

**A sermon by Dana Baron
Delivered on October 26, 2008 at
Mt Mansfield UU Fellowship in
Jericho, VT**

Sunday, July 27, Knoxville Tennessee. Church-goers were gathered for the morning service. The children of the church were staging a performance of the play *Annie*. Without warning, a man identified as Jim David Adkisson walked into the back of the church carrying a guitar case. He calmly put the case down, opened it and removed a shot-gun. He then began firing into the congregation. One church member, Greg McKendry, threw himself in front of the shooter and absorbed most of the pellets from the first shot. He was killed instantly. Adkisson got off at least one other shot, killing another church member, Linda Kraeger, and wounding seven others, before members of the congregation wrestled him to the ground and held him until police arrived.

In police custody, Adkisson said that the church's liberal teachings had prompted his attack. Police also found a four-page letter in Adkisson's car in which he stated that all liberals should be killed because they were ruining the country.

When I read the news from Knoxville, I felt a deep and powerful connection with the people in that church – a connection that I feel even now as I read these words. That connection was sealed in 1992 when the first members of our fellowship decided to become a member congregation of the Unitarian-Universalist Association of Congregations. Our Fellowship is called Mount Mansfield Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship. The church in Knoxville is called the Tennessee Valley Unitarian-Universalist Church. We are connected through a shared history, a shared organizational structure, and a shared theology.

Today I'd like to focus on those two Us in the middle of our name. Unitarian and Universalist. Where did they come from? And what do they mean to us today, individually and collectively?

As the name suggests, Unitarian-Universalism actually grew out of two distinct theological traditions, both originally Christian. Unitarianism originated as a rejection of the Christian concept of the Trinity of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and instead focuses on rational thinking, each person's individual relationship with God, and the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Universalism grew out of the belief in a loving God and universal salvation. The original Universalists didn't believe that God could punish anyone in hell for eternity. Instead, they believed that all people would reach a reconciliation with their God eventually.

Both of these theologies were born in the early days of Christianity and both have long and colorful histories. And both flourished under the religious tolerance that formed the cornerstone of American freedoms.

Universalism came to America in the 1700's with English Universalists fleeing religious persecution. Because of its loving and inclusive doctrine, Universalism quickly became popular throughout the United States, especially in rural areas and the expanding western states. The Universalist denomination, called the Universalist Church of America, was formed by 1793.

Meanwhile, Unitarianism took root in the northern cities of revolutionary America where political and religious liberty flourished together. The term Unitarian, originally used as a pejorative term for these religious liberals, was eventually adopted as a badge of honor and in 1825, a group of Unitarian ministers formed the American Unitarian Association.

Although the American Revolution pre-dated the formation of either the Unitarian or Universalist denominations, many of our nation's founders are often mentioned as being in our ranks, mostly on the basis of their own theological writings. These include such names as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Ethan Allen.

Through the years, Unitarians and Universalists joined together with many other people of faith in leading social and political movements that constantly changed the face of America. In the 19th century, they were at the forefront of the battle against slavery and the fight for women's rights. In the 20th century they were leaders of the civil rights and anti-war movements.

Over time, both the Unitarian and Universalist theologies continued to evolve. Unitarians were active in the transcendental movement of the 1800s and the pacifist and humanist movements of the 1900s.

The Civil War unfortunately destroyed many Universalist churches and killed many Universalist ministers who had served as chaplains for the armies. And while Universalism gradually became more liberal, so did other major denominations, and a softer approach to the idea of damnation became popular throughout the US in the mid to late eighteenth hundreds, making the Universalist denomination less unique in its teachings. The denomination struggled for many years as membership waned.

By the 1950's, the two denominations were both non-creedal and no longer necessarily Christian. As the two grew closer together they began to talk about consolidating, and in 1961, this idea became reality with the formation of the Unitarian-Universalist Association.

After consolidation, members of the new Unitarian Universalist Association continued in the forefront of political and social change.

A couple of stories from our recent history:

In the early- and mid-1960's the cause was the civil rights movement. In March, 1965, the battleground was Selma, Alabama where blacks were demanding their constitutional right to vote. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was in town, the Alabama state troopers were violently attacking black marchers and their supporters and emotions were running high. In response to a call from Rev. King, many other clergy members from around the country came to Selma to offer their support. On the night of March 11, three of those ministers, all Unitarians and all white were walking from dinner back to their hotel when there were attacked by a white mob. The Rev James Reeb was killed in the attack.

Some of you may be old enough to remember a previous quagmire of a war in Vietnam. In 1971, one Daniel Ellsberg dealt a severe blow to the government's war efforts when he released thousands of pages of classified documents to the New York Times that revealed embarrassing details about the government's planning and conduct of the war. These documents, known now as the Pentagon Papers, were later published in book form by Beacon Press. Daniel Ellsberg was a Unitarian-Universalist and Beacon Press is owned by the UUA.

