

A People of Hope¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

With everything happening in our world these days, how do we hold on to hope? What does it mean to be a people of hope? Vaclav Havel wrote, “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the faith that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

Our Readings today were “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” by Emily Dickinson² and “Hope” by Lisel Mueller.³

Sermon

“With all that is happening in our world today, how can we hold on to hope?” On October 8th, I led worship with a “Question Box” sermon—you created questions and I offered some answers. What struck me that day was that the vast majority had asked some version of this question. “With all that is happening in our world today, how can we hold on to hope?” It felt so important that I wanted to come back to it, today, and next week as well. And as it happens, the theme suggested by the Soul Matters Sharing Circle for December is also about hope: What does it mean to be a people of hope?

For many people of my generation hope was entangled in the big social movements that were creating change as we came of age. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” And we felt we could see it bending, and we were *helping* it bend—civil rights, women's liberation, gay liberation, the peace movement, environmentalism—the sparks of one movement ignited other movements like wildfires transforming the landscape. Our hope became linked to legal and societal change, all of it fitting into a larger narrative of progress. Things were bad in the past, this narrative told us, but through effort and struggle, the future is getting better and better.

But that narrative began to waver with the rise of right wing backlash in the 1980s. Still, we could continue to claim *some* victories. Equal marriage for same-sex couples, for example. And when Obama became president in 2008, it seemed like he embodied the hopes of our generation. Who could have believed or predicted that a black man could be president in America?

But then, last year, it all started coming undone. Karen Joy Fowler expressed it well, “Something inside me died on Election Night, and that something was my faith. For more than sixty years, deep in my heart, I did believe that we would overcome someday. And then in a matter of hours, on the evening of November 8, 2016, I stopped believing.”⁴

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² Emily Dickinson, “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers” from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, Copyright © 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

³ From *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems*

⁴ Karen Joy Fowler, “While You Are Standing,” in *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Time*, edited by Carolina De Robertis, (Vintage, 2017) p. 120.

Prior to that night, she had had faith in the “general decency and generosity of the majority of Americans.” And, she says, “because of this, I had faith in activism. I believed in people working together to make the world more equitable. I believed in witness, in persistence, in resistance... that belief is one of the many things I lost on November 8. I woke on the ninth to the realization of how quickly the work of my lifetime could be wiped away.”⁵

She goes on, “I saw that I had overestimated the goodness of ordinary people. I saw that men who care about nothing but money will always rule the world... We protesters have been opposing the likes of Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Henry Kissinger my whole life. ... They will never go away, and they will always have much more power than you and I.”⁶

Perhaps some of us in this room felt a similar undermining of our faith and hope for social progress and activism. Perhaps we even wondered about whether there *is* “a moral arc of the universe bending toward justice.” That famous proclamation of Dr. King was borrowed from the 19th century Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker; but what if it isn't really true?

Our ideas about social change have been based, in part, on an enlightenment understanding of humanity that saw our species on an evolutionary journey of ascent, the belief that we were getting better and better. Our early Unitarian forbears certainly believed this—Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke preached in 1886 on “the progress of mankind, onward and upward forever.” This phrase was adopted by many congregations as part of their statements of belief.

When I was looking through the section in our hymnal about hope, I noticed that many of those hymns date from the 19th century. Let me quote words from one, #345, from the poet Samuel Longfellow, who died in 1892.

With joy we claim the growing light, advancing thought, and widening view
the larger freedom, clearer sight, which from the old unfold the new.⁷

Rev. Clarke asserted that

there is always something to look forward to, some higher attainment, some larger usefulness, some nearer communion with God. And this accords with all we see and know: with the long processes of geologic development by which the earth became fitted to be the home of [humanity]; with the slow ascent of organized beings from humbler to fuller life; with the progress of society from age to age.... The one fact which is written on nature and human life is the fact of progress, and this must be accepted as the purpose of the Creator.⁸

But this story of progress is not without its own shadow side. It was also at various times a justification of European supremacy, colonization of other continents, and the horrible institution of slavery. It undergirded the industrial revolution, and a growth economy that harnessed earth resources with no regard for consequences. In our own time, we are seeing some of the disastrous damage that the story of progress has left in its wake. What if *progress* isn't the story we need right now?

