

CELEBRATING LAMMAS IN TROUBLING TIMES

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – June 22, 2008

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OPENING WORDS: CASTING THE SACRED CIRCLE

It is traditional in Earth-centered services to pay respect to the four directions and their respective elements, invoking the spirits of each to join us in setting aside this circle of worship as sacred.

East: Spirit of East, spirit of air, be with us this morning. Help us to greet this new day with courage and grace. Bless our circle with your presence.

South: Spirit of South, spirit of fire, be with us this morning. Help us to have the energy to meet what faces us. Bless our circle with your warmth.

West: Spirit of West, spirit of water, be with us this morning. Help us to ebb and flow with the tides of life. Bless our circle with your healing.

North: Spirit of North, spirit of earth, be with us this morning. Help us to ground ourselves in reality. Bless our circle with your creativity.

Center: In the center of this sacred circle, we light our chalice, symbol of our faith and of the light truth and goodness we hope it brings us on this day. I invite you to rise in body or spirit and join in the unison words of chalice lighting and affirmation.

Unison chalice lighting words: May the light of this flame illuminate our lives. May it guide us in our spiritual journeys, and inspire us to heal misunderstandings, strengthen love and work for justice and peace.

Unison Affirmation: Love is the doctrine of this fellowship, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer. To dwell together in peace, to seek truth in love, to serve humanity in fellowship to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony, thus do we covenant with one other.

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Lammas is the holiday celebrated by the ancient peoples of Northern Europe at the time of the first wheat harvest. As the days begin to shorten after the summer solstice, the grain ripens and the harvest begins.

Celtic myth tells us that this is the wake of the Sun King, Lugh, whose life was given so that we might live (<http://www.schooloftheseasons.com/lammas.html>): sun becomes wheat, wheat becomes food, food sustains life. The life of the Sun King is baked into every loaf of bread, and thus the sharing of bread becomes a blessing from the spirit.

In the modern neo-pagan traditions, the harvest festival of Lammas has added layers of meaning. Harvest time is a season's end, and thus becomes a perfect time for goodbyes. On Lammas, we reflect upon those things in our life that we must let go of—the metaphorical seeds that were not planted, the things that we regret. As we say goodbye to the summer sun, we let these things go.

Harvest time is also a time of preparation for the future amidst great abundance. Food that was grown during the warmth of summer must be stored properly to provide nourishment for the entire year. And thus, on Lammas, we also reflect upon those things we have harvested in the past year—the things that are new and good and abundant in our lives. And we think about how we are going to preserve those things as we move forward into the future.

Lammas is celebrated each year on or about the first of August. I had planned an unabashedly joyous celebration of Lammas for this Sunday some months ago when I first helped make the summer worship schedule.

Little did I know that the events of the week would change the tone of this service somewhat dramatically, forcing me to understand that Lammas is a holiday of balance—of letting go as much as drawing in, of the waning summer sun as much as of the abundant harvest. It is, after all, a wake for the Sun King as much as it is a celebration of the bounty of our Earth.

This past week has been a hard one for many people. Last week's shooting in the sanctuary of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church left the entire city of Knoxville shaken, two congregations mourning, and our entire religious movement silent in sympathy.

As some of you know, I have a number of friends in that congregation, some of whom I met through the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute, known as SUUSI, the family camp I attended in Virginia last week, and from which I was returning when I heard the news from Knoxville.

It was natural for me to think of those friends when I heard the news. Driving home from Virginia, I received a text message from my very good friend Elandria letting me know that she and her parents were safe. I pulled over to the next rest stop and wept.

Those of you who are on the Fellowship's email list, though, might have read that the story isn't that simple for me, either.

The gunman who killed two and wounded seven in Knoxville last week chose the Unitarian Universalist congregation specifically because that congregation has been a beacon of inclusivity, tolerance and justice in its community for nearly sixty years. The congregation had been a pioneer congregation insisting on integration in days when such a move was controversial at best. Throughout the years, it has taken bold stances on women's rights and the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people as well.

