecessor, the Rev. Edmond Browne, thought there was nothing natural about them – they were God's judgment on the people's religious failings. It was time for penitence, repentance, conversion, and more fervent faith.

And this attitude carried well into the eighteenth century in many places, producing the so-called Earthquake Revival of 1727, following an earthquake off the coast of Newbury that was felt "from Kennebec to the Delaware River." Three weeks later, addressing the opening session of the General Court [i.e., the state legislature], Thomas Foxcroft's sermon was, "The voice of the Lord, from the deep places of the earth." The sermon a month later by the minister in Weston [William Williams] was titled, "Divine warnings to be received with faith & fear." After another Massachusetts earthquake in 1755, Thomas Prince published a discourse on "Earthquakes the work of God and tokens of his just displeasure."¹

I know I am not alone in this room in my delight at having a totally different theology, one that disbelieves that there is a god who intercedes in human history in any such way.

It's not that none of us here believe in a god. Some of us don't, some of us do. But a long, long time ago – hundreds of years ago, in fact – when the old congregational

¹ *Protestantism in America* by Jerald C. Brauer and the website, "Archiving Early Americas"

establishment began to split in two diametrically opposite directions, we were among the vast majority of First Parishes in eastern Massachusetts that took a liberal stand. And that is still where we are.

So the odds are really, really good that even if you do believe in God, it's not a god that chose to wreak unfathomable terror and loss on all those poor, innocent souls. Rather, you may concur with the Greek Orthodox theologian [Costas Kyriakides] who said, "I personally don't attach any theological significance to this...." Or with the American Rabbi, Daniel Isaac, who said, "This is not something that God has done.... The issue isn't, 'Why did God do this to us?' but 'How do we human beings care for one another?'"

Disasters happen. Or, more to the point, sometimes natural events happen that are disastrous to humans, to other beings, or to both.

I know, sometimes disasters are of our own creating. Maybe global climate change is one such case. Or Iraq.

But I think I know the answer to this week's questions -- Why did so many people die, why did so many people lose their loved ones and their homes, why do so many people now face the prospect of hunger, thirst, disease, and destitution? And it's not because some larger conscious power willed their destruction. It's because of plate tectonics.

It's about physics and geology -- or better, it's about forces that those sciences try to describe. It's about nature. It's about the planet we live on, whose continental foundations move about, as they have since way before any of us humans showed up, and as they will long after humankind is even a fleeting memory.

Sometimes the forces of nature do us ill, even terrible ill, sometimes individually, and in sometimes staggeringly large numbers. The columnist David Brook observed, "This week nature seems amoral and viciously cruel." Amoral, indeed, but cruel only in its effects, and not by intention. It has no intention. Earthquakes just happen.

Like Rabbi Isaac, I don't think the religious concern is "Why?" That's the way it is. I think the real religious issue is, so what then? And I don't just mean this week, but every week: in a world where tragedy exists, and suffering, how ought we to live?

Religion of the sort I value coaxes us toward the idea that the answer lies in a generosity of spirit, in broad compassion, and selfless service, and deeds that make the world more kind.

I want to talk about that generosity of spirit as it lives among us locally, but first I would add the voice of our Unitarian Universalist president, Bill Sinkford, to the welcome chorus of those who solicit our generosity of spirit in response to this week's disaster.

"The Indian Ocean tsunami reminds us all how precious life is and how quickly life can end. As the death toll continues to climb, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and the Unitarian Universalist Association are working together to collect funds for disaster relief and to speed them to the Indian Ocean countries most affected by this immense tragedy.

"I urge you to be generous in your giving so we can do as much as possible to relieve the suffering of the survivors. The money you donate will be channeled by the UUSC to its partner organizations in tsunami-affected countries in the region and by the

UUA's Holdeen India program to on-the-ground indigenous partner organizations in India.

“I grieve this loss of life, especially the deaths of so many children. My prayers and condolences go out to the survivors and their families. I trust that Unitarian Universalists will take this opportunity to demonstrate our compassion for the people who must now begin the grim task of rebuilding their lives from the ruins left in the wake of this horrendous natural disaster. And I pray that we all recognize again that our lives are a precious gift.”

Copies of a statement by Charlie Clements, the Director of the UU Service Committee, are available downstairs, in which he tries to provide help to those who wonder, “What can I do to help?” He closes his letter by noting, “In a time such as this I find it helpful to keep in mind some words from the Talmud: ‘Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.’”

Let me say it again: Religion of the sort I value coaxes us toward a generosity of spirit, broad compassion, selfless service, and deeds that make the world more kind.

One name for that generosity of spirit as it can dwell among us in our religious home is hospitality. UU church consultant Michael Durall writes that “genuine hospitality is the hallmark of an engaging congregation, both in terms of its ongoing life and its ability to maintain a healthy financial position.”² He is, as I said, a church consultant, and so he is used to concerns about finances. But his new book, *The Almost Church*, has a much broader focus.

From his work he is convinced that money itself is rarely the real issue. Rather, it's a church's soul, its overall attitude. He thinks many churches don't demand enough of their members. Membership is too easy. Members focus too much on how their own needs are met, not how they are transformed to live lives more devoted to love and justice. He thinks our churches should challenge their members and friends to live lives of dedication, commitment, and even sacrifice.”

