

Choosing Hope in a Dark Time

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As we enter winter with its short days and long dark nights, we may feel a sense of foreboding or despair. Some might even be experiencing seasonal depression now. Perhaps that is why the theme for December chosen for us by the “Soul Matters” staff is “hope?” I think of “hope” as envisioning a brighter future especially when the present situation is bleak, either at a personal or community level. Like gratitude, last month’s theme, hope has both a psychological and a spiritual dimension. Psychologically, the feeling of hope can help us to move forward. But to be effective one must take action in the direction of a goal. Shannon told us that gratitude in part connects us to sources beyond ourselves including a higher power. I believe hope can have that kind of spiritual reach as well.

In addition to the arrival of winter, many here are losing hope about the state of our nation, in what certainly is an attack on rights and freedoms. What is the approach to this situation that can allow us to feel more realistically hopeful? What does our Unitarian Universalism offer us in confronting dark times, personal, cultural, or even planetary?

In my training as a clinical psychologist one of the most important things I was taught was to work to help clients feel more hopeful. The loss of hope is a warning that a client may be suicidal. The tools to deal with the loss of hope as I learned them were; help the client see that they have value, that their situation can be better than it is at present, that they will feel better if they take some actions to improve the situation, and if they seek support from others who care about them. I think this recipe can work at a community level as well. For all of us, even those not in a personal crisis, we do lose hope from time to time. Many people I talk to now feel hopeless about the direction of our country. What helps, is to remember to do what is possible to improve the situation. If hope is only a feeling, the chances are it will not last, and it may not be helpful enough. It is our actions that make the difference in improving our outlook more effectively and enduringly. Maybe that is why the Soul Matters people called their resource for the month “Choosing Hope?”

The spiritual side of hope for UU’s comes in part, from our theology, what we also call, our belief or values system. This system is reflected in our updated Shared Values statement. As I think about them now, it is clear that all of them, especially “Interdependence,” “Justice,” “Pluralism,” and “Equity,” with “Love at the center,” to me offer hope for a positive future world Unitarian Universalists agree to work to achieve. UU’s collectively believe we can make the world better by implementing these values. Unitarians and Universalists of the past have certainly demonstrated these values in their work. If we don’t feel hopeful, how could we embrace these values and expect to work effectively for change in the world? Our Values Statement tells us that hope is alive and we can make a difference.

We seek to create “just” communities where all of us can feel welcome and can renew hope. The words of one of our shortest hymns comes to my mind: “We live not for ourselves alone. In others’ good we find our own. Life’s worth in fellowship is known.” Besides worth, we also find our strength and hope here in community. We acknowledge our “Interdependence” which is a source of our hope. Another of our UU values, “Pluralism” teaches that there are many worthy viewpoints and no one viewpoint has an exclusive command of the truth. Our differences in belief need not separate us. The UU Values Statement also says we find hope in a diversity or a “plurality” of viewpoints and in taking an inclusive approach. Our focus on “Equity” tells us that all people have worth. When we treat others as worthy, we offer them hope. The logo of the “Values Statement” we are using now has “Love” at the center. Love is the power and the means by which we work to achieve the values of Interdependence, Justice, Diversity and Pluralism. Love is meant to bind us together and guide us. The overall message of our new Value Statement is that we work to build a Beloved Community, where the rights of all are protected regardless of race, color, belief or gender identification and orientation. This was the perspective of MLK, who’s life work was enabled by hope. As UUs we covenant, or make a sacred promise, to hold up these values in the pursuit of this work. At a time when some citizens are promoting divisiveness, and seeking to disenfranchise and ostracize those who are “different” we “stand on the side of love.” We support human rights, as our heritage teaches us. We offer hope especially to those who need it most. That is our faith tradition now, and that has been our tradition over the centuries. Our Unitarian and Universalist leaders of the past worked alongside others to end slavery, promote public education, women’s rights, civil rights and many other related causes. They often worked in desperate times. Our UUSC provides financial support to promote our values. Our faith has always stood for human rights, and importantly for my words today, has always brought our message of hope to the world. I believe our country needs these values now.