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁷ From *Singing the Living Tradition* (UUA, 1993)

⁸ From a sermon by Rev. Catherine Torpey in 2006, <http://www.snuuc.org/Sermons/OnwardAndUpwardForever.htm>

With all that is happening in our world today, how can we hold on to hope? If we can't pin our hopes on progress, on justice winning out in the end, on what can we depend? I began to get a sense of a new understanding of hope in the words of Vaclav Havel. Havel was a Czech writer and dissident who, in 1989 ended up becoming the president of an independent Czechoslovakia. But before the victories, in 1986, while he was sitting in prison, he wrote,

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons....

[He goes on:] Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. ... Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the faith that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.⁹

I hear him saying that hope is about how we live in the present—to what values we give our allegiance and our energy, not because we can win, but because it is our deepest understanding of what is right. At that time, he had no idea that the Soviet rule of Czechoslovakia would be overturned—that just a few short years later, he would be president of this new free country.

Professor and historian Howard Zinn writes something similar, adding the perspective of community and the human capacity for magnificence. He says,

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness...

If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction...

The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.¹⁰

What does it mean to be a people of hope? If we follow the advice of Havel and Zinn, it means that we choose to live now the values we hold most dear—whatever the outcome may be. We choose to live now affirming our interconnection with all people, all life. We choose to live now with generosity, with compassion, with courage, with respect. We hold on to hope by holding on to our deepest values. It reminds me of a slogan I learned long ago in the peace movement—there is no way to peace, peace is the way.

⁹ Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, 1986

¹⁰ <https://www.thenation.com/article/optimism-uncertainty/>. This article was adapted from *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear* (Basic Books, www.theimpossible.org).

In her book *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit promises,
...if you embody what you aspire to, you have already succeeded. That is to say, if your activism is already democratic, peaceful, creative, then in one small corner of the world these things have triumphed. Activism, in this model, is not only a toolbox to change things but a home in which to take up residence and live according to your beliefs, even if it's a temporary and local place... Make yourself one small republic of unconquered spirit.¹¹

That was the experience last year of those who were water protectors in the face of the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock in South Dakota. In the end, the pipeline was built. One might say that the campaign failed. But every person who participated in the camps came away empowered, transformed, energized. We still have no idea what may result from that unprecedented gathering of the Indigenous nations on behalf of the water.

But even if we ground our hope in living our values now, I know that we still wonder, “Will we make it?” Do our choices matter? Will we survive these hard times, and find better days ahead? Because hanging over all of our heads is the feeling that time is running out—that climate change or nuclear war might end our chance of seeing a better world.

Charles Eisenstein addresses these questions in a book entitled, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*. This book has been like a bible of hope for me these days. Eisenstein suggests that we can't fix our society using the same understandings from which it was constructed. He explores a great paradigm shift—a shift in the story through which we understand and create our culture. He writes that we have been living in a Story of Separation, in which we assume we are separate from everyone else, separate from the universe, individuals fighting against all others for survival. These assumptions also underly the narrative of progress and shape our activism for justice and social change.

He says we need to understand that we are not separate at all. A more beautiful world is possible as we transition to a Story of Interbeing. He writes,

The fear behind the question [Will we make it?] is “Whatever I do, it won't matter, because the world is doomed anyway,” and the assumption behind the fear is that I am separate from the universe. That is part of our story. The fear and the question go away as we transition to the Story of Interbeing. In it, we know that any change in ourselves will coincide with a change in other people in the world, because our consciousness is not separate from theirs.¹²

Many of you have heard me say similar things—that we are interconnected with each other—that the earth is one whole, made up of interrelated beings. Because we are interrelated, what we believe and how we act have effects that are not measurable via our old ways of measuring things. And we can see examples of this in social change too. Big changes sometimes occur suddenly, almost miraculously, seemingly out of the blue. The Berlin Wall coming down. The Arab Spring uprisings. The right to marry for same-sex couples. Even thirty years earlier, none of these could have been predicted.

¹¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, (Haymarket, new edition 2016)

¹² Charles Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible (Sacred Activism)*, p. 256.

