

**“What Do We Owe One Another”**  
**16 December 2012**  
**Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley**  
**Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman**

On this weekend of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School I changed my homily to “What Do We Owe One Another?” I had originally announced that I would offer the following: *In this mid-winter holiday season, stories of the birth of children remind us about new light and new life into a dark world. The children of this congregation represent our light, our hope, our future. What do we owe them? In this multi-generational service, we show our congregational responsibility of covenant as several families participate in our Ceremony of Child Dedication. Join together for a holiday potluck lunch after the service. See elsewhere in this newsletter for more details.*

Two days ago this was a very different homily. Two days ago I planned to reflect on our denominational meaning of child dedication and how we all care for our children when we are at church. We planned to have our children remain in the sanctuary with us, in multigenerational mode, for the entire service. We have changed the plan: we have invited the children to classrooms with their teachers for the rest of this service, so that we all may attend to matters of the heart in age-appropriate settings. I suppose that most if not all of us in this room today are grappling with yet another horrific act of violence in our country that ended in twenty-seven deaths, twenty of these children. We want to provide a safe place for all ages to express and respond as each of us must.

We may be grieving in part for how any new tragedy reminds us of tragedies past. When I first heard the news from Connecticut on Friday, I quickly jumped back to 9-11, a time when I was nearly two thousand miles away from my then teenage children. While all of us were far from those attacks, I so desperately wanted to hold Patrick and Amanda. Hugs over the phone lines offered a pale substitute. I look on the bright side: that terror also created a new level of closeness with my son Patrick, who was then at awkward-teenager stage: I signed off a phone conversation by saying my usual ‘I Love You’ that I had said so often before, and that time, on that 9-11 call, he was able unabashedly to say back, ‘I love you too.’

Connecting, embracing, coming together in community at times like these is so important. It is indeed good to be here together this morning. And it will be good to re-connect with the children downstairs for our holiday potluck celebration after the service as planned.

So we staff members regrouped not only who is here in the sanctuary now, but also what we talk about this morning. Rather than asking ‘What Do We Owe Our Children’, this morning is a time to ask ‘**What Do We Owe One Another**’ ... that is, how do we share our lives with others, committed to the love and peace and beauty that ground this free religious faith of ours.

So really, what I might have said about what we owe our children applies to all of us when we live as persons of liberal faith. I would have talk about how we owe our children rituals of

dedication as we have had this morning ... expressions of our covenant for how we will nurture and guide and love our children. But really, aren't we all called to share our covenants of dedication with each and every person in this room, of whatever age. In this free faith, our covenants keep us connected to one another, persons of all ages, connected in love.

I would have elaborated on how we owe our children educational programs so they grow in understanding of both the meaning and the living out of liberal faith in the world. I would also have reminded us how we owe it to their religious education teachers to help this education, because the mere forty hours or so a year they spend in Religious Education classes cannot nearly do the job, what with all modern culture's countering influences from TV, movies, texting and more, influences countering the message of love that we want them to grow up in. But really, don't we all owe this to everyone, this process of never-ending expansion of our perspective on what it means to be and live as a person of free faith. Don't we owe it to everyone to continue to grow in how we take our free faith out into a world more often shattered and hurting and more unexplainable than we can fathom.

I would also have reminded us about how we owe our children safe spaces here at church --- just as they trust their schools to be safe. But really, don't we owe it to all of us to know safety here at church. We will affirm safety here in this building in a few weeks when we run a fire drill. We will also continue to work for safety in our interpersonal relationships as we work on a Safe Congregations program that expands our awareness of interpersonal boundary violations.

### What Are Our Values?

Horrible events as we have experienced this weekend also tend to bring us to renewed awareness of the best in how we relate to one another: best practices that certainly we owe to everyone. In the past twenty-four hours, many of us have probably heard advice about how to approach our children with conversations about Newtown, but really don't these tips apply to all of us, at any time:

- Communicate through age appropriate conversations. That is, in any of our communications, take the other person into account: who that person is, what do they need from us.
- Ask open-ended questions to help discern what our children already understand about the Newtown events. Be curious about the place of the other: open-ended question help remind us of just how much wisdom others have to share with us.
- Speak as honestly and directly and authentically as we can: to our children, to all who we engage with.
- Don't hide your authentic emotions, but don't over-indulge in feelings that become self-serving. May all of us be genuine with one another.
- If children are old enough to watch television and read news on social media, help them limit what they learn by putting boundaries on their viewing. Avoid replaying the same news clips over and over, and let us do the same for ourselves, pushing the stop button on repetitious broadcasts, and on all those other tapes and stories that are the same-old-same-old renderings about people and events in our lives.
- Keep life as regular as possible, for our kids, for ourselves. This is why we are going ahead with the congregational holiday celebration we had planned for after the service.

