



## **Boston: Sweat, Blood and Tears**

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Last Sunday, I preached on a Matisyahu song called “One Day,” a hopeful, prayerful tune that we might evolve beyond violence and bloodshed. There’s a line in that song about the mourning of “the souls of the innocent,” seeing their lives on “the blood-drenched pavement.”

Then, who might have ever thought we would see something I’m going to show you? I’ll give you a choice to avert your eyes or not. Go ahead and show it. *[shows photo]* Now normally after a marathon it’s a mess, but there’s normally not blood. “The blood-drenched pavement.”

After this brutal, dramatic, difficult week, I think it’s a very important question to ask ourselves: What do we trust to keep ourselves kind, to keep ourselves alive and aware and awake? And what do we trust to keep ourselves most humane, not shutting down our hearts? This is inherently a spiritual question, and not a question about faith that deals in any kinds of abstract or esoteric nature. There are some folks I’ve heard say, “Faith is believing 20 impossible things before breakfast.” That is not what faith is really about. It’s very often fantasy.

I think the true meaning of faith is hit right at the heart of what we mean by spiritual experience, with the Hindu word for faith – *straddha*. It’s translated as “what we set our hearts upon.” That’s a matter of trust, what we set our hearts upon. That is a critical question at the end of this week. I think one of the ways we can start to really engage that question meaningfully, authentically for us, is to keep it at an elemental level. Not an esoteric level, not looking for huge answers, but to keep it at the basic level.

That’s why I have found this past week strength and solace (literally and symbolically) in sweat, in blood and in tears. To bring us back to what is most precious about our common humanity, to remain faithful to the sweat, yes, of those runners and of the helpers, and of the people who rushed in. To remain faithful to the innocent bloodshed, and to remain faithful to the tears that many of us cried.

If we can remain faithful to these things, we will also find that we remain faithful and connected to something else as well, which is our capacity to keep our hearts open when we might want to shut down and close off and not pay attention to our lives any longer. To choose opening rather than closing.

This is the story that the Buddhist nun Pema Chodron tells. It's a wonderful story, teaching a word, *bodhicitta*, which translates as a whole host of things – awaken, mind, heart, open heart. She said she got her first lesson at this when she was six years old. She was walking down a dusty road where she lived, kind of kicking the dirt because life wasn't going her way and she was unhappy. An old lady saw her from her porch and said, "Little girl, don't let the world go hardening your heart."

That is an important lesson after a week like this week. Let's not let the world go hardening our hearts out of anger. Out of vengeance. Out of fear. Out of uncertainty. I felt all those other things, but I also felt this this week: Just a little bit of numbness. Maybe on the heels of Sandy Hook and in the midst of so many other reports of bombings and destruction, natural disasters, human disasters... Emotional responses are emotional responses. Bringing judgment to our emotional responses I don't think particularly helps us, because if we know we're numbing out or we know we're getting overwhelmed by difficult emotion, we can still choose to pay attention to what's going on.

Yes, I understand right now. I've had it myself, too. I live in a media household. Sometimes we need to disconnect. Sometimes we need to walk away. But to disconnect without choosing distance is an important thing. Because if we choose too much distance, what we're doing is ignoring the state of our broken and hurting world. This distance becomes denial, which is a form of closing our hearts and hardening our hearts. So wherever we are right now emotionally, it is what it is. But indifference is a choice, and caring is a choice. And to choose awareness and to choose connection and to keep faith with sweat and blood and tears is to remember what is most precious about us in our common humanity and what will link us back to our lives.

If we can remember these things, we will also recall that we have this deep intimacy with life that can never be taken away. We are all a part of each other and everyone is a part of us. We all exist at any moment of our lives in these concentric circles of belonging, from the smallest circle to the circle beyond that to the circle beyond that to the circle beyond that.

In Boston this week, of course, that closest circle is comprised of those who are dead and injured and those who love them. I think of the next circle closest contains my friend Peter. After we left New Haven in 1994, he has called Boston his home for the last two decades. He is a marathoner. He didn't run the Boston Marathon this time, but has run it multiple times in the past. And he is a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, so the minute the news broke, he has been in the heart of what that city is experiencing.

A concentric circle beyond that, I think, includes those who have a meaningful connection to this part of the world. My mom went to college in Boston. I grew up summers on Cape Cod, spending more time in Boston than I did in my native New York City. Shhh, don't tell anyone this, but I like Fenway Park more than I like the new Yankee Stadium. Especially since they've gotten rid of the rats and they've replaced

the troughs that men used to go to the bathroom in with actual urinals. If you remember old Fenway Park, it was like that. If you got pushed along at the end of the line, well, it got a little messy.

As that circle of belonging extends outward to some of us, we might remember and take the heart to this event: Our own 5K here at Wellsprings, that fun event. Yes, a 5K isn't a distance endurance race like a marathon, but it is an opportunity for so many of us to test ourselves.