This short poem by Emily Dickenson speaks to hope as an enduring part of our humanity. Here it is:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all –

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

This poem both honors and praises our human capacity for hope. Dickinson uses the metaphor of a durable, little bird to represent the hope that lives within all our souls. This bird sings come rain or shine, wind or storm, good times or bad. Hope never asks for anything in return. It endures in all of us as a gift. The poem urges us to value this essential resource that we all have. Dickinson also tells us that hope has a spiritual dimension because it “perches in the soul.”

With hope, people can make it through the hardest of times. We just need to listen to “the little bird” singing its tune. According to Dickinson, hope can be an especially valuable resource in the most extreme situations, “sweetest in the gale is heard,” “the chilliest lands,” and “on the strangest sea.” Looking at hope this way, has been invaluable to me as a psychologist working with others seeking my help. I trusted that the little bird exists in everyone including all my clients. And in addition to dealing with our personal challenges the little bird is there for us as a community, to exercise our UU faith when society needs us, as it does now. That is what I most wanted to tell you this morning.

To advance hope, we begin by finding the “bird of hope” within our own souls and then to seek help others. UU Rev. Cris Jimmerson says, “Hope [arises from] our choosing to act out of love for each other and the web of existence even in the midst of our not knowing, [and] even when we encounter great challenges.” Jimmerson goes on to say, “By purposefully finding the wisdom we need to sustain ourselves in the voices of those who have suffered oppression, people ...” can move from despair to hopefulness and can act in the face of adversity. Knowing that others who have suffered in past challenging circumstances and prevailed, can strengthen our belief in hope, even if we can’t predict the outcome. Slavery was abolished, women received the right to vote, and gays the right to marry, although all these causes took years to accomplish. Unitarians and Universalists were among those who worked for these accomplishments.

Psychological research shows that hope enables resilience. Resilience is the capacity to respond actively and constructively in the face of adversity. Research also shows that taking action in the face of adversity is psychologically healthier than passively wishing for something to change for the better. When we take action based on hopeful feelings, our mood improves, and potentially we make a difference. We can take some satisfaction in acting, knowing that we tried to make a difference, even if our effort does not show an immediate impact.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the psychiatrist who wrote the famous book, *On Death and Dying*, believed that hope in the midst adversity is not about denial of loss. Instead, it is about the potential for new understanding and growth that comes from experiencing and processing loss. She suggested that people who have known suffering, can develop a deeper compassion and

appreciation for life, and they can have more empathy for the suffering of others. In her experience, a person doesn't "get over" grief but instead learns to live with it better. People grow and rebuild themselves beyond the loss to become whole again. Remember the Japanese term "kintsugi," the repair that makes the broken object more beautiful than it was before it broke? Hope is the energy it takes to repair after a significant loss. Repairing after a loss can result in an enhanced sense of self. Kübler-Ross' work shows that hope, "the thing with feathers," can be found in within oneself even after significant losses. Then we can reach out to others with love, patient guidance, and compassion. Kübler-Ross reminds us that the renewal of hope begins with healing ourselves and then extending it to others. Our country is going through profound loss and the support of those who are suffering the most need us, including immigrants, ethnic minorities, and nonbinaries.

For concentration camp survivor and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl, hope was essential for staying alive in the midst of catastrophic suffering. Those who lost hope in the concentration camps were most likely to perish. Hope, as he saw it, was the result of choosing one's attitude and finding purpose amid the most horrifying conditions imaginable. Frankl discovered and then taught, that hope is maintained by finding a reason to live. The reason to live can be a vision of the future, or love for another person. Hope comes from affirming life and courageously facing tragedy and even calamity. The "thing with feathers" helps us to imagine that better future. Dr. Frankl also believed hope can stem from dedicating oneself to a cause greater than oneself and acting through love. He said, "Those [in the camp] who lost hope developed a certain look in their eye, a fatalism that inevitably ended in death." They experienced an "existential vacuum." This was his term for a complete loss of meaning, loss of hope, and a sense that nothing really mattered anymore. Dr. Frankl tells us clearly, we do not want to give up in the face of adversity.

