

TRANSFORMING TRAGEDY INTO HOPE:  
THE STORY OF THAT WHICH MIGHT HAVE BEEN

A Sermon By  
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Sometimes our lives become entwined with a single event that transforms us through the generations. For my family, it was the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963. I was seven, and had recently moved to Phoenix from Riverside, California. My father, Ray Manker, was one month into his new ministry at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Phoenix.

It was a time of unrest, of people fighting for civil rights, especially in the South. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was inspiring us to gather and march and demand justice for everyone, to share a dream that one day little boys and little girls would “not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” It was a time when a dream like that could take shape in the hearts of people all over the country and sharpen our spirits like arrows to defeat the enemy of racism and prejudice and injustice.

It was a time, like any time, when change was too frightening to too many, and bigotry found four men to latch hold of, to fester in hearts damaged and weakened by who knows what fears and hatreds. These men plotted to hurt the civil rights movement, especially the church in Birmingham where black children had been gathering to march in the hundreds for the right to be treated equally.

It was a Sunday, like this, almost exactly forty-five years ago, minus twenty-four hours, at 10:22 AM. It was not a day of marching; it was a normal Sunday morning, and the children were in the basement having just finished a lesson entitled “The Love That Forgives.” The bomb blew out the stained glass windows and killed four little girls my age: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley.

There were a lot of deaths in those days, not the least being Unitarian minister James Reeb, who was beaten to death in Selma after answering King’s call to the clergy in 1965 to gather and to march, and then, Martin Luther King, Jr., himself, assassinated in 1968. King had given the eulogy at the funeral for three of these girls, challenging people to get out and work for change, chiding his fellow ministers not to hide behind the stained glass walls of the church.

The names of the four little girls killed forty-five years ago have become familiar to me like a litany: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. They might have faded away, like the names of so many others killed in those days, including two little boys, one shot by a policeman, another I can’t remember how, but both on that very same day in Birmingham. I would probably not know or remember these girls except for the creative response of one man to this tragedy, shaping a memorial that in turn shaped my life and my family’s life down to this day, when I remember and can share with you this story, and share with you the on-going dream that King so eloquently expressed in his “I Have a Dream” speech.

John Henry Waddell was driving across the border from Laredo on his way home to Tempe after spending two years apprenticing as a sculptor in a studio in Mexico. His

family was with him when they heard on the radio the news of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the deaths of the four girls, the same ages as his children sitting behind him. He was touched to the core, the place where dreams stir our creative juices and demand a response. He began to shape his dream, to plan how to express this tragedy in a way that would remind people for years to come that we must not do these terrible things to each other. We must not take lives.

He shaped these deaths into an image of what these girls might have been had they lived. And yet, it became more than that as he worked with the forms and learned what they had to teach him. He learned that his life's work was about "the beauty of individual differences," and he tried to express that in the different beautiful forms of the bodies, having them represent four types of the female form. One became a mother, holding an empty swaddling cloth, the imprint of a baby who never would be born; one became a nervous soul, turning toward or away, in hope or in desperation, expressing the dilemma of so many minorities; one embodied acceptance, of death and of all that is or will be; and the last became a prayer of youthful hope and optimism, her hand raised to the sky, the word "prayer" written upon it.

Shortly after the deaths of the girls, John had attended a service that my father led, dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement. He had submitted a work of art to be displayed which depicted a poor African American woman in ragged clothes in a slum. Above her head, in a cartoon bubble, it said, "You don't care about the poor, do you?"

This one piece so affected the congregation gathered that morning, that, combined with the ministry of my father and the passion of Waddell, the people of the church eventually commissioned a memorial garden and the sculpture which came to be entitled "That Which Might Have Been." The minister got to shaping the garden, planting the trees, and the artist got to work shaping the statues and feeling that he was doing "the piece he'd been born to create."

The four statues were placed facing the four directions, with a pool around them and four steps leading into the middle. The space in the center is a vase, a desire for supernatural aid. The memorial garden has become an expression of hope for understanding among all of humanity.

People come from all over the world to see it, and John Waddell's work can be discovered in many places across the country. Twenty years ago, Curtiss and I were visiting the Mondavi winery in Napa Valley, California. As we rounded a building, we saw a figure in the middle of the grass dancing in the sprinkling rain. "That's John's work!" I said. And it was.

