

## Swept Away

Jamaica Plain, January 9, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

The week after Christmas, I had to take our new kitten in for a veterinarian appointment; my wife Ellen and our daughters were out of town. Half an hour before the scheduled time, I discovered that I couldn't find the cat. I realized that the last time I had seen her had been before I had left that morning for church, my hands filled with many things. Perhaps the stay inside cat had snuck out the door somehow? I found suspicious prints in the snow, and called around for the cat outside throughout the neighborhood. Then I searched the house from top to bottom and back again. Still no cat - how could I lose the kitty on my watch? Would we find her? Would she survive? I looked some more, with no luck. Finally, long after I had cancelled the appointment, I was working at the kitchen table when, to my great relief, I heard the sound of cat food being eaten. I thought, if I felt this way about losing my cat, imagine the incredible pain, anxiety, and terror of those who had lost loved ones to the tsunami in southeast Asia.

The fate of thousands of people who were swept away by the ocean waters is beyond our imagining, people who were Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, some Western Christians and Jews, and those of no particular faith, rich, middle class, and poor, young and old. Recently a church leader used the term "Biblical" to describe the disaster. Certainly waters play an important role in the Biblical tradition: the Red Sea waters that provide a passage to freedom for the people of Israel, the waters that overwhelm Jonah when he resists his call from God, the waters of creation in the mythic beginning, and the waters of destruction in the great flood. In the Bible, water creates and destroys. The waters of the tsunami caused great death and destruction, so that now millions of people need safe drinking water for life.

In writing on the tragedy, author James Carroll uses the Biblical figure of Job, who insisted on an answer from God as to the meaning of his suffering. In seeking the meaning of what he calls "unearned suffering," Carroll focuses on how we can help

those hurting right now. Thankfully, people around the world do want to help - over 4 billion dollars has been pledged in aid and it is estimated that more than 1/3 of Americans have already given to relief efforts.

People in our country have been touched by the disaster in an extraordinary way. Among possible reasons for this empathy - many were on vacation breaks and read and saw news reports, during the good will brotherhood/sisterhood season of Christmas/Hanukkah/Kwanzaa. Especially disturbing was the loss of so many children, some estimates say up to one third of the dead. The tsunami also invokes deep-seated fears of sudden catastrophe. Conversely, our attention is not drawn to the children of Iraq and the thousands of children around the world who die daily from preventable illnesses like diarrhea, caused by killer impure water.

Many in our country can identify with those taking a winter vacation in a "tropical paradise," enjoying a simple life where it's warm and beautiful, being a Henry David Thoreau without the Concord winter. While the latest tsunami death toll is 150,000 people and over 5 million people are at risk, our attention is particularly drawn to the fact that over 2,000 of our fellow citizens are still missing. We hope and pray for their safety, as we do for those missing of all countries. Still, I recognize in myself the tendency to care more about our team. Recently, the Boston Globe ran a series of articles on each of the 42 Massachusetts soldiers killed in Iraq. I read especially carefully the piece on Corporal Travis Desiato, who was buried out of the Bedford Unitarian Universalist Church. Right or wrong, having our people involved in the tragedy does help us to care.

The haunting question for many after the tsunami horror is "Why?" One can answer with explanations of tectonic plates and earthquakes and inadequate early warning systems, but that still begs the question "Why?" In this case, unlike say, the melting of the polar ice cap, our behaviors don't seem to be involved. None of our standing political agendas have a connection - for the Right, no, gay marriage did not cause the disaster, for the Left, neither did President Bush.

Our "Why?" comes down to a theistic or God question, a question of what is termed by theologians "theodicy," a term from two Greek words meaning "God" and "justice." How can a loving and just God allow injustice? I recently spent several hours in line at a West Roxbury funeral home to pay my respects to Charlie Hauck. He was universally regarded as a "good man," a person who worked with inner city youth, who died of cancer at the age of 57. If it seems an injustice when one good person dies, what about when thousands are killed in a swift and terrifying way?

Some of the ways religious thinkers have dealt with the question of "Why?" regarding God's justice include: the idea that God punishes wrongdoers (God as sadist); God suffers with humans and our suffering is transformative, if not in this life, then in another realm; God created a natural system that involves certain physical laws, and tectonic plates collide and randomly cause earthquakes, in other words, God is not omnipotent; there is no God and in the natural order of things, "Stuff Happens;" the philosopher Leibnitz argued that we humans can't see God's "Big Picture," as a huge Monet canvas of water lilies might look ugly from a distance of, say, three inches, likewise, perhaps the disaster will in the "Big Picture" draw warring religious groups together, such as the Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka.

My teacher Dorothee Soelle, in her book entitled *Suffering*, argued, echoing James Carroll's thought, that people who have suffered or seen suffering may then work to alleviate mindless suffering. On that note, I have information on how people can support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's relief work related to the tsunami. Under the leadership of our Director of Religious Education, Emily Lichtenstein, our kids are creating a collage of photographs on ways people are helping in the wake of the disaster, and some of the classes are making potato print cards and others selling food after church on the 23rd to raise money for relief efforts.

Let us remember the tsunami relief efforts, but not forget other pressing justice issues. At this time it is essential that we ask, "How can we help?" However, we also need to continue struggling with Job's question of "Why?" the question of God and justice. The

Universalist hope was that no one would be ultimately lost and separated from God. The hope that somehow in the end there is meaning, justice, and God.