

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Ascent to Hope”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 11, 2007

Spoken and Silent Meditation

The Psalmist cries out, “Where is my rock?”
The granite boulder
secure against earthquake and flood
upon which to build a fortress of faith.

Shifting sands littered with deconstructed truth
and murky swamps drained of mystery and wonder
cannot support serious meaning and value
that will endure for many lifetimes.

We need a firm foundation
upon which to lay the cradle of our new born child;
A place to stand and make promises we know we can keep;
And lie down in our last days
as the moon beckons our spirit to be free of our body.

May we find that rock here
not buried in the Albany clay underneath us
but in the arms of those around us
whose love flows up through the rock
like a bubbling spring.

Sermon

Albany may not be the best place to talk about hope. Just down the hill at the state capital in January, we heard our new governor say, “Day one, everything changes.” With a historic margin of victory under his belt, Spitzer was ready to take on Albany politics and reform it. I remember being caught up in the enthusiasm as I think many in this congregation were as well.

Well, now we’re past day 300 and we’ve settled into politics as usual. The Spitzer steamroller seems to be stalled while his driver’s license is being checked to see if he’s

an apologist for illegal aliens. The great danger of raising people's hopes is seeing them unfulfilled, leaving them more discouraged and hopeless than they were before. Having one's hopes raised and dashed again and again helps explain the stereotype of the elderly being crotchety and cynical.

Before researching hope, my relationship with the word was strained at best. The future just isn't looking very hopeful these days. The proliferation of nuclear technology and weapons of mass destruction predict an increasing violent and lethal existence in store for us. With oil prices nearing \$100 a barrel and rising, carbon dioxide at the highest level in millions of years, and the world population estimated over 6.6 billion, it may seem as if the troubles that escaped out of Pandora's box are running rampant and hope has decided to retreat back into the box and close the lid.

Being oriented toward the realism of Buddhism's unwavering witness of the present moment just as it is, hope hasn't been the center of my theology. Hope looks past the present moment to a better future. Meditation holds one back from the future and trains one's attention directly on what is happening now. The meditator wants to know the nature of reality *as it is*, not *how it might be* tomorrow. Meditation has been called the practice of no escape.

So I came to the study of hope with a bit of a prejudice. Cultivating desires for the future or wishing the world different than it is, is an obstacle in direct seeing of the world as it is. What I *hadn't* appreciated about hope was its function, like fear's function, as an emotional source of action. Buddhists who sit down on their zafus to meditate believe the practice has some value for them. All of them at least hope that it will lead them to an enlightened mind state.

I realized hope actually drives our actions and choices every day. One's hope for recovery directly affects the kind of medical treatment one seeks and gets in a hospital. Hope drives couples who are having trouble conceiving a child into the fertility clinic. The ardor and persistence needed to try all the fertility options requires great hope. Damaged relationships couldn't be mended unless both parties hoped for change in the other. Athletes inspire our hope watching them train and perform as they strive to win. We built Emerson Community Hall because we hoped it would help us build up the strength and services of our congregation and reach out to promote our values in the larger community. That hope is bearing fruit today.

When hope is missing, the results can be devastating. David Bergen, US soldier in Iraq who blogs as "The Foxhole Philosopher," wrote an interesting piece about Iraqis' relationship to hope. Bergen observed a multi-generational sense of hopelessness there. The people have been dominated for thousands of years by empires that rise, conquer

their land, then fall before another empire. They have little experience with self-governing to inspire their hope. This causes many Iraqis to shun political engagement and the development and support of public institutions like an effective police force. They have little hope of living in a *just society* so they withdraw from public life saying they *just want to be left alone*. Without much hope for a better life in a society permeated by distrust, suspicion and cynicism, building a democratic society seems next to impossible. Conversely, looking at American society, the problems in Iraq reveal how critically important hope is to make our democracy function.

The hope of building the new Jerusalem energized the persecuted Puritans who came to the New World in the seventeenth century. While we Unitarian Universalists have abandoned their Calvinist theology, we still hold on to their vision of creating and sustaining a good and just society here. We have translated their faith in God's elect into our hope that democratically governed people endowed with inherent worth and dignity can somehow accomplish that goal.

Hope, like fear, is a product of the human imagination unique to the human species. Moses' assertion of the rule of law, Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom of God has already come, the Quran's assertion of human equality, and Newton's discovery of the law of gravity continue to imaginatively reshape the foundations of human society. Whether the source be saint, scripture, scientist or scholar, hope draws its power from the imagination's creativity. Robert Fulgum writes: I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge -- myth is more potent than history -- dreams are more powerful than facts -- hope always triumphs over experience -- laughter is the cure for grief -- love is stronger than death.

