

A Letter to My Murderer

*A sermon offered by Reverend Nate Walker on behalf of the
Joseph Priestley District of the Unitarian Universalist Association on
Saturday, February 27, 2009 at the General Assembly in Salt Lake City, Utah*

On Sunday, July 27, 2008, Jim David Adkisson walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church while 25 children and youth were performing the musical *Annie*. Adkisson opened a guitar case, pulled out a 12-gauge shotgun and began firing. Two church members were killed – Greg McKendry and Linda Kraeger. Seven more injured. He was restrained by three congregation members and one visitor for three minutes until the police department responded to the 911 call. Adkisson's ex-wife had been a member of the Tennessee Valley Church in the 1990's but was not currently involved. Adkisson's hatred of liberalism, including his hatred for the church's acceptance of homosexuality, was expressed in a letter found by police. An affidavit by one of the police officers who interviewed Adkisson says, "During the interview, Adkisson stated that he had targeted members of the church because of its liberal teachings and his belief that all liberals should be killed because they were ruining the country... he felt that the Democrats had tied his country's hands in the war on terror and ... had ruined every institution in America with the aid of major media outlets. Adkisson made statements that because he could not get to the leaders of the liberal movement that he would then target those who had voted them into office." He also said that he intended to keep firing until he was killed by the police. But he did survive. He was given the right to legal representation and a fair trial at which time Mr. Adkisson pleaded guilty to two counts of murder and accepted a life-sentence without parole. Unfortunately he showed no remorse.

In this case, the State of Tennessee decided not to pursue the death penalty, a state that has had various methods for the death penalty over the years, roughly divided by century. In the 1800's they used hanging, in the 1900's electrocution and in the year 2000 lethal injection became the primary method of enacting capital punishment. Would Unitarian Universalists be supportive of this type of sentencing? If the members of the Tennessee Valley UU church are like those who took a recent survey at the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia then about 13% of them will want the murderer to get the death penalty. What would those who were in the room during the shooting want? What would the victims' families want? And what would the congregation do? They could have waited. They could have petitioned the court to seek the death penalty. Or they could have petitioned the court not to seek the death penalty. As we have heard today, members of our UU family have experienced the pain of a loved one being murdered. The rest of us cannot truly know how we would react. Would we want vengeance? Would we want mercy? In our time together today, our hope is that we can honor all reactions and opinions. Our hope is that we can look for the humanity in the complexity of our responses, however each of us defines it.

This ends our readings and begins the sermon.¹

¹ This first page was adapted from the writing of Worship Associates, Christine Carlson and Janet Scannel of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia

Sermon

Boy oh boy, what a hopeful title for a sermon: *A Letter to My Murderer*. I asked someone if they were going to attend and they replied, “Uh, sounds like a downer.”

I agreed but explained that the hope comes from when we join together with those who have witnessed murder. Why do we come together? To let them know simply, they are not alone.

The following sermon is an exercise of the imagination; a way for me to use my imagination as a spiritual practice by picturing myself as one who was murdered. In doing so, tenderness, compassion and empathy are born from my imagined suffering.

My words do not claim to offer lofty promises or absolute answers but may inspire those who are open to wrestle with the ethics of capital punishment. It may inspire those who have never thought about the complexities or those who have never taken a public stand to reframe their beliefs and to put their faith into action, aware that the pen can be mightier than the sword.² My hope is that we may recognize that we are not powerless but powerful agents of conscience. We have the power *to heal with love*. We have the power *to bless with joy and to serve the spirit of freedom*.

Let us take up this challenge by first considering a model that may move us beyond the dualism found in many laws – laws that can take into consideration the wishes of the one murdered. What would it look like if the state respected the wishes of the dead? What comfort could it bring the victim’s families? What comfort could be offered? Would it make a difference? What would it look like if we drafted a document to guide the state, our families to address our specific beliefs about capital punishment? What if we literally composed a letter to a hypothetical person who may one day kill? Could such a letter serve as an advanced directive?