I know there are people in this congregation who are signed up to run next month, the Broad Street Run, and are feeling just a little bit more scared right now that maybe they're putting themselves in jeopardy. That's a concentric circle of belonging, and ties us back to the sweat and the blood and the tears, and there's another circle here as well, too. We sit in a Unitarian Universalist congregation and it's Boston, that city, that is most identified with a Unitarian part of our heritage.

What I heard and saw on Facebook this week were so many reports from people I know and care about in Boston, who found themselves in lockdown, sometimes at our denominational headquarters, 25 Beacon Street, right off the Boston Common.

And then there is that most humane circle of belonging, the most ethically relevant, the most spiritually relevant circle of belonging and ties us back to sweat and blood and tears. It is simply our compassion, our basic human compassion and choice to open our hearts when the world scares us or makes us want to run away. Because eventually, if we pull back far enough, we see the only circle there is, the only circle that counts, and ultimately includes all of us. Each of us rests upon and in this common Earth.

If you saw the pictures from the blast zone right near the finish line of the marathon, you might have seen something else. It's something that was almost hard to pay attention to because of all the injured and the smoke. But you may have seen near the finish line flags from all the different nations representing the participants in this race. We recognize there is no American or foreign sweat; there's just sweat. We recognize that there is no white, brown, black, yellow, red blood or many of the different shadings of our skin. There is just blood. And we know that there are no Jewish, no Christian, no Muslim, no Hindu, no Buddhist tears. There are just tears.

See our universalism, our commitment to believe in a love that is offered to, and finally invites us all. A universalism is not comprehended by a creed. A universalism is absorbed by our connections, by the connections that already are, already are here. When I say absorbed, I mean absorbed through the heart, absorbed, tasted, touched, smelled. That is the universalism not of creed, but the universalism that exists simply because we are alive.

I love the way that Jesus instituted what we now call communion. In the most intimate ways he said to his friends, perhaps knowing that his life was going to be threatened

and coming to an end, “There’s no doctrine to recite. There’s no lines to memorize.” He said, “Simply do these basic elements – wine and bread. Do this in memory of me.” Sweat, blood and tears. “Do this in memory of me.” Open the heart in memory of him.

I think many of us already know who this young man is: Martin Richard, killed at the finish line. I asked a question on Facebook and I still haven’t gotten a good answer ‘cause I don’t think there’s a word for this in English: What is the word that signifies both heart-opening and heartbreaking simultaneously? “No more hurting people,” Martin wrote, and then simply “Peace.” “No more hurting people.” Do this in memory of him.

To remain faithful to his life is to open ourselves not just to sadness, the sadness I can see on so many of your faces right now, but it is also to make us strong as well. To rekindle in us ethical and moral purpose because we are sweat, we are blood, we are tears. So please stop hurting people.

Remember this past week the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, if we really want to change the world for the good, if we really want to change the way things are, we need not just “tender hearts,” but we need as well “tough minds.” See, hearts that are hardened cannot heal and they cannot heal others. Minds that are not tough will only bring more damage.

None of us know exactly why these two brothers, the Tsarnaevs, did what they did. It appears it may be an expression of what I don’t even call Islam. I call it Jihadism, the belief that religion is expressed only in war with those that believe differently. From Baghdad to Boston, from New York to Mumbai, this perversion of religion has killed tens of thousands of people. But to view all of Islam and all Muslims through this lens is not just a perversion of the religious facts, but it is also permission to engage in some awful human impulses.

We’ve already seen, and I have already seen this week on social media. Not so many of my friends, thank God, but I’ve seen a little bit of it. Comments:

“It’s time to close the borders.”

“It’s time to keep them out.

“They are threatening us. It’s time to round them up.”

You see what that’s doing – the them. It’s make an “other.” This is something we human beings love to do when we are fearful or vengeful. We love “othering.” We love to make our problems all a faceless matter of other people who can be blamed for our problems if we get rid of them, the undifferentiated “other.” Then we can be at peace.

Whenever we “otherize” someone else or a whole people, we start dehumanizing them. We start taking away their sweat, their blood, their tears.

In this past week the *New York Post*, a newspaper that is worth less than toilet paper, seriously. (I hope they are sued to the point that they no longer exist.) Maybe you saw

what they did. They put two young Arabic-looking men, who were at the Boston Marathon – they did nothing else other than be Arabic-looking and young men – and put up some words on the front page of their newspaper – **Bag Men**. And labeled them terrorists. This is what we do when we make an undifferentiated “other.” We start to dehumanize. There have been reports, sadly I think there will be more reports, of Arabic-looking people who have been physically attacked and assaulted. Unless we don’t learn the lessons from this last brutal decade of wars that did no good.