The gunman chose the church he did on purpose.

More devastatingly, though, for me, the gunman is someone I once knew. When I knew Jim David Adkisson, some ten years ago, his friends called him Jabo. We served together on the SUUSI Teen Staff. He was conservative, but always respectful and glad to engage in meaningful discussions. He played the guitar, and, along with his now ex-wife Liza, he sang most beautiful version of Guy Clark's "I Don't Love You Much, Do I?"

More importantly, though, he was sober in those days. A few years later, times got tough, he fell off the wagon, and became abusive and violent. When Liza divorced him, I thought I'd never hear from him again. How wrong I was.

The Jabo I knew was not the Jim David Adkisson who opened fire in a worship service, brainwashed by hatemongers to be mad at liberal-thinking people for troubles that likely were more due to severe mental illness and unchecked self-medication with alcohol.

I've struggled with this all week, to be honest with you. It's been something of an emotional rollercoaster. I've been angry at a society that could let Jabo fall through the cracks and sad that he chose violence as a way to be noticed. I've been filled with grief for people I did not know and worried that the causes of inclusion, diversity, and justice have been dealt a setback by one angry, misguided man.

Waverly Fitzgerald writes at the website "School of the Seasons" that there are four aspects to Lammas: letting go of regrets, saying our farewells, celebrating the harvest, and preserving things for the future. Regrets, farewells, harvest and preserves. (<http://www.schooloftheseasons.com/lammas.html>)

This Lammas, it is clear what I'm leaving behind. I'm letting go of regret that more could not be done to save Jabo before so many lives were lost and hurt. I'm letting go of the anger and grief and sadness and fear of the past week. I'm saying farewell to two people I didn't know whose lives were ended too soon, and to one man I did know whose life could have been so, so different.

But what is it that I'm harvesting and preserving this Lammas? The answer to that question lies also in Knoxville.

This morning, at least two former ministers of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church came back to the church to participate in the re-dedication of its sanctuary—the ritual cleansing of a holy place marred by violence.

The service is likely still going on as I speak. In worshipping together in this way, the members and friends of that congregation are seeking to preserve what is at the core of their community—love and peace—even amidst the grief, the sadness, the anger, and the fear that they must feel in that space, even as they try their hardest to let those things go.

This Lammas, I am harvesting love. I am harvesting the care and compassion of many friends and colleagues. I am harvesting pride in a religious movement with a Trauma Response Ministry and professional staff that responded to the tragedy in Knoxville while it was still unfolding. I am harvesting reconnections with old friends made new again by my return to SUUSI last week.

I am preserving my dedication to creating an undivided human family—one in which all people have inherent worth and dignity, in which all people are treated with respect and love and justice.

This Lammas, what are you letting go of? What are you saying farewell to? What things in your life need to be a part of the past, left to the turning of the Earth as pages of history?

What are you harvesting? And what are you preserving? What is in the abundance that surrounds you? What are you keeping for the future? What carefully-tended fruit has ripened in your soul that calls out for protection against the troubling forces of our times?

This Lammas, I pray that you, too, harvest love. I pray that you harvest peace. And I hope that together, we can preserve our faith in the humanity, our dedication to creating a better world, and the nurture we find in our connections with one another. Blessed be.

CLOSING WORDS: OPENING THE SACRED CIRCLE

As we extinguish each of our five flames, we invite the congregation to respond in unison with the traditional words of parting here.

East: Spirit of East, we thank you for your presence today. As you go, we ask for your blessings of newness.

Congregational response: Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.

South: Spirit of South, we thank you for your presence today. As you go, we ask for your blessings of strength.

Congregational response: Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.

West: Spirit of West, we thank you for your presence today. As you go, we ask for your blessings of stillness.

Congregational response: Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.

North: Spirit of North, we thank you for your presence today. As you go, we ask for your blessings of wisdom.

Congregational response: Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.

Center: Together, we extinguish our chalice at the center.

Congregational response: Carry the flame of peace and love until we meet again.

Our circle is open, yet unbroken. May we all go in peace.