

SEARCHING FOR A CENTER

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro

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A recent edition of *Bill Moyers Journal* on PBS featured a follow-up story about the terrible shooting at the Knoxville UU church in July. An unemployed truck driver named Jim Adkisson burst into a Sunday morning service and opened fire with a shotgun, killing two adults and wounding twelve others. The casualties would have been even worse had it not been for the heroic efforts of several congregation members, who managed to subdue the gunman until the police arrived. Afterwards, police found in his apartment an assortment of hate literature directed against liberals. One of them was a book by radio talk show host Michael Savage titled *Liberalism Is a Mental Disorder*, in which he calls liberals “the enemy within our country” and “an enemy more dangerous than Hitler.”

Here are some excerpts from his radio program, which broadcasts to an audience of over eight million people. Speaking to a caller who identified himself as gay, Savage says, “Oh, you’re one of the sodomites. You should get AIDS and die, you pig.” He also targeted children with autism. “I’ll tell you what autism is. In 99 percent of the cases, it’s a brat who hasn’t been told to cut the act out. That’s what autism is.” On the subject of immigration: “America is being overrun by an invasion force from Mexico that’ll soon take over the country. . . . You psychotic liberals don’t even know you’re digging your own grave and throwing lime in there. All that’s missing is the worm from the tequila bottle to go with it.” Conservative commentator Bill O’Reilly is quite explicit in expressing his views about immigration. “Do you understand what the *New York Times* wants? And what the far left want? They want to break down the white, Christian male power structure which you are a part and so am I, and they want to bring in millions of foreign nationals to basically break down the structure that we have.”

Another of the right-wing “shock jocks” is Glenn Beck, whose program airs every week-night on CNN Headline News to tens of millions of viewers. Recently he fantasized openly about murdering controversial liberal filmmaker Michael Moore. “I’m thinking about killing Michael Moore and I’m wondering if I could kill him myself, or if I would need to hire someone to do it. No, I think I could. I think he could be looking me in the eye, you know, and I could just be choking the life out of him. Is this wrong?” [PBS, *Bill Moyers Journal*, 9/12/08]

My **gut-reaction** answer is “Yes, this is very wrong.” Glenn Beck recently said that sources **within the Secret Service** had told him that if Barack Obama is elected president, he will be assassinated. This kind of public prediction about the assassination of a public figure isn’t just “wrong,” it is dangerous, because it carries the very real potential for giving permission to some other Jim Adkisson—frustrated and angry, armed and mentally unstable—to carry out this violent prophecy and transform himself into a hero in the war against liberals. To say that these right-wing media figures are deeply offensive is an understatement, but they are more than that. They are more than a threat to our sense of common decency and civil discourse. At a psychological level, they pose a threat to our national security insofar as they condone violence against people with whom one may disagree.

At a deeper level, the shock jocks of hate undermine our nation's most basic principle: *E Pluribus Unum* ("out of many, one"). What does this phrase mean for us at a time of great national discord, when the purveyors of mistrust and intolerance capture such a widespread audience? One of the visions of American unity is that of the **melting pot**, in which the differences among our diverse people are submerged into a greater unity, which, as it turns out, is an identity organized around European Protestant male-dominated values. During the past fifty years, the arrival of immigrants from non-European cultures has begun to challenge this version of the American identity. As Forrest Church writes in his book titled *The American Creed*, "Unity is indeed an American sacrament. But it is our pluralism that unites us. Considerable blending has occurred over the years. . . . American is more like a salad bowl than like a melting pot. Otherwise our motto would be *unum* alone, which decidedly we are not. At our finest, we remain both proudly pluralistic *and* united. When a Russian Jew and a Russian Christian come to America, two things unite them that divided them in the old country: their faith in freedom and their freedom of faith." [p. 65]

The purveyors of hatred toward immigrants need to be reminded of these words inscribed on our Statue of Liberty:

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman with a torch,
Whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome;
Her mild eyes command the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

[quoted in Forrest Church, *The American Creed*, p. 66]

Against those who claim that the American creed revolves around a particular religion, Forrest Church writes, "America is not a Christian nation. It is, however, a religious one. The founders recognized that freedom is a morally neutral quality, defined by the objects to which it is devoted. Without a moral mooring, our liberties run the risk of lapsing into license. When this happens fundamentalist and other people of faith are right to be alarmed. The American Creed doesn't play favorites when it comes to theology—atheists receive the same protections under law that fundamentalists do. It does, however, rest on a moral foundation. To abridge people's religious freedom cuts across the American grain. . . . The American Creed calls our nation under the judgment of an authority higher than sect, mammon, or self-interest." [p. 82]

Those of us who are Unitarian Universalists affirm a slightly different version of the American Creed, but with similar implications. Our "creed"—if indeed we share one—might be expressed as "Out of one, many." As Unitarians, we believe that Ultimate Reality—however we name it—is an undivided whole. Out of this fundamental Unity has emerged many different pathways to truth. They are not all one and the same, and in that diversity we take great satisfaction, for it allows each of us to seek spiritual truth in a multitude of ways. Our trust in religious diversity allows us—indeed **requires**—each of us to continue searching for new pathways.

But there is more. Our Universalist heritage urges us to put tolerance and inclusion into practice. As Forrest Church writes, "Diversity is a fact in American life, but pluralism is the

ideal toward which we strive as a people. To put pluralism into practice requires more than mere tolerance. At one level to tolerate means to ‘bear with repugnance.’ Jesus doesn’t ask us ‘to tolerate our neighbor as ourselves.’ He commands us to love our neighbor. The Declaration of Independence doesn’t promote diversity, it inspires pluralism, which endows both freedom and diversity with moral content.” [p. 116]

This vision of America is **not** limited to liberals. Peggy Noonan is a conservative Republican who was a major speechwriter for Ronald Reagan. She is also disturbed by the climate of bitter partisanship that has engulfed our nation. In her new book titled *Patriotic Grace*, she writes, “Here is one thing that holds us together, if we let it: Our history. A sense that we have inherited and are part of a great nation created by men and women whose lives still have much to teach us, whose lives can move us, can electrify our intellectual environment and help us see ourselves more clearly.

“The young of our country—and, again, our newest Americans, members of the great wave of immigrants of the past twenty-five or so years—need to know *they are part of a continuum*, a human continuum of great meaning and worth. If they are taught a love of country it will help them respect themselves—it will help them to know they are connected to that, they are part of that, they are another expression of the continuum. In a crunch—in a terrible moment of history—we will benefit from a renewed patriotic sense, and thank ourselves for having encouraging it. A shared sense of pride in who we are and what we’ve been will help us see each other as . . . the same. That sameness will be a real glue in a tearing time.” [pp. 149-50]

That vision of who we are and where we are going will sustain us in the difficult days ahead. It is diametrically opposed to the hateful vision of the shock jocks. As Forrest Church says, “To remain true to its highest values, America must reembody the ideals of democratic pluralism, not rely on the vaunted superiority of modern secular materialism or trust in the persuasive power of military might. . . . To survive the assault of neotribalism, America will have to revisit its shrines and recover its soul. American values go far deeper than untrammelled laissez faire capitalism and have nothing to do with materialism. They rest on the firm spiritual foundation on which our nation was founded.” [p. 137]