

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Hope Springs Eternal”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
April 4, 2010

Introduction

About a month ago, as the snow was melting and the flowers began sprouting out of the ground, my mind was on hope. This year, as winter began to fade and spring was coming, we needed the message of spring. As we saw this week, some individuals lose hope in this life. It is our job to help them find it. As the song says:

Stop, stop, my wheel! Too soon, too soon
 The noon will be the afternoon,
 Too soon to-day be yesterday;
 All that inhabit this great earth,
 Whatever be their rank or worth,
 Are kindred and allied by birth,
 And made of the same clay.

- I believe in hope because nature teaches us that spring comes every year to give us hope in the midst of winter.
- I believe in hope because I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of the human personality.
- I believe in hope because I believe there is divinity in every living things.
- I believe in hope because we humans have the capacity to love, act and improve the human condition.

I love spring: the re-emergence of color, especially green, the sounds of birds in the early morning, the reminder of hope even when life is fragile and delicate. It is not coincidental that Easter and spring come at the same time. Easter for me is synonymous with the celebration of spring. These two concepts are brought together in a poem by May Sarton titled, “Easter Morning.” It goes like this:

The extreme delicacy of this Easter morning
 Spoke to me as a prayer and as a warning.
 It was light on the brink, spring light
 After a rain that gentled my dark night.
 I walked through landscapes I had never seen
 Where the fresh grass had just begun to green,
 And its roots, watered deep, sprung to my tread;
 The maples wore a cloud of feathery red,
 But flowering trees still showed their clear design
 Against the pale blue brightness chilled like wine.
 And I was praying all the time I walked,
 While starlings flew about, and talked, and talked.
 Somewhere and everywhere life spoke the word.
 The dead trees woke; each bush held its bird.
 I prayed for delicate love and difficult,
 That all be gentle now and know no fault,
 That all be patient—as a wild rabbit fled

Sudden before me. Dear love, I would have said
 (And to each bird who flew up from the wood),
 I would be gentler still if that I could,
 For on this Easter morning it would seem
 The softest footfall danger is, extreme. . .
 And so I prayed to be less than the grass
 And yet to feel the Presence that might pass.
 I made a prayer. I heard the answer, "Wait,
 When all is so in peril, so delicate!"

I recently turned the television on in the early morning. Each of the major stories was telling the story of a child who had been abducted and was missing or killed. All were telling different stories, but the theme was the same. We experienced it in Charlottesville this winter. I felt what May Sarton expresses, "When all is so in peril, so delicate!"

May Sarton is a person who fought depression much of her life. She expresses in this poem her joy with the return of spring. She advised, "Wait, when all is so in peril, delicate!" She found solace in nature, in wild rabbits, fresh grass, gentle rain, the sound of birds, the Eternal presence that nature brings.

There is much to be anxious about in our world. Morgan Harrington, unfortunately, is one death of many this year. Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University. The list goes on and on—Auburn University, Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Our world is so much in need of a message of hope.

A few weeks ago I asked the Active Minds "What gives them hope." Gordon McKeeman reminded us that our Unitarian and Universalist heritages encourage us to believe in the goodness of every human personality, the worth and dignity of every person. Yes, we need a new message of hope that Unitarian and Universalist gives us.

Humans all are we—fools who do not see divinity when it is in front of us. We don't trust ourselves and we don't trust others. Alexander Pope writes that even with all of these shortcomings: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." ("An Essay on Man", l. 95)

My sermon today is meant to encourage each of you to believe in spring, and hope, and joy even though reason and doubt may tell you otherwise. Some politicians tell us to have hope for the future and others mock it as a dream. Some politicians prefer torture to hope. I come today to speak for hope. If a politician can have the audacity to hope, surely liberal religion can as well.

I remember the worst service I ever designed. It was probably the worst service every designed by anyone. It was written in the midst of the gas shortage of the '70's, when people were lining up at the pumps to buy what gas there was. I chose to plan a service before Christmas that year designed to explain the gas shortage. I wanted people to know why they had to wait in line for gas. I wanted them to understand the dilemma we had created for ourselves. It was a great idea. The timing was horrible.