I wouldn't know this if I hadn't spent my years growing up in the Phoenix church going outside after class or worship every Sunday and standing in that Memorial Garden. We had been told, as children, that the statues were not just for looking, but for touching, and we would walk into the middle of the pond and jump from statue to statue and wonder about the girls who were killed, children just like us, and why people could be so cruel. We would play and enjoy the beauty of the garden, and unbeknownst to us, the meaning of the place would seep into our spirits and teach us what is important in life: caring, beauty, justice, hope. I was not the only one who experienced this in the Memorial Garden; I have heard from many children of the church who mentioned years later how those statues and the story of the four little girls affected

their religious growth and learning and the importance of social justice in the religious life.

There was controversy. The statues were nude, and nudity was still feared in society in those days. It still is. When asked about it, John said that clothing would take the eternal nature away from the work and embed it in a particular time period. So he works always with the nude form, except when a city council forces clothes on a piece, and the artist needs the money. There is one group in downtown Phoenix of John's statues wearing clothing, all because of someone's prejudice and fear of the human body.

Growing up Unitarian Universalist, we also grew up with the "About Your Sexuality" Curriculum, which in its latest incarnation is known as "Our Whole Lives," or Owl. It is a ministry of social transformation to free us from the ignorance and fears of our human sexuality, and UUs are on the forefront of this. But prejudice and fear take many forms, one of which is this fear of nudity, and this has plagued "That Which Might Have Been, Birmingham, 1963," for forty-five years.

It is because the statues are nude that the copies that were made for Birmingham have never been able to find a home there. It is because of this nudity that in 1996 the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association refused to allow them to be displayed in the front foyer of the Convention Center in downtown Phoenix, forcing us to bus people to the church to see them. Someone at the UUA had claimed that the statues looked like slave women on the block, and she hinted that a hidden and insidious racism had guided the hand of this white male artist.

I was so angry that I stayed up all night fuming, and finally got up and wrote a long letter to the UUA explaining the importance of those statues and how horrible it felt to have not only their beauty maligned in this way, but the heart and soul of the artist put on the chopping block. I didn't say it that way, but I said it, and mailed it--don't know where it is now.

I got the poster of "That Which Might Have Been, Birmingham, 1963" framed, and hung it in my children's bathroom to remind them of this sacred space even after we moved away from Phoenix. I didn't really think about the fact that they would look at it every single day, in the way that I had walked in that garden every single week. But the story and the message seeped into them and laid a foundation for social justice as the framework and essence of true religious community.

At some important event, perhaps the tenth anniversary of my father's ministry at the church in 1973, the members bought this bust from John to present to my father. It has been in my parent's house ever since, and I have looked upon it over and over. In 1974, my mother and father and four of us children buried the ashes of my brother, Wendell, at dawn under the african sumac on the south side of the garden, and his name is inscribed on the memorial plaque. In 1978, my friend Cindy and I took refuge from a failed camping trip one night at John's ranch near Cottonwood. And in 1979, John said to Curtiss and me, "Come on up and choose a drawing for your wedding present." This is that drawing.

In 1986, for my ordination, Ruth Waddell, John's wife, sent me this special edition of John's book *The Beauty of Individual Differences*. She wrote that it was a gift from my mother-in-law, Wanda, and John and the co-author, Ann, wrote me a dedication. I have read the book several times, and John's experience of education and the need for

more open creativity in education has paralleled my educational views and shaped my ministry. His words about art's role in our lives is very important. He writes, "Art follows two directions at once: inward, toward the soul, and outward, as the arts relate to life and all other areas of thought and endeavor. So far in [humanity's] history the final record of existence and achievement is found primarily in the art forms surviving [us]." (p. 23)

We create memorials to those events, often tragic, which have shaken us and forced us to rethink what is important. The World Trade Center attacks left a hole not only in the center of New York City, but in the hearts of our nation, which is demanding to be filled with the most beautiful creation we can design. We choose to memorialize those many men and women who died in our wars by creating walls and gardens and places for contemplation and memory, so that their deaths will not be forgotten.

But the greatest effect of memorial art is to remind us that life is precious and time is short, and neither should be wasted. Life should be cherished and time should be spent with awareness and appreciation of the beauty in which we are embedded. Our differences are beautiful, our lives are beautiful, and the desire to reflect that beauty back to the world is a most religious and spiritual act.

We gathered last night in this Memorial Garden which still stands, and hopefully always will stand, at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix, where it has become a sacred space for all. We remembered the lives of these girls 45 years after their deaths with candlelight and song and a rededication to living lives of meaning and justice and love.

Today, let us remember four little girls, Addie Mae, Denise, Carole, and Cynthia, who never got the chance to live full lives, but their deaths have helped to shape a nation and a conscience and a hope for the peace and justice for which we all dream.