Hope differs from optimism because it doesn't arise from a deliberate thought pattern that leads to a positive attitude. Hope may or may not have a basis in reality. In the Jataka story I shared with the children this morning, the brave little parrot kept trying to put out the fire aware of the futility of his efforts. Yet he could do no other than make the attempt because he felt compelled to act. He hoped his efforts would make the difference he could not foresee.

The parrot reminds me of Wendell Phillips, the abolitionist who fervently condemned slavery in the 1840s as a "moral outrage" even though his cause seemed hopeless. A man asked him after a speech, "Wendell, why are you so on fire?" Phillips replied: "I am on fire because I have mountains of ice before me to melt."

Paradoxically, our ability *not* to be able to predict the results of our actions can actually *support* our hope. I found an essay about uncertainty inspiring hope by Howard Zinn in an inspiring collection of essays by social activist Paul Rogat Loeb

titled, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: a citizen's guide to hope in a time of fear*. Here are two hopeful paragraphs from that essay:

Is an optimist necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time? I am totally confident not that the world will get better, but that only confidence can prevent people from giving up the game before all the cards have been played. The metaphor is deliberate; life is a gamble. Not to play is to foreclose any chance of winning. To play, to act, is to create at least a possibility of changing the world. ...

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. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. 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 spiraling top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopias future. 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.

Vaclav Havel understands deeply the power of hope to sustain action even when reality offers no hope of spring in the dead of winter. Havel writes:

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 a state of the world. Whether we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; 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.

A place I find hope is in the writings of other Unitarian Universalist ministers. One beautiful writer and storyteller is Victoria Safford. She told the story of a psychiatrist in the health clinic at a prestigious women's college. In her words:

We were sitting once not long after a student she had known, and counseled, committed suicide in the dormitory there. My friend, the doctor, the healer,

held the loss very closely in those first few days, not unprofessionally, but deeply, fully-as you or I would have, had [the student] been someone in our care.

At one point (with tears streaming down her face), she looked up in defiance (this is the only word for it) and spoke explicitly of her vocation, as if out of the ashes of that day she were renewing a vow or making a new covenant (and I think she was). She spoke explicitly of her vocation, and of yours and mine. She said, "You know I cannot save them. I am not here to save anybody or to save the world. All I can do-what I am called to do-is to plant myself at the gates of hope. Sometimes they come in; sometimes they walk by, but I stand there every day and I call out till my lungs are sore with calling, and beckon and urge them in toward beautiful life and love." (p. 187)

If we want to plant ourselves at the gates of hope, we need each other. William Lynch wrote in his 1965 book "Images of Hope" about the importance of community:

Hope not only imagines; it imagines *with*. We are so habituated to conceiving of the imagination as a private act of the human spirit that we now find it almost impossible to conceive of a common act of imagining with... [Hope] must, in some way or other, be an act of a community, whether the community be a church or a nation or just two people struggling together to produce liberation in each other. People develop hope in each other, hope that they will receive help from each other. As with the imagination, we tend always to think of hope as that final act which is my own, in isolation and in self-assertion. But it is not this at all; this interpretation is, in fact, one source of its dubious and sentimentalized reputation. ... As it occurs among human beings, it represents or forges the very bonds of human society, meaning nothing less than that [people] can depend on one another. According to this understanding of the matter we would rightly expect that human societies and hope would rise and fall together.

My research has helped to clarify for me my role here each Sunday when I stand up to address you. It deepened my appreciation for just how important my words are to support and encourage people's hope.

For all my Buddhist leanings, I actually am a very hopeful person. Even though I feel like the little parrot sometimes, flying over this congregation, sprinkling a little water on you on Sunday morning, I don't get discouraged. I know there is more going on in our midst than I can ever know or experience. Something I say may occupy a place in your head for years before it may be fully appreciated and make its way to

your heart. That has certainly been true for me as I've listened to my ministers over the years.

What I know without a doubt is how hope grows in our hearts when we meet and nurture it together. We don't need to have any assurance about what the future will be, as long as we can witness directly today the generous and generative power of love.

And as long as I know love lives, I'll have hope.

Benediction

Reinhold Niebuhr famous quote:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime,

Therefore, we are saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense

in any immediate context of history;

Therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.

Therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite a virtuous

from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;

Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love

which is forgiveness.

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