Obviously, that would include appeals to aid disaster victims. But it also includes such every-week expressions as how church members deal with newcomers among them, how we embody the spirit of hospitality.

It's an interesting word, hospitality, “the cordial and generous reception and entertainment of guests or strangers socially or commercially.” It comes from the same Latin word as does hostel, hospital, hospice, host, and hotel. The Latin word meant host, stranger, or guests. But that Latin word came from an earlier Latin word that meant stranger ... or enemy. And so that same original word is the root of hostile, hostility, hostage.

That reflects the differing attitudes people have toward strangers. I don't know that church folk think of newcomers as enemies, but Durall reports a shocking lack of greeting in a lot of the churches whose worship he drops in on. By the way, Durall is married to a UU minister, who during a sabbatical visited a lot of UU worship services and reported at the end that the Wayland congregation had been the most welcoming. (As far as I know, her husband's never been here.)

And it is heart-warming to watch members of the Newcomer Committee and so many others of you try making visitors feel at home, being friendly with strangers. It is

² *The Almost Church*, Michael Durall (Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, Tulsa, 2004), 66

one of the three hospitable things I want to cite as important ways we can try to embody a generosity of spirit here at First Parish.

That activity is nothing new, but the other the activities are. And they don't exist yet, but they may before long, thanks to the energy and commitment of some of our members. Durall speaks highly of the enabling church, the kind of congregation where new ideas and fresh initiatives are greeted more as possibilities than as threats.

One of these new ideas is the covenant group, which isn't exactly new, as we have had various groups that functioned in much the same way – a chance for a group of people to meet regularly for a period of time, with ground rules that insure a safe and respectful interchange of personal stories, spiritual outlooks, or whatever. A premium is placed on listening.

Meanwhile, all over the continent, UU congregations have latched onto this idea in various ways with various names – like small group ministry – generally based on the model of groups of 8-10 people, who meet regularly, have a check-in, and then reflect on some topic of spiritual or religious or deep importance, usually with a reading to kick off the conversation. The amount of ritual varies.

A number of our lay ministers and I attended a training session recently. We attendees were divided into groups of appropriate size and discussed our fears and how we dealt with them. Materials exist that provide dozens of possible topics. The groups are lay-led, with ministers providing regular, close support to the leaders.

It is not unusual for a church to have five or ten such groups going at any time, or more. The hope is that by the time spring arrives, we may have four groups of our own about to start, involving 35-40 people. People who want to take part – and we're prepared to involve more than 40 people -- will be assigned to a group, and an effort will be made to include newer members with longer-time members.

This may seem at first to be another activity people would be doing for themselves, which would be fine, and individuals do report that they get a lot out of these groups. But participation is also an act of hospitality, of welcoming the other members of the group into a deeper relationship than can easily take place in coffee hour.

And then there is the possibility that we will extend our hospitality even further out into the community through the Interfaith Hospitality Network, or IHN, that many of us have heard about from one of our newer and enthusiastic members, Callie Ritter, who has spent many months presenting the idea to various church groups and individuals, including the governing board, which will decide this week whether to endorse the program and bring it to the congregation for a vote, probably in early February, after one more chance for people to ask questions at an after-church meeting.

Like small group ministries, participation in IHN could be an important way for us to become even more connected to each other and to our deepest values, even more alive with a generosity of spirit. So I'm going to spend what little time remains today describing what the program is about, as described by one of our churches already active, in part because I think the idea has great potential, and also, I suppose, because even if we don't take part, this is the kind of undertaking I think we want to be involved in.

“The goal of IHN is to mobilize communities to help low-income families achieve and sustain independence. Each local network of congregations is part of the national Family Promise, which was founded in New Jersey in 1988. There are more than 3,000 congregations involved nationwide involving 33 states. Nationally, there are over 95,000

volunteers helping more than 120,000 men, women, and children. In 2003, 83% of guest families found permanent or transitional housing.

“Congregations host families who are homeless in their facilities a week at a time a number of times a year. [We’re thinking of three weeks here in Wayland, the one after Christmas and two in the summer.] They not only provide shelter but food and a friendly positive atmosphere for these families in transition. During the day these families are helped at an IHN Day Center with setting goals, saving money, obtaining employment or gaining job skills, obtaining child care and seeking permanent housing....

One of our churches reports that in their case, “It takes about 45 volunteers each hosting week [which is, I think, about the number of people who have already signed cards saying that they would volunteer] . Volunteers serve as hosts, provide children activities, spend the night, set up and take down the homey accoutrements, provide money for special needs, and coordinate meals.

“Our participation in IHN helps us to live out our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes, which affirm the worth and dignity of every person, and justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.”

Whether it be the Service Committee, IHN or some other effort; small group ministry; or just a friendly, welcoming conversation with someone who is a stranger to you, as you walk to your cars after worship, may there be a quality of caring, a hospitality, a generosity of spirit that we offer here -- to each other, to all who come new to our door, to our community, and to an ever-needy world.