Lost in the tumble of this week, something important was released – an exhaustive document called The Constitution Report that had some respected progressives and conservatives. An exhaustive 500-page report that found beyond a shadow of a doubt, beyond any question, that since September 11th, 2001, our country has intentionally and regularly tortured prisoners. The previous administration started it and sought to justify it, and the current administration just wants to kind of move on beyond it.

I’m going to read you some words from that report because this is what happens when we make an “other.” This is what happens when we dehumanize, and this is what has been done, by the way, for those of us who are U.S. citizens, in our name.

“Torture,” the report says, “has no justification and damaged the standing of our nation, reducing our capacity to convey moral censure, moral authority when necessary, and potentially increased the danger to U.S. military personnel taken captive.” The taskforce found no firm or persuasive evidence that torture produced any actionable, reasonable intelligence that could not have been produced in other legal means.

One of the authors of the report, and this is a seasoned guy, this is a guy who’s seen some stuff in his life, said, “I had not recognized the depth of torture in some of these cases.” And then concluding sadly he said, “We’ve lost our compass.”

Here’s another opportunity for us as a nation to keep true to our compass or to lose it again in fear and in vengeance. Believe that we regain our compass by returning to our connections. If we wish to act justly on behalf of those who sweat, those who shed blood, and those who shed tears, we cannot do it from fear. We cannot do it for “other.” We cannot do it from vengeance. We must remember and remain faithful to who and what is truly worthy of our faithfulness: The lives lost, the heroes and the helpers, just as Mr. Rogers and so many other people have said.

There’s a wonderful story in the Buddhist tradition that speaks of Guanyin, the Goddess of Compassion. It is said of her that she is the one who observes the cries of the world. The beautiful heart-opening image: observing the cries of the world. There’s a mythological story in this tradition that talks about a great, fierce dragon, who somehow is transformed into a tiny little fish, and that fish is about to be sold at market, and that fish cries out, and Guanyin answers from the heavens to save that little creature this way: “A life should definitely belong to the one who tries to save it, not the one who tries to take it away.”

A life should belong to the one who tries to save it, not to the one who tries to take it away.

When we keep faith with the savers, with the helpers, in Boston, in West Texas, we belong to them and they belong to us. What we start to do is begin that necessary process of healing, of staying intimately connected with our lives.

There are many people who this day are traumatized, who because their experience has been so overwhelming, they are shutting down. I read about trauma this past week. It's stored in the body when an experience is so overwhelming. Do you know that one of the most powerful things with someone who has experienced trauma is simply this: The power of touch; connecting back to a body in a meaningful way. Not a big, huge, tremendous, overwhelming bear hug, but just simply holding a hand. Maybe reach out to someone with your hands near you right now. Remember the power of touch.

I have a friend who's a physical therapist and who has been working this past week with a number of the people injured, people who are now amputees after the bombing in Boston. This past week she shared a story about being with one of her patients who lost a leg, and who broke down in tears, and she simply held his hand and promised to be there as he returned to his life. A few days later he walked about 100 feet in the walker. He knows sweat. He knows blood. He knows tears.

When we remember sweat and blood and tears, we remember that we don't have to divide our vulnerability from our strength, and that our strength arrives very often in our honest vulnerability. It's like at the end of a marathon if any of you have ever run one or ever been there. A marathon, just an average, everyday kind of marathon, is a place in which people stagger across the finish line – you know the time that this bomb went off was 4:09:44, I believe. That's what someone like me in the best shape a decade ago would run a marathon in. These are not the elite runners. This is the place of people who run merely to run.

The sweat and the blood and the tears. To stay faithful to this is to know that even when we encounter limits in our lives, and even when we feel we have come against the finish, even when we feel we have reached our limits, even when we feel we want to shut down, that's still an invitation to open.

I think my favorite line from all of the *Harry Potter* books and movies is this. It's called *The resurrection stone*, and it contains a secret message: "I open at the close." We can close down if we want to. We just say let's close all our borders. We could say let's close up our hands into fists. We could say let's close down our hearts.

Or we could choose to heal, and choose to keep faith with those who are healing. We can choose to open at the many closings of our lives, to stay in touch, to not harden our hearts. And in that way, folks, we are doing exactly what Mr. Rogers said we should do: We are being among the helpers and the healers. Today may we open.

Amen, and may you live in blessing. Let's pray together.

God of endings and beginnings, divine path of healing and helping, may we recognize in those moments when we feel shut down, shut off, barricaded from this life, that there is always the invitation to return and to return and to return again to the best and most basic of who we are.

May we recognize that ultimately in what unites us there is so much strength, so much more strength than what would divide us, and a path, a way forward, a spiritual invitation to recognize that the deepest layer and flow of life there is always love – fragile love, vulnerable love, opening love, and invites us again and again be present, be opened and hear and be healed.

Amen.