

HOPE HAS HUMAN HANDS

In the late 40's, early 50's, there was a song which, when it came on the radio, would make my dad groan and move as if to turn it off, muttering "that darn song, it's so sticky!", and my mother and I would cry out, "no, we want to hear it!" It was a terrifically sentimental song and its words could even be said to be sappy, schmaltsy, syrupy. And I'll bet you haven't heard it for years, but if you remember it and feel like joining in, sing with me.

"Soft as the voice of an angel, breathing a lesson unheard, HOPE with a gentle persuasion whispers her comforting word: Wait till the darkness is over, Wait till the tempest is done, Hope for the sunshine tomorrow, after the shower is gone. Whispering Hope, oh how welcome thy voice, making my heart, in its sorrow, rejoice."

In those days, hope--to me--meant miracles; it meant a sort of Pollyanna-ish optimism that "everything will be fine in the morning". It meant that no matter how desperate the financial situation of our family, we would have food on the table; someone from my dad's little Baptist congregation would deposit a freshly killed Canada goose or venison roast or string of fish on our doorstep.

Hope, in my young mind, was a kind of insurance policy, a belief that God would not desert us if we were faithful. Hope provided for miraculous recoveries, last-minute rescues. It meant that the sun would always rise, that spring would follow winter, that seeds would grow, that birth would produce new life, that the Lone Ranger WOULD arrive on time!

I'm not sure how I reconciled my beliefs with my experience in those days. Though I knew at some level that Hope as a technique didn't always work, I continued to profess my belief that it would and did produce miracles.

But I guess I figured that even Hope had to take a few days off occasionally; that was probably why my friend Lynn did not recover completely from an unusually serious bout with mononucleosis, why my dad, who was a Baptist minister, sometimes couldn't make it all the way through his sermon and had to sit down to catch his breath, scaring us all to death. Hope was on break those days. And, of course, it wasn't Hope's fault that I didn't make straight A's in school; I hoped I would, but obviously Hope wasn't enough.

What does Hope mean to Unitarian Universalists? We are kind of past the miracle stage. If we are ill, we may hope for a rapid recovery; if a loved one is dying, we may hope for an unexpected sudden cure or a peaceful death. We may hope, as I often do, that the rattle in the car will turn out to be harmless, that the trail ahead of us is not really as steep as it looks, that the ferry line will not be too long, that we can pay the bills, that the kids will be home soon. Our daily hopes are usually simple and focused on our immediate needs and desires.

Over the years, as I've examined my religious faith in light of my own experience, I have gradually revamped my thoughts about Hope as a religious concept.

It seems to me that the Hope that is innate in the human spirit is more than simply a wish for good outcomes, for peace on earth, a politically correct holiday greeting. Hope is far more than cliches or a wish for miracles. It is not trivial or sentimental.

The definition I've come up with after many years of observing my own need for hope and the moments which seem to create hope, for me and for others, is this: HOPE IS MY AWARENESS, MY DEEP UNDERSTANDING, THAT I AM CONNECTED TO THE INEXTINGUISHABLE STREAM OF LIFE, THAT I AM PART OF THE WHOLE.

Let me repeat that definition and ask you to compare your own experiences to it. For me, HOPE is the clear sense that I am a part of the inextinguishable, inexhaustible stream of life. For me, it is a tangible sense of my place in the universe. It is the fiber of the interdependent web of all existence, the connection I have to all else in life.

When I have lost HOPE, I have lost my sense that I belong to the universe, to the web, to life itself. But HOPE is strengthened in me with every reminder I receive of that connection. It may start when I first see the tomato seedling pop up in the seed tray on my windowsill. It may be triggered by the purring of the fuzzy kitten on my lap as I read. Even a stranger's greeting on the sidewalk or beach may evoke a warmth that reminds me that I do belong here, I am a part of life.

Hope is found in relationship, whether it is in my relationship with my pets, with my friends and family, with strangers, with all of nature or God, if you are comfortable with that word.

If religion is defined as the expression of human relationships with self, with others, and with the universe, then Hope is a manifestation of that relationship and a valuable piece of our active faith. Unitarian Universalists mostly do not hope for a heavenly home; we hope for an earthly home that is heavenly and we know that is our job.

