



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Altars of Light

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Altars of Light, Pierre Joris

If the light is the soul
then soul is what's
all around me.

It is you,
it is around you too,
it is you.

The darkness is inside me,
the opaqueness of organs folded
upon organs--

to make light in the house of
the body--
thus to bring the
outside in,
the impossible job.

And the only place to become
the skin
the border, the inbetween, where
dark meets light, where I meets
you.

In the house of world the
many darknesses are surrounded
by light.

To see the one, we need
the other / it cuts both ways

light on light is blind
dark on dark is blind

light through dark is not

dark through light is movement
dark through light becomes,
is becoming,

to move through
light is becoming,

is all
we can know.

It has been a week of much darkness in our world. Even in sunny Southern California, as the sun sets earlier and earlier, the darkness feels as if it is creeping in. Our nation and world is experiencing a crushing amount of violence piling up, weighing heavy on our hearts. This morning, we come together to seek hope and understanding. We come to seek the light in the comfort of our kin.

While we gather today in this sanctuary, in the wake of horrific violence, the media is often the first place we turn. Of course, media plays on our need to understand what is happening, rushing in to shape our reaction with a combination of facts and speculation. Just as we were attempting to grapple with the global terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut and beyond, we heard the news of a terrible shooting at a Colorado Planned Parenthood after Thanksgiving. And then, this week, the news of the terrible attack in San Bernardino flooded our field of vision. In the case of Wednesday's shooting rampage, both its geographic proximity to us and the emerging context makes our reaction even more confusing and complex. With emotions heightened, conversations are fiercely raging in the media about the motives of this awful crime—workplace grievance or otherwise-- and the right way to respond, and what, if any, the connection to terrorism may be.

The term terrorism, used frequently by some pundits and politicians and ultra-cautiously by others, turns out to have a specific and narrow application calling for caution in its use. In a time magazine article out Friday entitled *This is What it takes for Mass Murder to be 'Terrorism'* by William Yeomans, the author uses the term as used by the FBI under the Patriot Act.

"Terrorism" encompasses "acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law" and "appear intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping."

As Yeomans writes, "the definition of terrorism for law enforcement purposes is clear: It turns on the intent of the perpetrator, who must seek to coerce civilians or change government policy through life threatening actions. Terrorists are driven by ideology, whether it is the anti-government radicalism the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, the anti-abortion Christian radicalism of serial bomber Eric Rudolph, the white supremacy of the Ku Klux Klan and other groups, or the distorted ideology of radicalized Muslims."

This definition of terrorism helps us to see clearly why Robert Dear, motivated by Christian anti-abortion ideology, would attack a Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood clinic to punish and intimidate people who hold or defend an opposite ideological viewpoint, women like

victim Jennifer Markovsky and Police Officer Garrett Swasey. Even if every moral fiber in our bodies rejects it as deplorable, we can somehow understand the origin of the motive of the violence. What this definition doesn't help us to comprehend is the nature of the terrorism linked to radicalized religion that we are witnessing globally, which does not discriminate against a particular political view but seems to wholly condemn a Western pluralistic way of life. When we hear that there may have been links to radicalization in the shooting rampage in San Bernardino, we wonder just how deep and wide the commitment to such a dangerous and deadly ideology could be, and how if at all our way of life is at risk.

Terrorism of any kind is insidious, it creeps into our consciousness, a poison that slowly whittles our sense of security and safety in the world. It inflames stereotypes and challenges even the most open religious liberals to question how religious ideology can be manipulated to commit such heinous violence.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is a British Rabbi, philosopher and scholar of Judaism who served as the Chief Rabbi for the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth until 2013. His most recent book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* is an urgently needed call to consciousness for people of all faiths struggling with the visible increase of religious extremism in our culture. You may have explored Rabbi Sacks' book on your own, or heard his work shared often in conversation with David Brooks in his op-ed writer for the New York Times or commentary for NPR.

