

“Why Hope Dies Last:

The Amazing and Unlikely Survival of Conviction, Compassion, Creativity, Courage, commitment, and Conscience in a World that Should Have Killed Such Things Off by Now”

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Readings

The first reading is taken from *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* by Joanna Macy.

“You and I share common knowledge and common fears about what is happening to our world. We live in an extraordinary time—here at this moment on planet Earth. From news reports and from our environment, we are bombarded by signals of distress—of toxic wastes and famines and expiring species, of arms and wars and preparations for war. These boggle the mind and stir within us feelings of dread, anger, and sorrow, even through we may never express them. By virtue of our humanity, we share these deep concerns.

“Let’s try something. Take a moment now, take a couple deep breaths to relax, and let two or three things come to mind that gave you concern for the world this past week. Note the images and feelings that arise.

“The responses that arise, as we behold what we are doing to our world, are compounded by many feelings. There is fear—dread of what is overtaking our common life and terror at the thought of the suffering in store for our loved ones and others. There is anger—yes, and bitter rage that we live our lives under the threat of so avoidable and meaningless an end to the human enterprise. There is guilt; for as members of society we feel implicated in this catastrophe and haunted by the thought that we should be able to prevent it. And above all, there is sorrow. Confronting so vast and final a loss as this brings sadness beyond the telling.

“What we are really dealing with here is akin to the original meaning of compassion: “suffering with.” It is the distress we feel on behalf of, or more precisely, in connection with the larger whole of which we are a part. It is our pain for the world.”

And our second reading is from a letter written by Thomas Merton, a Trappist Catholic monk, to Jim Forest, a young civil rights activist, dated Feb. 21, 1966:

“Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.

“The big results are not in your hands or mine, but they suddenly happen, and we can share in them; but there is no point in building our lives on this personal satisfaction, which may be denied us and which after all is not that important.

“The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do His will, we will be helping in this process. But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand.”

Sermon

Good morning. My name is Brian Watson and it is a great pleasure to be here with you this morning. I have been a member of this Fellowship for about 8 years, and involved with the Social Justice Committee here for just about as long. I am currently also serving as a Trustee on the Board of this Fellowship, which is an awesome responsibility I take seriously.

One of the primary reasons I first stepped through the doors of this church was the strong ethic of social justice in the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes. I was struck by the fact that here was a faith community that was not sequestered from the world, but actively engaged with it; a place that recognized that personal spiritual growth cannot truly happen outside the context of the suffering of the world of which we are a part. What I sensed then, and still do, is a spirit of hope in the theology and in the community of this Fellowship.

So it is in that spirit that I come before you today, a special Sunday for UU congregations across the country. Because today is a day when we open ourselves to the suffering of the world in a deliberate way. It is a day when we direct our hearts and minds to people who are struggling for justice, for the means to live, for human rights, for dignity. Most of all, this is a day when we invite each other to *become* those people, not just to look on passively from a distance. Because it is in becoming people struggling for justice that we tap into the aquifer of hope running under our dry feet.

I come to offer my reflections on the subject of hope because I believe hope is perhaps the one essential element necessary for human existence, and, at this point, human

survival on Earth. Hope is in greatest demand and often, hardest to find. My experience over the last 14 years as an activist working for peace and for the abolition of nuclear weapons has given me some insights on hope that apply to any work of a seemingly impossible nature. I've realized that acting in hope is the only way to sustain an "impossible dream," like the dream of a world without nuclear weapons, a world living in peace.

But "hope" has come to mean much more than what I first understood it to be. And in the deepening of my understanding of what hope really is, I've discovered that hope isn't just something to prognosticate the future. As the quote by Vaclav Havel in your program says, "*Hope is a state of mind, not of the world.*" It is something I try to live out, as a principle of life, as a way of being. In this way, my understanding of hope has become more radical. My hope is now a radical hope, a hope that taps the root of what it means to be alive as a human being in times of great peril.

The question that has led me deeper into hope has been, and still is, "Why, despite everything, does hope survive? Why does hope die last? Does hope ever die at all?" Considering the state of the world, the outlook for the future does not look good. We're in big trouble.

Really big trouble: global climate change, species extinction, crushing poverty, destruction of soil, grassland, and forest on an unprecedented scale, rapacious consumption of oil, gas, and coal, AIDS, TB, and Malaria taking the lives of thousands of children every day, repression of women and girls, exploitation of the poor at home and abroad, cancer spreading through our bodies, growing insecurity, wars and armed conflicts of all kinds raging across the world, violence against gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual people, economic globalization and the instability that comes with it, an exponentially-growing human population, and the still-present threat of global nuclear annihilation.

Just one of these things could make a person give up hope. What about the accumulated effect of all of these, and countless other crises, facing us? Indeed the "logical" thing, the thing that reason might *seem* to suggest is, basically, "Trying to make a difference on any of the perils facing us as an individual is pointless."