Eisenstein's point is that we must understand our hopes for change in a more deeply radical way. We are not merely trying to get better at what we already have. We are trying to wake up to a whole new story. He writes:

This is the level we must work at if we are to create a different kind of society. We must become the storytellers of a new world. We tell the story not only with words, but also with the actions that spring from that story. Each such action shows all who witness it that there is another world out there, another way of seeing and being, and that you are not crazy for thinking it is there. Every act of generosity is an invitation into generosity. Every act of courage is an invitation into courage. Every act of selflessness is an invitation into selflessness. Every act of healing is an invitation into healing. I am sure you have felt this invitation upon witnessing such acts.¹³

What does it mean to be a people of hope? We come back to a similar plan of action as suggested by Havel and Zinn and Solnit, but with a different underpinning. Again, we must choose to live *now* affirming our interconnection with all people, all life. We choose to live now with generosity, with compassion, with courage, with respect. We hold on to hope by holding on to our deepest values.

But we also recognize that these choices matter in ways that we cannot yet explain. As we begin to understand the story of interbeing, as we recognize that all beings are one, we realize that our small actions ripple out in ways that affect the whole. And the energy we bring to each choice, each action, matters as much as the results we are aiming toward. It is no longer about pressuring the government to pass the best legislation, or trying to amass the largest member base, or garnering the biggest press coverage. It is also no longer about working ourselves to death, or neglecting our families. It is about opening to transformation within our selves and within our communities.

With all that is happening in our world today, how can we hold on to hope? I want to acknowledge that I don't believe there is an easy answer. I don't believe we can just get back to the way things were. We can't get back to an unexamined sense of well-being that many of us felt—not all people though—the sense that everything was going well, and in those places where all was not well, the assurance that life was getting better, and justice was on the way. I think we have to let go of those facile hopes, and grieve for the pain in our world.

I am reminded again of Joanna Macy talking about the three stories of our time. The first story she calls “business as usual”—but that story can no longer survive with its model of unlimited growth on a limited earth. We have to let it go. The other two stories are dependent on our choices. One is called the “Great Unraveling,” things falling apart and disintegrating into every person for themselves, like we see in Hollywood post-apocalyptic movies. We are feeling the evidence of the Great Unraveling these days. But the third story is the “Great Turning,” a shift toward an inter-connected way of living on this beautiful earth, with mutuality and respect for all of our fellow beings.¹⁴

In an interconnected living system, small changes can create large shifts. We see this in the difficulty scientists face in predicting the weather. One small deviation in the conditions at the outset of the observations, can cause huge deviations in the outcome. Called the butterfly effect, they notice that even a butterfly flapping its wings in Mexico, might change the weather in Maine.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁴ <https://www.activehope.info/three-stories.html>

Rebecca Solnit says, Hope

navigates a way forward between the false certainties of optimism and of pessimism, and the complacency or passivity that goes with both. Optimism assumes that all will go well without our effort; pessimism assumes it's all irredeemable; both let us stay home and do nothing.

Hope for me has meant a sense that the future is unpredictable, and that we don't actually know what will happen, but know we may be able write it ourselves.

Hope is a belief that what we do might matter, an understanding that the future is not yet written.¹⁵

What does it mean to be a people of hope? A people of hope chooses to live *now* in a way that affirms our interconnection with all people, all life. A people of hope encourages each other to live *now* with generosity, with compassion, with courage, with respect. A people of hope holds on to hope by holding on to our deepest values, together.

Our final song was "I Am Willing" by Holly Near.

Chorus: I am open and I am willing
To be hopeless would seem so strange
It dishonors those who go before us
So lift me up to the light of change¹⁶

Closing Words

Rebecca Solnit writes, "To me, the grounds for hope are simply that we don't know what will happen next, and that the unlikely and the unimaginable transpire quite regularly."¹⁷

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice, let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

¹⁵ Rebecca Solnit, "Protest & Persist: Why Giving Up Hope Is Not an Option," *The Guardian*, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/13/protest-persist-hope-trump-activism-anti-nuclear-movement>

¹⁶ You can hear it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AkGk5maD8Q>

¹⁷ <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/woolfs-darkness-embracing-the-inexplicable>