For the past ten years, a barrage of data and scholarship has led many of us to draw the conclusion that organized religion has been on the decline, with the secularization of Western society leading the way. Organizations like the Pew forum on Religious and Public Life have reported on the increase in the "nones," people of no religious affiliation, particularly amongst millennials. *Philosophers and authors have touted the "new atheism" and the proliferation of humanist beliefs, distilling what was best about religious community without the dogma or rhetoric. Churches and synagogues have wrung their hands about declining attendance in the pews, selling their buildings and changing their focus.* In this commonly accepted view, as the future progresses, the particularities of pluralistic religious life become more and more distanced from the public sphere. Religious life becomes even more personal and privatized, practiced with little intrusion into the public sphere. Acts of religiously motivated terrorism will continue to be characterized as aberrations and outliers, a perverse and sociopathic metastasizing of extreme religious beliefs coerced into violence by a combination of social and economic circumstances inflamed by a destructive political ideology. People who commit these crimes will be seen as distant from ordinary religious people and secular society.

In his book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* Rabbi Sacks disagrees with this trend argues the opposite—he argues that religion, not secularization is on the rise. Secular society, he argues, can provide the kind of technology, social and medical services to solve our problems and provide for the flourishing of our lives in ways that make religion seem no longer needed or relevant. But people more than ever long to make meaning and find belonging, especially in the wake of an increasingly confusing and chaotic world. "Religion has

returned because it is hard to live without meaning.” Beyond meaning, religion provides a sense of identity that binds individuals together in a group for a particular purpose around a set of beliefs and practices. Religious affiliation, sometimes connected to family of origin, sometimes not, provides a sense of kinship within group with political, social and spiritual norms.

Religious extremism corrupts the positive sense of belonging that religion provides to an “us” versus them, a distorted tribalism that dehumanizes the other, dissolving empathy for those outside of the group to a point where the other must be punished and destroyed. While Scriptures are full of messages about hospitality and treatment of the “the other,” the stranger and the outsider, this refusal to see the other as fully human is most often the origin of religious conflict and violence, terrorist or otherwise. In the radicalized faith, dissonance between the religious world that the individual inhabits and the outside world is so heightened that it creates an unbearable hostility only eased through violence, a loyalty to a distorted and highly politicized radical ideology.

Rabbi Sacks calls this “altruistic evil,” an evil in which formerly “ordinary” religious people carry out terrible acts of violence and destruction in the name of a “higher good.” He writes, “Too often, in the history of religion, people have killed in the name of the God of life, waged war in the name of the God of peace, hated in the name of the God of love and practiced cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.”

In Sack’s view, religious people, liberal and conservative, need to confront the violence of radicalized religious behavior as a repugnant and intolerable manipulation of religious life—an aberration separate from our human religious family like the crazy uncle, but endemic to it.

I’ve thought a lot about how the media has interviewed family and community members of the married couple who committed the heinous crime, all of whom have decried the awful attacks. As of yet, there seems to be little indication of the couples’ active radicalization. And yet, the couple had a family of their own and were part of a community. Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik left their 6 month old baby with their grandmother to travel to a holiday party at the Inland Regional Center and opened fire, killing fourteen people and wounding dozens. Could anyone in their community have helped them examine how traditional religion has been distorted into religious terrorism, and to bring them into a different understanding? Would anything beyond stricter gun control laws prohibiting the purchase of weapons have made a difference? We can’t know for sure. But every extremist, regardless of their distorted religious beliefs, has at one point had people close to them whose love, care and peaceful interpretation of religion might have the potential to be persuasive. Could those people have seen the signs and signals that the person may have been isolated and at risk for radicalization?

As religious liberals, we may not immediately understand the role we might play in confronting extremism. We often feel ourselves further distanced from religious fundamentalisms, especially those coupled with violence, sometimes feeling targeted ourselves for our commonly held beliefs on controversial political issues and our insistence on a religion

of inclusion. As a part of the religious landscape of pluralism in our world, our liberal religious views set us apart and are decidedly not for everyone.