A friend talked with me about her second biopsy for breast cancer. “I was scared to death,” she said. “I’d already had one surgery and was terrified that this was the beginning of the end. I felt loose from my moorings, adrift, disconnected, hopeless. And I knew I couldn’t bear it without help. The nurse started to move away from me after the test, and I said to her, ‘I need you to hold on to me’. She took my hand and I felt myself re-connect with life. She gave me more hope than a negative biopsy.”

Hope does not rely on Divine Intervention, but on human hands. Hope is our job, not God’s, despite nature’s constant and faithful supply of hopefulness. The sun always rises, spring always comes, the snow always melts, the cycles of creation go on and on. We derive great hope from that faithful repetition of nature’s patterns. But nature also socks us in the teeth: hurricanes demolish whole coastlines, avalanches wipe out homes and travelers, the wind whips fire through dry underbrush, the sun burns our skin, disease wipes out millions, rains bring flooding and mud slides.

We can’t control it but we can respond to it.

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast”, according to the poet Alexander Pope because human beings have an innate gift for hope. When disaster strikes, other human beings immediately reach out to victims. It seems inherent in human nature to give aid in times of trouble. An old Judy Collins song says “Friends are like diamonds, and trouble is a diamond mine.”

That doesn't mean all human beings give aid, just that we're all capable of it. Some of us have so squelched our natural inclination to help that we will walk right by, ignoring trouble or fearing the consequences to ourselves. Sometimes it is truly dangerous to offer help; it's not always easy to know right help from wrong. But sometimes we withhold our help because we see no benefit to ourselves from it, we see no reason to help because our goal in giving help is so we'll get something back later on .

Like love, hope is active. We can give hope to ourselves and one another. In fact, I believe, we have a responsibility to do so.

I believe that it is in everyday human acts of kindness and respect that we find our own hope rekindled and that others' hope is also reborn when we reach out to them.

I believe that hope is not passive, something we wait around for, but that it is created and recreated daily in ourselves and others.

I believe that hope comes in many forms--hugs, smiles, acceptance, kindness, respect, patience, thoughtfulness, listening, generosity, appreciation, forgiveness, working for justice in our society.

I believe that we need to recognize our own capacity for giving hope and increase our efforts to do so. And I believe that we must recognize our own need for hope and actively seek it out.

I believe that hope is at the heart of liberal religion, of Unitarian Universalism. We give it to ourselves and to others as we live out our UU principles and purposes. It is the sinew that links us with the interdependent web of existence, the fiber that binds us to one another. Without it, we cannot resist evil. It is our daily work, to give and receive hope.

Hope is our human response to tragedy, whether it is evil brought by perverted human nature or the damage of natural disaster. When another human being is injured, it is up to fellow humans to mend the damage. We might wish that a vengeful God would strike down evildoers or quell natural forces, but it is up to human hands to offer hope.

What does it mean that we are responsible for giving hope? It means that we have a job to do. We don't know, always, in our daily lives, just who needs hope at any given moment. We have to assume that everyone does. We have to be ready to offer hope to everyone we meet, whether that's the crabby clerk at the store, the multi-colored, multiply-pierced teens in the park, the stray cat or dog, the frustrated parent with a toddler, the nursing home patient who can no longer remember our name, the homeless man camping in the woods, the beleaguered teacher, our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender neighbors, the victim of domestic violence.

We ourselves also need hope and we can seek it out for ourselves, whether we do it by taking a walk, talking to a friend, giving money to UUSC or the Red Cross for disaster relief, listening to music, pulling weeds, reading poetry, asking for a hug or a listening ear, starting seedlings, feeding the birds, cleaning out a drawer, greeting a stranger, or spending time in prayer or meditation. We give ourselves and others hope every time we reach out to those who need justice and love.

Several years ago in Denver, a young woman named Jeannie Van Velkinburgh ran to help Oumar Dia, a West African man who was shot at a downtown bus stop just because he was black. She got a bullet in the back for her efforts and is now a paraplegic. A cynic might say she should have left well enough alone, that she shouldn't have gotten involved, because look what it got her.

