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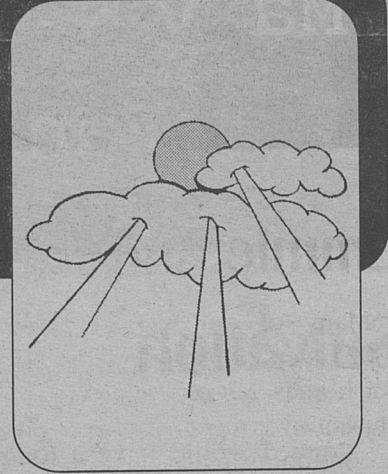
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The Spiritual Essence

by The Rev. Jane Dwinell



Sanctuary

On Sunday December 2nd, Robert Woodward entered the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in West Brattleboro, VT and asked for sanctuary. He said he came to the UU church in particular because he knew that Unitarian Universalists were accepting of people of all kinds. He was distraught, and pulled a knife on himself. Police were called and within moments "Woody" was shot, and he died of his wounds several hours later while undergoing surgery.

Woody's story is slowly emerging. We may never know all of it, but what is known is that he had no history of mental illness. Whatever caused him to break, to cause his paranoid and suicidal impulse may never become clear. Several things come to mind here: one is that such a mental break could happen to any of us, and another is that houses of worship should be sanctuaries for people in distress.

Mental illness is not well understood, and still carries a great stigma. Associated with that is the still-lingering belief that homosexuality, bisexuality, and the questioning of one's physical gender are all mental illnesses, easily "cured" with the proper "treatment." We know that is simply not true. Even clearly defined mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder, anxiety and panic disorders, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and clinical depression are still not always successfully treated. Many people live with the great stress of one of these illnesses — either in themselves or in a family member. It is often hard to know how to handle the ups and downs of the illness along with the activities of daily living.

Where can help be found? And will the person have the strength, energy, or ability to go for help?

We in the BGLT community need to look out for one another in these stressful times. We need to look out for our friends and family members who are sometimes simply unable to leave their homes. Bringing food, music, or a quiet presence can be so helpful. Offering to clean house or do chores can help a person find the inner strength to begin to heal themselves.

We can also seek a spiritual community. No one should be killed in such a place, but should be received with warmth and gentleness. Unfortunately, many people in our society — law enforcement included — are not completely sure how best to help a person in the midst of a mental health crisis. We in Vermont also face the reality of thinly-stretched and poorly-funded community mental health services. Many people who need treatment simply cannot get it, and often turn to their religious community for lack of a better place to go.

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At the same time, many of our past religious homes have treated us destructively, only adding to our stress as BGLT people. Homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgendered people have been told that they are abominations in the eyes of God, that they are sinners never to be redeemed, and that they are not welcome in a house of worship. Fortunately, there are spiritual communities where BGLT folks are embraced in their wholeness, seen as children of God as much as any other person — even people with mental illness, which may carry as much of a social stigma as being gay.

As Woody's story is brought to light, as the police in West Brattleboro are investigated, let us be mindful of the people in our communities who are in need of our love and care, who are in need of gentle, but thorough medical and psychiatric treatment, and a loving spiritual home.

The Rev. Jane Dwinell serves the First Universalist Parish, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, in Derby Line, VT. She lives with her partner, Sky, and their two children, Dana and Sayer, on the shores of beautiful Lake Memphremagog.