A Declaration of Life

You are aware that an advance directive tells your doctors the kind of care you wish to have if you are, for example, in a coma and are unable to make medical decisions. It is designed not only for the hospital to know your wishes for end-of-life care but it is also helpful to your family. In times of crisis your loved ones would know exactly what to do. I had the honor of caring for a family recently, whose parent left an advanced directive. It informed the doctors that they were not to be kept alive by machines; should their heart stop or if they could not longer breath. The doctors are told to DNR, do not resuscitate; another term used in the field is AND, allow natural death. Many people long for a natural death and legally craft documents that permit the system to honor their wishes. What if we were to craft advanced directives to address capital punishment?

I ask this question in the context of the Knoxville tragedy – when Jim David Adkisson entered the sanctuary on a Sunday morning of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist congregation and open fired during a children’s production. Two people died that day, Greg McKendry and Linda Kraeger, and seven others were wounded.

² Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1839

If we could turn back the clocks... if we were to go back in time and ask Greg and Linda to write a letter to their murderer, what would they compose? What would they want their murderer to know? What statement would they make about his crime and what kind of punishment would they affirm? Could such a statement make a difference?

In the following letter, Jim is the hypothetical name given to my fictitious murderer. My words serve as an advanced directive, informing my loved ones and the state of my dying wish. It does so by speaking directly to the one who may take my life. It is designed to be a personal statement of conscience to be used in any court of law.



June 27, 2009

Dear Mr. Atkisson,

If you are reading this letter then it means you have taken my life. I am dead. You are alive.

I write this letter without the awareness of your motives for killing – nor is it known to me the events in your own life that contributed to your actions.

I do know, however, that my family must in excruciating pain. I imagine my loved ones, my friends, my community weeping and cursing your name. They are probably asking why, why did you kill him? It is likely they want to kill you with their bare hands. Having stripped me of my inherent worth and dignity, they may want revenge.

We may not ever know why you killed but this much is true. You must repent. You must confess. You must make amends and sincerely and deeply apologize to my family. It is only right. Then you must receive your punishment.

Thankfully, we live in a justice-seeking nation and therefore you will be granted a fair trial and if found guilty will receive severe repercussions. I cannot predict which jurisdiction your trial will be held, nor what state and federal laws will be in place. I can, however, say that my trust lies in the system.

I believe it is right for the state to do anything in its power to remove you from society so that you will not harm another living being. I believe it is right for the state to do anything in its power to make a bold statement to the world that whoever takes life will receive death.

I believe it is just for you to receive capital punishment – aware that no one who takes life is worthy of living. I believe we must save society from murderers like you and therefore we must do God's work by sentencing you to death.

My dying wish is that whatever pain you may have caused me, you yourself experience.

My dying wish is that my family members can, if they desire, be present for your execution. Your death will comfort them because they will be able to see for their own eyes that you are no longer in the world.

In fact, your execution should be made public so that all who suffered, all who seek justice, can know that the state lawfully played its part in protecting us all.

After your death, you will receive ultimate punishment. For only God will have the final judgment on your soul. I find comfort knowing that your soul will be damned and mine will be made whole.

I wonder if you ever knew love... I wonder if there will be... I wonder... Will this letter... the one composed to you now... will it ever have my signature?

God, give me the strength to sign this letter. God, give me the strength... Give me the strength to write another... (crumple letter)



June 27, 2009

Dear Mr. Atkisson,

If you are reading this letter then it means you have taken my life. I am dead. You are alive.

You have received a fair trial and were found guilty. The state will inevitably choose an appropriate punishment for you; it is not mine to affirm or deny their decision. My faith lies in the system. I know those in power will do what is right.

I am but the dead – a voiceless victim of the past because you robbed me of my future. I am but the dead – a veiled memory of the past whose life will live on in the memories of my loved ones.