Jeannie VanVelkinburgh doesn't think so; she knows that not only did she offer hope to Oumar Dia, she has also given hope to us AND to the murderer, who--though he may never understand it--has received a powerful lesson in human nature. Human beings are supposed to care for one another.

Let's revisit the definition of Hope I am using this morning: Hope is the conviction, the reassurance that I am connected to, am part of, the inexhaustible, unquenchable stream of life. It is my knowledge that I am supported and nurtured by my place in the interdependent web of existence and it is my job to give it to others.

I'd like to close with a story from my own life.

It was June, a few years ago when I was still living in Colorado. I'd been driving Interstate 80 since dawn, from Farewell Bend on the Snake River in eastern Oregon where I'd camped in my van the night before. I was returning to Colorado after burying my mother, crossing the hot dry deserts of southern Idaho and over the border into Utah, pondering the lessons of her life and death and crying as I drove, my tears drying almost as soon as they appeared, in the hot blast coming through the open window. And now I was beyond tiredness, in that late afternoon state of mind where rational thought and fantasy merge, and reality has a fuzzy edge.

I'd been seeing a lot of hawks poised on telephone poles or circling overhead, their broad wings barely flickering to stay afloat. My mother had loved birds, and hawks and eagles were interesting to both of us. Each bird felt like a message, but in my emotional state, I couldn't quite figure it out.

Every redtail or northern harrier caused me a fresh pang, and by the time I reached the outskirts of Salt Lake City, I had exhausted my tear ducts and my brain.

I wanted to be back in Colorado as soon as I could. I wanted to drive a favorite route through the mountains, but I had no idea how to find it in the maze of interstates, beltways, and smaller roads that interlace the Salt Lake valley.

I drove south into SLC, peering through my foggy contact lenses at unintelligible signs, looking for landmarks. Nothing. I realized I was in the far left lane of a 6-lane interstate and, in my weariness, nearly sideswiped another car as I tried to pull the huge van over so I could read my map.

At last came a break in traffic, and I eased over to the shoulder, cringing for fear I had missed seeing some hapless little car in my mirror, and half-expecting to feel a sickening crunch. But I made it, stopped the van, and, once again, the tears came. I was safe, I hadn't hit anyone, but I was exhausted and bereft.

Suddenly, in my rearview mirror, I saw the ominous blink--blue and red, blue and red. "Oh no," I thought, and hastily mopped my eyes as I fumbled for my car registration.

There appeared at the driverside window a short stocky cop, his hat pushed back on his head, his face serious and concerned. I braced myself for the worst, assuming he'd seen my near-accident, but in a voice of infinite kindness, he just asked, "Lady, are you lost?"

That man could not have known just how lost I was. I couldn't find myself on any map--neither the map of Utah nor the map of my life. I didn't know where I was after my mother's death; I only knew I needed to go home.

I don't know what I said to him, besides asking how to find route 40, but he neither remarked on my tears nor ticketed me, and within a few minutes I was on my way again.

As I topped the last long hill up out of Salt Lake City, my eye fell upon the broad winged silhouette of another redtailed hawk, soaring just above the horizon.

And all the confused, jumbled thinking that I'd been doing all day--the memories of my mother, my grief at losing her, my anger at myself for all the years I'd felt motherless because of my own rejection of her religious beliefs and because of her illness, the link to birds and mountains and all of nature, the incandescent flame of her unconditional love for me---all these coalesced into one single thought.

I AM NOT ALONE. I AM NOT ALONE. I AM IN THE ARMS OF THE UNIVERSE, I AM IN THE ARMS OF GOD.

Emily Dickinson wrote: "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all."

When we offer hope to ourselves and to one another, with each smile, each touch, each act of kindness and understanding, we knit up the rips and tears in the interdependent web of existence and bring each other closer to spiritual wholeness.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that no act of kindness is in vain, that our efforts to bring hope to each other and to the larger community will bring us hope as well. May we find ways to minister to the community in which we live, ways which will foster Unitarian Universalism in the world, ways which will address some of the systemic problems that plague society, and ways which will bring us the peace of mind of knowing that together we have offered hope to a hurting world. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.