

I ran to hug my son as he walked through the airport security gates. He smiled, looking down at me and the floor in the way that only 16 year olds can do. Jacob had just returned from a trip to New Orleans with the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice. His sister and I had come to pick him up from Bradley International Airport. It was late, almost 11pm on a Sunday evening.

He didn't say much as we walked together through the terminal, though the grin on his face told me that he was glad to be home. I commented on the chalice tee shirt that he was wearing. "They gave it to us." He said, not taking my conversational bait.

Standing waiting for his baggage, I asked about the blue yarn tied around his wrist. He shrugged, "I don't know Mom".

I reminded myself what the coordinators of the trip had told us parents..."Try not to ask too many questions -- let the trip settle with the kids. They'll talk about it with you when they're ready."

So I didn't push. Okay, he's wearing a chalice tee shirt and blue yarn around his wrist. Seemed like good signs to me.

Therefore Jacob's question in the car a few minutes later took me by surprise.

"Aren't you going to ask me any more questions about my trip?" He asked.

I smiled as I turned to look at my son in the back seat.

"Sure." I said.

"Tell us something that you will *always* remember about your trip?"

"Well, the service this morning was hijacked by a bunch of angry people."

"*What?*" My son's words were not fully computing in my brain. Was he joking? Exaggerating?

"Yeah." He continued. "We were sitting there during a moment of silence when all of a sudden, these people stood up and started shouting. Honestly Mom, they seemed kind of crazy. They were saying that *ours* is not a *real* religion, and that we need to repent. They kept telling us that there was still time to be saved."

I realized that he wasn't joking, or exaggerating. I was shocked, scared and in a strange way, proud, all at the same time. Here it was. Our Unitarian Universalist faith, coming to life.

Time stood still. I was reviewing my kit of parenting skills, searching for the best way to respond.

"You are kidding me!?"

No, that would totally shut him down.

"How could this have happened to you!?"

No.

or

"Yes! You're getting a real time example of putting

our liberal religious values into action."

No, that would drop like a bomb shell.

I landed on trying to be as non-anxious as possible. "Tell me more. What happened honey?"

Jacob went on to share that he and the other members of his group were in the closing worship service of their nine day adventure. They were fourteen teenagers from across the United States who had come together for a social justice trip.

The day of this "hijacked service" was the last day of their trip.

July 20, 2014. They were worshipping at First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans. Rev. De Vandiver a UU community minister was officiating.

The youth had just been commissioned as leaders in our liberal religious faith. The congregation was observing a moment of silence in honor of a long time member who had recently died. When members of Operation Save America stood up and began shouting obscenities.

They had infiltrated the service and spread themselves amongst the people. As they were shouting, more members of their group came into the church from the streets carrying large poster boards. They proceeded to push pictures of aborted fetuses into people's faces, while yelling their opinions on religion and reproductive justice.

"What did you do?" I asked my son.

"We went to the edge of sanctuary, held hands and started singing. You know, our hymns."

"Which ones?" I asked, the reality of what he was telling me still just starting to sink in.

"I don't know Mom. The ones we always sing."

"How did you feel?" I queried.

"Scared." He answered.

"Of course you did." I replied. Of course he did.

Jacob went on to describe how the police and the "head guy" from Planned Parenthood came. He shared that they were really helpful and talked with the youth about what happened. "They were cool. They really cared." He told me.

Operation Save America, one of the most violent pro-life groups in our country, had descended upon this New Orleans neighborhood earlier that week. They had assembled and stalked outside of doctor's homes. Staged a funeral in the park complete with a rigged casket and a dead fetus. They targeted the First Unitarian Church that Sunday morning because the dedication for a new Planned Parenthood clinic had recently taken place in the church's sanctuary. There is footage of them in the church, from the video cameras that they wore on their heads, shouting at the people gathered for worship. "This is not a true religion" "Save your souls" "Baby killers" and the like.

In preparation for this sermon, I went to the Operation Save America website. Here is an excerpt from their blog dated November, 3rd. The post had to do with a similar trip they had more recently taken to Memphis. *"First stop was Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood is one of two death camps remaining*

defiling Memphis with the shedding of innocent blood. The other death camp is called "Choices." (A Memphis Center for Reproductive Health). Though Planned Parenthood was open, no babies died that day. It is amazing what happens when the church shows up. God shows off."

These were the people who descended on First Unitarian Church New Orleans, Sunday, July 20th 2014.

My son Jacob continued to wear his blue yarn bracelet for days after he returned. I'm not exactly really sure when it came off. But you can imagine how I felt reading the FaceBook post to the kids from the minister who was leading that service. Rev. De Vandiver or as they called her, "Momma De". She wrote this one month after they had returned from their trip:

"The threads of my yarn bracelet have become frayed...but the love and respect that I have for each of you never will. Thank you, beloveds, for living with courage and compassion into the mystery of this world. Thank you for nine days of your precious summer days. Thank you for choosing to show up fully with your whole and holy selves. Thank you for the love and grace you offered each other and everyone you encountered on your journey."

Veterans Day, observers and safety task force policies, my son worshipping in a UU congregation 1,400 miles away from me when it is violated by intruders, and how that congregation responded – calmly, rooted in our faith and with dignity. All ministries of care. It is our Unitarian Universalist faith coming alive in the world. It gives me hope.

I am indebted to and inspired by the work of our Safety Task Force. They spent hundreds of hours and many meetings putting together the best safety policies possible. The policies and procedures address issues of medical, fire, and disruptive persons. We are held in greater care because of them. These may not be issues that we event want to imagine, but it is endlessly better that we are prepared for them if they do happen.

To the observers who have stepped forward and volunteered. Thank you. May your ministry of care bring you even closer to this sacred community, and may your days of observance be peaceful and whole. Shaune Martin said at the observers training a few Saturday's ago; "All Souls is a very special place, and it calls to us to help keep it that way." I believe that this work will become part of

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the fabric of our community and will support us as we advance toward our vision where we act boldly, compassionately, and publicly for justice.

Each one of us bring our faith alive, every day. Sometimes it is dramatic, like the story that I just told, but most often it is more ordinary - in the day to day. How we teach our children that all of life is valuable, when we greet no one as a stranger, and everyone as human kin.

That's ministry of care. It will not always be comfortable and it shouldn't be. Especially when we venture beyond our circle of liberal acquaintances and friends. As Unitarian Universalists we are called to rise above and go beyond rageful, hurtful, attitudes and actions that only perpetuate the violence that pervades our Earth.

Instead, we live out our convictions and principles by leading with love. Love that is strong and life affirming. Love that is big enough to hold and address the issues of our times. Love that illuminates fear and hatred. Love in the big things and the little things. Love that makes our faith come alive, one day at a time.

That is ministry of care, and that is what our world desperately needs.

Amen and Blessed Be.