I want to write to them and tell them how much they are loved. I learned from them patience and kindness. I learned from them honesty and gratitude. I learned from them to accept whatever comes. I accept the fact that you are now alive. I am dead. There is nothing left to do. I have no voice.

I am powerless to your actions and to a system that will chart its course. Fate will decide what happens. It's not mine to say.

It is not my responsibility to do anything... It's not my responsibility to even be writing this letter. Why give any attention to the one who stripped my dignity? You don't even deserve to hear from me. Why bother? It's not like anything said here will matter anyway... (Crumple letter.)



June 27, 2009

Dear Mr. Atkisson,

If you are reading this letter then it means you have taken my life. I am dead. You are alive.

I may be dead but my life continues through the memories of my loved ones. My life continues through the legacy of these words. I am aware of my power. I am aware of my responsibility. I am aware that my words can determine your fate.

When thinking of your future, the writings of my spiritual guides come to mind. I hear my teacher Thich Nhat Hahn say, "I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life." I hear Gandhi saying, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." I hear Jesus saying to the crowd that is about to stone a woman, "let those without sin cast the first stone."

I am but one human life. I am a man who has made many mistakes; a man who has hurt many. I am not without sin. I have certainly been blinded by rage. Who is to say whether or not my life would have found me justified to kill? I suppose this letter puts me in such a situation.

I have the power to craft an advanced directive, condemning you to death. I have the power to make your death my dying wish. My loved ones have the power to seek revenge in the name of justice by sentencing you to death; but can true justice be achieved through violence?

Dr. King said, "Through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can't murder murder. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that..."

Where is the light in these dark days? Where is the light found in the belly of my family's grief? I imagine my loved ones experiencing excruciating pain, knowing that their Natie has been killed. Yet, their suffering must pale in comparison to the pain your loved ones must be feeling, knowing that you have killed.

I believe allowing you to live will be the most just punishment. Death is easy. Life, life is hard. My dying wish is that you live. You must come to live with yourself; you must live with the past; you must come to live with your sentence.

My hope is that the Prosecutor or District Attorney will not propose capital punishment as a result of my homicide. My hope is that you will receive a fair trial, that the judge and jury will look favorably on my words and pass a sentence in accordance to my wishes. If not, my hope is that the Governor will grant you clemency, and pardon you from death row.

In no way should my statement be read as if you should go unpunished. You should be punished. But how?

I wish for you to be immediately removed from society. I wish that you may have time alone to sit with your thoughts, aware of the power of your mind. As a Hindu prophet once said, your thoughts shape your words, which shape your actions, your habits, your character, your destiny.

I wish for you to have time with others to help process your thoughts, aware that your actions have shaped your destiny and mine. I wish for adequate resources be given to you to aid in your eventual rehabilitation. In that time, my hope is that you are given the responsibility to preserve life.

I want you to be sentenced to tend to a garden. I want you to name your plants after those in history who have sought to preserve life – give them a name, and teach others about the significance of the name. My hope is that you will do everything in your power to keep them alive. In time, those aiding in your rehabilitation may deem you ready to care for another being. When you're ready, my wish is that you be entrusted with caring for a dog. I want you to name him Nate. I want you to take care of your new animal companion. Treat him with dignity, just as you seek to preserve your own. Discipline him with care, just as you discipline yourself by practicing self-care. I believe in you.

You may have taken my life; you may have stripped me of my dignity; you may have harmed my loved-ones beyond imagination but know that the cycle of violence will not aid in their pain, nor will it bring me back to life. My life will only continue if you preserve the essence of my memory.

In lies your charge: to use your power to preserve my memory; to use your power to preserve your dignity; to use your power to preserve life.

I close my letter with some questions for you... what will you do with your new life? What purpose will come from these events? What vision will you craft for yourself?

Just as these questions are asked of you, one question remains for me. Will this letter receive my signature?

Just as this question is asked of me, one question remains for those who listen to these words... The question is not which letter will receive my signature, but which letter will you write?

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