

Worship in the Key of Disaster

When a gun gets loose on a Virginia campus, or a high school rampage occurs in Colorado, when a building blows up in Oklahoma City or a plane hits a tower in Manhattan, people follow their horror and disbelief with liturgy and love.

I'll never forget the little shrines of stuffed animals in Manhattan or Oklahoma City, the three crosses erected on the hills outside of Columbine High School, which were later taken down by students who "didn't believe" any more. These street liturgies are the reflex ritualizing which comes when things that can't be explained happen. Ritual attempts to explain what can't be explained.

The cell phone has changed our approach to disaster (we rush to phone) but not our approach to worship. We still want face to face contact after disaster strikes. What follows here is a small guide to good worship when disaster strikes. The first part is for the professional, the second for the participant.

1. First of all, act quickly. Don't wait, act. The congregations in Virginia acted swiftly to gather people together. Mazel Tov to them. Don't worry about the quality of the service or music: it will pour out. People want religious leadership at times like these.
2. Create Symbols. The white ribbon that the Bronfman Center at NYU is promoting is instructive. People want to say we connect. We object to what happened. The Bronfman Center is having a companion event at 2 today in NYC. They also sent delegations of students to Virginia. Again Mazel Tov.
3. Involve diverse constituencies. This (in my view) is not the time to invoke the name of Jesus so much as the name of the God beyond God. Don't alienate people who may never have wanted religious connection before!
4. Sing. Help people to cry. Especially help people who have been victims of previous violence. You know who they are. Invite them especially.
5. Follow up on anniversaries. Put on your calendar the one year anniversary and have some other kind of remembrance.
6. Don't expect the relatives of the victims to speak or be able to speak. Invite them and let them be surrounded by the clumsy love of the service.
7. Give people THINGS TO DO, even if it is distributing leaflets or phoning people or cleaning up the room where the remembrance will be held.
8. Resist talking about the violent perpetrator. Do not indulge the hatred you oppose. The time will come for anger. Leave revenge at that.

These instructions go to religious professionals as we go beyond street liturgy in to human gatherings with awesome spiritual content. For those who are not professionals, the point is to participate. Show up some place. Act like you care. Isolation is our biggest enemy when terrible things happen.

My own 9 – 11 day in Miami was to find my daughter and be the first parent to take a child home from school. I then fed my animals, got money out of the bank, packed food and went to the church. I was then Senior Minister of the Coral Gables Congregational Church in Miami. I

realized my process was strangely, almost absurdly practical. I got my daughter, age 16, to start calling the youth group on their cell phones. We got almost all the youth group to the church. Then we called the whole congregation, using all the cells and phone lines. We called 900 people that day to see if they were ok. By 4 p.m. we had put out a press release that we were having worship that night at 7 --- and over a thousand people came. The best thing that happened in that worship was that we invited a Moslem woman, a Pakistani-American doctor at the local hospital, to speak. She was brilliant and received a standing ovation. We worshipped and wept and put a finger in the dike of anti-Moslem hatred. We liturgized love in the face of hate.

As we move into the aftermath of yet another violent disaster, we can imagine a range of responses. They will be a collage of the revenge and awe, fragility and the concomitant preciousness of daily life, fear and insecurity, all packaged in as practical (and absurd) a way as removing our shoes at the airport. This nearly absurd but very holy experience is what ritual and liturgy are all about: they bring together our longings for love and our opposition to hate and violence. They matter more than we can ever know because they have the last word. They fill up the space where hate has tried to come with its opposite. They prevail.

The Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper is Senior Minister of the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York City, since 2005.