But controversial stances on political issues aside, our religious views are in alignment with the fundamental principles of human rights – inalienable and universal. We believe all religious people must stand for the basic human rights of other religious people to practice their faith and to live in a peaceful world. We uniquely view our religion as our link to understanding the larger human family, religious and secular, not the boundary which separates us. We then have the responsibility to join with other people of faith to better understand and confront the despicable manipulation of religion into terrorism. As people of faith deeply invested in a peaceful world in which all can flourish, we must do everything in our power to enact the political and spiritual conditions to end mass shootings. The crisis in our world is not only that the barriers to legally obtaining assault weapons are low, but that people consistently exploit the laws to willfully kill other people and promote the culture of fear and intimidation we are living in today.

We must pray, and we must act. This week, we saw the media erect a wall between the two. On one side, Republicans calling for prayers for the families and the victims. On the other side, Democrats calling for sensible gun control action. Writer for the Atlantic, Emma Green, coined the term “prayer shaming.” She said: “There’s a clear claim being made here, and one with an edge: Democrats care about doing something and taking action while Republicans waste time offering meaningless prayers. These two reactions, policy-making and praying, are portrayed as mutually exclusive, coming from totally contrasting worldviews.”

If we dig a little bit deeper, the strong reaction reveals the need for a cogent and rational response to tragedy in the midst of a confusing swirl of grief, anger, frustration and fear. Brie Loskota is the managing director at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC. In an interview with KPCC on “Why we pray after mass shootings,” Loskota responded: “We turn to religion in times of tragedy because it provides four essential things: community, rituals of hope, moments of personal transcendence and deeper purpose. Prayer is a ritualized way in which people are able to bring those four elements of religion together and really shape meaning and create community when things feel out of control.”

When tragedy strikes as it did this week in San Bernardino, prayer is often the first response for most Americans. The Pew Research Center’s 2014 survey has reported that 55% of Americans pray daily. Of all Americans who say they don’t believe in God—not all call themselves “atheists”—20% say they pray daily, 11% pray weekly and 7% monthly. These studies tell us that belief in God or religious affiliation is not a pre-requisite for prayer. Prayer is a human response to living in a difficult and challenging world.

Unitarian Universalists are known to have hang-ups about this word, but if we can reframe prayer, it becomes less important what words we use, but the feeling our prayer invokes within us—and how they embolden us to live differently because we have prayed. To whom we address our prayers becomes irrelevant. Attuning our hearts to the urgency of our feelings

and our world's great pain is more important than our carefully chosen words. To echo Mahatma Gandhi: "It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart."

Terrorism's intent is to turn our hearts to stone, rigid, inflexible, and blaming. It makes us afraid to be free to move and enjoy the world. It coerces our better nature, twisting our trust for the world into suspicion. It entices us to shut off to those whom we perceive as different and dangerous, closing the ranks on our own groups, as liberal as they are. Prayer helps us keep our hearts open to that love in the face of so much fear is a daunting spiritual task. It pushes us to love beyond the barriers of our religious affiliation, developing empathy for the other as a part of our larger human family, one who, just like us, is seeking love, belonging and meaning in their lives? Can our prayers express our love the world with all of its beauty and its brokenness, refusing to acquiesce our sense of freedom and belonging even when our security feels shattered?

The poet Pierre Joris writes:

In the house of world the
many darkneses are surrounded
by light.

To see the one, we need
the other / it cuts both ways

What Unitarian Universalism has to offer is an unshakable love unbound from only our particular sect group. The promise of our faith is a love for humankind that is vast and unconditional. Our congregations must be altars of light in dark times, persistently blessing this broken world with our open doors and open hearts. We see the many darkneses of the world, the potential for faith to be that light. We must pray, and we must act, living into the promise of our faith. The soul of the world is at stake.