The temptation is to go into a state of denial about the catastrophic realities we are facing. I believe a great many of us have done just that, including, I have to admit, myself, at times. Far too many of us, feeling the pain of the Earth and our brothers and sisters, have said to ourselves: "It's just too much to think about. I can't do anything about it anyway." In so doing, we have not only made a self-fulfilling prophecy—"I can't do anything about it" becomes quite true when one chooses not to do anything about it—but we have also cut ourselves off from the source of hope, which is compassion for, or "suffering with," a world in anguish. We who live this way may yet still be breathing air, but we have suffered a far greater death, which is the death of our spirit.

It is no small wonder, then, that hope still survives, and is alive, and is working through millions of lives around the world. The odds are simply against the feasibility of hope, so why bother?

The Greek myth of Pandora reveals part of the answer to this question. In the myth, the newly-wed Pandora is told by her new husband, Epimetheus, to never open the storage jar she had received from Zeus. Until then, humankind had lived in a paradise without worry. But Pandora's curiosity led her to open the storage jar. (Hmmm, does this sound like another myth about evil being unleashed into the world?) Upon so doing, she released all the misfortunes of humankind: famine, plague, war, hatred, greed, and many others flew out of the jar to forever torment the human race. But Pandora—whose name, incidentally, means “all gifts”—was able to put the lid back on the storage jar in time to keep one thing in: hope. After a terrible and bleak period for humankind, Pandora went back to the jar and opened it once again. Out fluttered the last remaining gift in the jar, hope, to go and be with people in their suffering.

In the Greek myth, hope is as real as all the calamities and atrocities released from the jar. The Greeks were on to something when they included hope among the “gifts” in Pandora's jar: that as real as all the evil in the world, there is also an ineluctable force that lives as well, the force of hope.

A little etymology is useful here as well. The Latin “sperare” means “to hope.” (And we still use this Latin root in words like “de-spair,” to be without hope; and in “pro-sper,” to bestow hope.) The Latin “spirare” means “to breathe.” Its close cousin, “spiritus” is also the root word for “spirit,” as in “spiritual,” and “inspirational.” (And the common words “respiration,” “inspiration,” and “conspiracy,” come from this root.) In this sense, then, “spirare” has a deeper meaning than just drawing breath in and out. “Spirare” more correctly points to the drawing in of the force of life itself, the “spirit of life.” Indeed, when someone dies, we might say that they have “ex-pired,” literally, the spirit of life has left them. The fact that the two Latin words for “hoping” and “drawing in the spirit of life” are so similar is more than a coincidence. I think their similarity in word is because they are similar in fact: literally, to draw in the spirit, the breath of life, is to hope. To hope, literally, is to breathe in the spirit of life.

The title of my sermon “Why Hope Dies Last,” is borrowed from the title of the Studs Terkel book, “Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Difficult Times,” a collection of interviews of all kinds of people working for social change. On the cover is a picture of a single candle flame burning. It reminds me of the many cold, windy peace vigils I've stood in, holding a flickering candle, my spirit feeling much like the struggling flame in my icy fingers.

Hope is often portrayed as a candle in the darkness. And it is interesting that the symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith, the flaming chalice, is analogous in symbolism to the candle held in a vigiler's hands. That symbol, which we take for granted, did not always exist.

The symbol of the flaming chalice emerged from one of the darkest, most hopeless, periods in human history: World War II and the fascist holocaust taking place across Europe. The original flaming chalice symbol was drawn by an Austrian refugee who had never heard of Unitarianism or Universalism. His name was Hans Deutsch and he was a refugee in Portugal in 1941, when he was asked by people from the Unitarian Service

Committee (which later became the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee upon the UU merger in the 1960s) to draw a symbol that could communicate across language and culture barriers to express the mission and purpose of the Unitarian Service Committee, which was formed to help refugees from the ravages of the war. Deutsch drew a chalice with a flame, surrounded by a circle of protection and love. People fleeing from the war came to recognize and trust that symbol, a symbol of freedom and love and hope during that utterly bleak time.

What do we kindle in our chalice here each Sunday? It is that same flame, a tiny, flickering symbol of hope, utterly vulnerable and defenseless, that could be blown out by the weakest breeze of despair. We Unitarian Universalists know the odds stacked against the survival of that flame, that hope. We are fully aware of the global crisis we are in. We have compassion for, we suffer with, “all who are hurting in our wider world.” We know that despair will extinguish our flame again and again. Yet, we come back, and we light the chalice again and again. We refuse to let despair have the final word. We return, with the ashes and embers of our snuffed-out hope, to blow the spirit of life into our chalice, our community, to rekindle it again, here, together.

Why do we do this? Why bother? What is it about hope, true hope, that is self-sustaining, re-generating, re-surrecting?

In the readings earlier in the service, I read a passage by Thomas Merton that has meant a great deal to me ever since I first encountered, and was startled by it. In it he says, “Do not depend on the hope of results.” This is a disarming statement that seems, at first, to be somewhat fatalistic. In a world whose life-systems are collapsing to the point where many species, most notably our own, *homo sapiens*, may not be able to survive, results are all that matter, right?

Merton doesn't say that results *aren't important*, he says that our hope, in order to survive, cannot *depend* on them. He continues, “As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the *value, the rightness, the truth* of the work itself.”