One of the last books Humanistic Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote is called, *The Revolution of Hope*. In this book he suggests that humanity is at a crossroads. Fromm believed, modern society's emphasis on efficiency, production, and consumption, driven by an uncritical acceptance of technological progress, has alienated individuals from their authentic selves, their relationships, and their communities. With truly prophetic insight Fromm warned us that in the future, our lives will be ever more controlled by technology and it could be used by dictators for evil purposes. He died before the wide spread use of internet, but he anticipated the reach of technology and its potential to completely control our lives. He wrote this book in 1968 and his prediction is much truer today than it was then. In the face of the power of technology to intrude itself so completely into our lives, he anticipated that we will have to choose hope or else descend into hopelessness. Our freedom will come he said through every, "... moment in the act of hope and of faith in the here and now." He added, "every act of love, of awareness, of compassion is resurrection." Alternatively, he warned, "...every act of sloth, of greed, of selfishness is death." For Fromm the "Revolution of Hope" was a life-or-death proposition. Fromm warned us of the great peril we now find ourselves in, but also of the possibility of a "revolution of hope."

Law professor and commentator Joyce Vance just published a book called, *Giving Up is Unforgivable*, in which she argues that it would be a huge mistake to give up hope of saving democracy in our country. In making the case for hope, she urges us to look not only at what is

going wrong with the administration in Washington we have now, but rather at what is happening positively in our federal courts. Some of our federal judges are risking danger to themselves and their families by taking a stand for the rule of law and against the illegal actions of the current administration. These judges are not deterred by intimidation. Vance also states that to give up in despair at the present time is “unforgivable.” It is our job now to work for legislators who will stand up for the rule of law. She points to successes that have been achieved so far, including stopping the deportation of immigrants to the prison in El Salvador, the example of law firms and universities that have stood up against bullying, and the success in preventing the overturning of birthright citizenship, as stated the 14th amendment. Our responsibility as citizens is to speak out, politely of course, and to support candidates who stand for democracy and oppose autocracy, she affirms.

Fromm defined the choice we face regarding hope this way:

To hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime. There is no sense in hoping for that which already exists or for that which cannot be. Those whose hope is weak settle down for comfort or for violence; those whose hope is strong see and cherish all signs of new life and are ready every moment to help the birth of that which is ready to be born.... Progress ... depends on our capacity to come to grips with our hopelessness. First of all, we have to see it. And second, we have to examine whether there is a real possibility of changing our social, economic, and cultural life in a new direction....

Fromm's message seems to fit the current state of our nation. If we remain hopeless, we will lose more ground. We need to seize the moment we are in now. I am inspired by current leaders who believe there is “a real possibility” of restoring our democratic institutions, and inspired as well by the leaders of the past who worked to do so.

Too many of our fellow citizens have fallen into an unwarranted trust in a leader more focused on his own needs than on the well-being of the country as a whole. Many others have simply found it advantageous to “follow the leader.” The president and his team have exploited the levers of power, including of technology and social media, to misinform, divide and exploit. Those in office have used their positions and the levers of government to target Americans they see as enemies. For many on the other side, this circumstance has induced a profound loss of hope. At the same time, there are those among us who see the possibility of protection and repair of our systems, and norms. As I understand the thought leaders I have referred to today, this is the time to renew our hope and to fight for the values stand for.

When we take a stand in the direction of hope we grow in our humanity and we help to improve society. To quote Fromm again:

Life that stagnates tends to die; if the stagnation is complete, death has occurred.... We grow either stronger or weaker, wiser or more foolish, more courageous or more cowardly. Every second is a moment of decision, for the better or the worse. We feed our sloth, greed, or hate, or we starve it. The more we feed it, the stronger it grows; the more we starve it, the weaker it becomes.... What holds true for the individual holds true for a society.... Often we, the individual or the people who make up a society, have the

illusion we could stand still and not alter the given situation in the one or the other direction. The moment we stand still, we begin to decay.

All the wise and effective people I referred to here this morning tell us choosing hope is required, and it is our most ethically responsible course now. Hope helped Dr. Frankl and others survive Nazi concentration camps. It helped Dr. Kubler-Ross' patients deal with the challenges of dire illness and death. It helped citizens of Eastern European Countries overthrow Soviet domination after WWII. Hope led the human rights improvements in our country over the last two centuries. If hope has such power, perhaps we here can listen to and feel the "thing with feathers" inside us and then do what we can to help restore human rights, freedoms, and decency that are being attacked. Winter turns inevitably to spring. Unitarian Rev. Theodore Parker famously said in 1853, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one... I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice." Parker did not live to see the end of slavery in America but he was an important voice and inspiration in the abolition movement. You and I need to be part of the bending towards justice now. The country and world need people like us and we need to act for our own well-being. And our UU theology and our values require it.