While we grieve for families in Connecticut, staying as regular as we can helps us to keep our own lives going forward, albeit a little bit sadder for awhile, perhaps a little bit wiser.

### What Can We Do

It seems that when we encounter disruptions in our lives --- at home, at church, in our nation, many of us want to respond with some sort of action. However, often we are not quite sure what we can do to make a difference. We may feel powerless. We might think: "There is nothing I can do to help make the environment better, nothing I can do to deter individuals who might give in to acts of terror." Keeping before us our Unitarian Universalist commitment to social justice gives us both means and methods to actively engage in helping our world. If you are experiencing feelings of powerlessness this weekend, I call you to consider taking your liberal values into the wider community, to help heal this broken world by joining some project of social justice in our denomination. The words of Buddhist activist Joanna Macy may help call us to engagement with the world: "Is it my imagination to think that we have been chosen [to live] at a time when the stakes are really high, at a time when everything we've ever learned about interconnectedness, about trust, about courage, can be put to the test. Each one of us is a gift...the earth is giving to itself. Every anguish, betrayal, disappointment can help prepare us for the work of healing...If the world is to be healed through human efforts, I am convinced it will be by ordinary people, people whose love for this life is greater than their fear, people who can open to the web of life that called us into being."

Perhaps this is the time for you to engage in advocacy for more stringent gun control, or improved conditions in many of our nation's schools; or more community resources for at-risk children and youth. If you want to channel your action into Unitarian Universalist programs, perhaps it is time for you to support the work of our denominational Trauma Ministry.

### How do we go forward

So how do we go forward: from this room, this time, forward to again be with our children, our families, our friends? How do we go out into a world that we know is uncertain? Well, not even I as your minister can offer absolute answers to these questions. However, we might consider a few thoughts. As we go out, let us be doubly intentional to express joy and compassion to others. Let us try to see the world through the lenses of others, at the same time that we bring our own perspective to them. As we reach out with love to others, let us also remember the importance of physical touch, to include a hug or a handshake along with our smiles. As President Obama said on Friday, parents will probably hug their children just a little tighter. Let us give tight hugs to everyone, going way from each and every relationship at peace with one another. Let us be content to live with some of the mystery of why 'bad things happen to good people.' We people of reasonable faith seem to want to figure things out, to create logical explanations. We may never be able to explain how tragedies happen. We may need to rely on our faith, as we work through this and other hurts that come into our lives. Let us be willing to name the confusions in our hearts and souls. Let us be in this moment, this moment of national mourning. As we are in mourning, let us also cherish well every day of this beautiful life

I expect that for a few days, or weeks, we will be kinder, gentler, more compassionate, more caring, more attentive. What a world it would be if we stayed like that, always in this attentive mode that tragedy brings out in us. May we strive to have these hands that extend love and

caring reach just a little further and last a little longer, to touch one or two more lives who might then move from anger to joy, from hatred to love, from violence to peace. What a world we have the potential to help create.

Our country undoubtedly has tough days ahead. Certainly many families in Connecticut have tough days and years ahead. Still, my friends, let us also be committed to keeping our own lights shining brightly, even as horrific events may threaten to dim them. Let us not allow the darkness of one particular event turn out our lights of hope. Yes, we will grieve for a period. But let us not lose our resolve to do all we can to keep this beautiful world be more safe and secure.

From UUA president Peter Morales:

**“We must rededicate ourselves to creating a society where differences are resolved without violence, where the mentally unstable do not have ready access to lethal force, where violence is not glorified, and where we can live, love, and work in safe places. Our task as a religious people committed to compassion and to peace is to show a better way.”**

May I now invite your continued reflection as we listen to the composition ‘Thankful,’ which David Glasgow will offer now, rather than during the offering as we had originally planned. Come the offering time, David will announce the new music for that portion of the service.