Unitarian Universalists have also been active opponents of the war in Iraq and the atrocities that have been associated with it. Amnesty International came out strongly in opposition to the torture of prisoners at Guantonomo. The president of Amnesty International is Bill Schultz, former president of the Unitarian-Universalist Association.

So this is our history – your history. You were connected to that history when the founders of this Fellowship decided to join the UUA and you decided to participate in this Fellowship. Ours is a history of free thought and thoughtful action. Unitarian-Universalists are often ahead of their time. When others are saying “no, the time is not right, its too early”, Unitarian Universalists are saying “yes, the time is now, in fact its too late.”

Today Unitarian-Universalists continue to be leaders in the social and political movements of our time: the fight for gay rights, the movement to protect our planet, and the efforts to end the war in Iraq. It was our place in the vanguard that caught the attention of Jim Adkisson. And the price for our activism is sometimes high, as was demonstrated this summer in Knoxville.

Now, we are the ones moving Unitarian-Universalist history and theology forward. Unitarian-Universalism is a “non-creedal” religion – there is no one set of beliefs that all members must subscribe to in order to belong. Instead, we are called

individually to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I take this to mean that we have both a freedom and a responsibility. We not only are free to search for our own truth, but we also have a responsibility to do so. We are called to go beyond zero. And we have a responsibility to share what our search uncovers, and listen as others share their piece of the truth.

As members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we're part of a web that connects Unitarian Universalists on many levels. We are one of over 1000 Unitarian Universalist congregations in the US. How many have you visited? Go to any of them you'll feel the connection. There will be people like you and unlike you in all of them. Tell them that you're visiting from another Unitarian Universalist congregation and you'll feel the connection deepen.

Our congregation is a member of the new Northern New England District formed by the merger of the old Northeast District, which served Maine, and the former Vermont-New Hampshire District. The district is always sponsoring conferences, workshops, and other regional events. How many have you attended? Go to a District conference and you'll be connected with Unitarian Universalists throughout northern New England. It gives a feeling of strength and unity when you join with a hundred other Unitarian-Universalists to work or study or play together.

Our congregation is also a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The UUA was very helpful in our efforts to purchase Mrs B's Barn. They contributed a \$17,000 grant and their loan guarantee program made it possible for us to secure a mortgage. Each year, the UUA holds a General Assembly somewhere in the US. Have you ever been to one? Go to a General Assembly and you'll feel the strength of thousands of Unitarian Universalists in one place at one time. You'll feel both the unity and the diversity that is the hallmark of our faith tradition. And you'll see that you're not the only one who dreams of a world living in peace and harmony.

In closing, I'd like to return to Knoxville one more time. The way that TVUUC reacted to the horrible events in their sanctuary illustrates the strength that comes from their Unitarian-Universalist connections.

One week after the shooting, the congregation held an emotional service to rededicate their church.

Rev. Chris Buice, who serves as the congregation's minister, led the overflow crowd in resanctifying the space. Sia Matthews lit the flaming chalice with Religious Education Director Brian Griffin, who has been lauded for his work on July 27 in helping get children out of the church when the attack occurred. "We are safe," Griffin said at the beginning of the service. "We are together. We are loved. And so it will be."

The congregation sang "Spirit of Life," which has become a Unitarian Universalist musical statement of faith, and later, "May Nothing Evil Cross this Door," a hymn affirming the safety and love that should be part of all worship spaces. Rev. Bruce Southworth, Minister of Community Church of New York City, who grew up in TVUUC, led the congregation in a responsive reading adapted 1 Corinthians: 13. Former ministers and officials of the national Unitarian Universalist Association joined the congregation at the service, including former Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) president Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, who was minister at TVUUC in the early 1980s. Buehrens reminded the congregation of its proud history in standing up for civil rights and social justice issues. Thomas Jefferson District Executive Annette Marquis remarked on the resilience of the congregation and reminded the congregation that they "are not alone."

Rev. Buice offered a homily on the rededication and the strength of the congregation.

"God of many names, known in the spoken word and most profoundly in unspoken silence, we say with you and in you and through these simple words, 'We reclaim our sanctuary,' This sanctuary, which has been defiled by violence, we rededicate to peace. This holy place, which has been desecrated by an act of hatred, we reconsecrate for love. This sacred space, which has seen death, we recommit to life. The holy spiritual home, which has known fear, we rededicate to faith and freedom."

And at the end of the service, the children led the congregation in singing the song that was meant to be sung a week earlier, "Tomorrow" from the play Annie.