Merton, in this letter to a struggling young civil rights worker, shows us the distinction between *conditional hope* and *unconditional hope*. Conditional hope is the kind that is more like wishful thinking, or day-dreaming. It is a hope that depends on a certain outcome in order to survive. If the outcome doesn't happen, then the hope dies. This kind of hope is not at all limited to superficial and materialistic goals, such as landing a certain job, or getting that recognition you deserve, or even finding that perfect gift under the Christmas tree. Conditional hope can be attached to great ideas, such as “peace,” “justice,” and even “love.” I have seen conditional hope at work in many social justice activists, and I have seen it in myself. It is the kind of hope that *depends* on the results we want. When we inevitably lose, we de-spair, we lose hope, or...we lose what we thought was hope.

Unconditional hope is the kind Merton is talking about in his letter. This kind of hope is much more challenging to live into, but it is far more life-giving than the other kind. When we live with unconditional hope, we change our way of being. We become

different people. Because we let go of, we de-tach ourselves from needing the satisfaction of seeing the results of our work. Once we let go of needing results, we actually are bestowed with possibly the greatest power there is: the power to persevere, to keep marching, to keep moving. We are given a “weapon” which is totally nonviolent and which our opponents can never take away. Once we have unconditional hope in our hearts, we just keep doing what is right, what is good, what is beautiful, what is true.

I discovered this sense of power before this most recent Iraq war. Every week, on and off, for more than two years, I would stand with a few others on a street corner in Silverdale with a sign protesting the imminent war. I’m sure we looked absolutely pathetic, utterly ineffectual, wasting our time. Yet it was something that I could do, and I knew that, as tiny a group as we were, our presence gave courage to others to also speak out, to question, to not feel as alone. One day a car of young men with buzz-cuts stopped to talk with us. They kept insisting that what we were doing, in addition to being a “slap in the face” to people “risking their lives for our freedom,” was also pointless and stupid. In a rare moment of clarity, I looked at the young man, and calmly said, “I’m standing here not to change anyone else’s mind. I’m standing here to show that my mind is against this war.” I tried to explain to him that the action of my conscience to dissent, to say no, was my personal obligation that no one, *no one*, could ever take away. By claiming this right, and standing firm in my convictions, I embraced unconditional hope, gave up the need to see any results, and gained a tremendous sense of power.

The other thing about when we let go of needing results is it liberates us to actually do the infinitesimally small things which, when everyone does them, will actually achieve the results we seek. It frees us from the burden of needing a “paycheck” for our actions. With unconditional hope, we do the action for the *sake of the action itself*, and by so doing, we create the possibilities that make results possible.

Here’s a small example of this idea in action, from another member of our Fellowship. After reading a sobering article about the vast amounts of plastic debris floating in the oceans, Deborah McDaniel decided that she would pick up every piece of plastic she encountered on her walk from the Seattle ferry terminal to her workplace a few blocks away. The cynic would look at her, stooping down, over and over and over again, picking up tiny fragments of plastic litter and say, “What’s the point?” But yet she persists, day after day, picking up plastic. Apparently, nobody’s told her the bad news that what she’s doing is pointless and a waste of time, or else, she just doesn’t care. Now, just imagine if everyone getting off the ferry and walking to work every day did what Deborah does. Imagine if everyone, everywhere did what she does. Would that make a difference? Such a movement might even inspire the careless and lazy litterbugs to start using their trash bags!

Here’s what another great social activist and leader of the Sojourners movement, Jim Wallis, says about hope: *“Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.”*

Let’s try something. On the chairs or on the floor around you are some odd-shaped pieces of cardboard. These are Guest At Your Table boxes, and you will now do something which is pointless and a waste of time. Take a piece of cardboard and fold it

along the scores lines to make a box. Like so. See what I mean? Pointless! Because what's the purpose of these boxes? To collect spare change over the next few weeks. And what good is spare change? What I put in my little box won't make a difference, so why bother? Well, the Guest at Your Table drive is like a snowstorm. Each coin you put in the box is like a snowflake. And each snowflake adds up. And, of course, you are not restricted to only putting coins in the box. Cash and checks are acceptable as well.

But what is the point? The point is this: the Guest at Your Table drive is a major source of funding for the group that inspired the symbol of our faith, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. They work with partner-groups in the US and across the world to do the work that is right, that is good, that is just and true: the work of making sure everyone has the right to clean and affordable drinking water, that all workers have the right to a living wage for their labor, that all people can be secure in their inalienable human rights, and that all people hit by natural and human-caused disasters are protected and served. So take these boxes home and do what is right and good and true. Fill them up.

We've often heard Jesse Jackson exhorting crowds to "Keep hope alive! Keep hope alive!" But I think Jackson has it backwards.

Hope, like the spirit of life itself, is already alive.

It does not need to be resuscitated. It does not need to be brought back from the brink of death like a flat-lined patient in the emergency room.

No. Hope doesn't need to be kept alive.

We do.

Hope is there, waiting for us, asking us, expecting us to be alive.

So go out and do what you can. But also do what you *can't*. Do the thing that has no reward for you, but which is the right thing to do.

Go breathing hope.

Thank you.