I come to encourage you to welcome spring, to feel hope, and to feel joy in your life. Herman Melville once wrote: "If we bend down our eyes, the dark vale shows her mouldy soil; but we if we lift them, the bright sun meets our glance halfway to cheer." My desire is to celebrate human potential, to lift the dark vale of life, to meet the glance of the bright sun and to cheer.

Meanings of Hope

We often think of hope as a sort of magical dream that will occur at some future time by outside intervention. In this hope the present is considered futile and insignificant. The future is emphasized as the answer to all of our problems. Oftentimes hope is a form of dreaming and has no foundation in reality. George Herbert wrote in the 17th century that "Hope is the poor man's bread" (Jacula Prudentum, 1651).

The Unitarian Universalist hope is different from magic. Hope can be grounded in fact, in the experiences of our past and our knowledge about the possibilities of the future. Ambrose Bierce wrote, "Hope is desire and expectation rolled into one."

The Eastern religions give us a concept of hope based on the unity of the divine within nature. Tagore expresses this philosophy: "Within us we have a hope which always walks in front of our present narrow experience; it is the undying faith in the infinite in us."

For Christians hope is the belief in the presence of Jesus after his death. That is the hope of Easter, that Jesus will continue to be present among his followers. For most Christians, including many Unitarian Universalists, this is a spiritual presence, not a physical presence. As the gnostics said in the 2nd century, from their reading of the scriptures, we should not take the messages of the disciples as literal interpretations of the appearance of Jesus. Rather, these were visions of those who wanted Jesus to return.

Unitarian Universalist hope can also include a belief in the presence of a person in memory after their death. I promote this in every memorial service I conduct. Our hope also lies in our potential to make the future what we wish it to be. Hope is present not future. It is not a dream. Hope is grounded in action. If we cannot act, we cannot choose. We have no hope. Norman Cousins wrote:

The question is not whether humans beings are prepared to do these things. The question is whether you, the individual, are prepared to do it. You have the gift of free will. You can make choices. So long as the ability to choose can be matched with options of consequence, there are strong grounds for hope. There is hope that enough individuals will use their free will to make the life-giving and life-sustaining choices." (p.69)

Hope must be grounded in our ability to know and to act or it is magical hope.

Hope, Mortality and Death

One of the most common contexts for hope is that in illness and death. It can be a way of avoiding the final end of life. Many religions have the belief that there can be hope in death because there is something on the other side that is even better than what we are now experiencing. This is not my view of hope or death. With Socrates I can say:

I do not know what lies in the beyond, but I go forward with courage and hope, and I shall find out in good time.

Also, with Norman Cousins I can say: "The tragedy of life is not in the fact of death, but in what dies inside us while we live" (p. 31). Immortality and hope exist for me because I can know, I can choose, I can act.

Hope in Community

I believe in hope because I believe in humans who come together to act for good, we can be a part of a community. This is an important part of the Unitarian Universalist

mind-set. By joining this movement we wish to be a part of something larger than ourselves. We gather together for some common purpose. We can celebrate our lives—our hopes and dreams. We can discuss the problems of the world. We can share our personal concerns, our failures, our disappointments, our most inward emotions. All of this occurs because we are part of a community. We join together in hope expressed through words, music, and acts of love.

You do not have to be a member of a church to be religious. You do not have to have your name on a membership list in order to be an ethical person. But as Unitarian Universalist we join because we are affirming that this community gives us some hope. It provides us an opportunity to act. It gives us a chance to meet other people that go can enjoy, love, be with, care for, and share our lives.

I experienced this in Richmond, Virginia several years ago when a family of four were killed just two miles from the church. I won't go into the gruesome way the mother, father, and two young children were killed on New Years Day. What I will say is the church became a beacon of light for the community for the community in the midst of terror. Over 700 people attended a vigil service at the church, and then over 1400 people attended the Memorial Service the following week in a local theater. Again, it was a message of hope in the midst of tragedy. This is at the heart of our religion.

Conclusion

Yes, Unitarian Universalism is a religion that has a positive view of life. It is a religion that gives us hope--in this world and in our lives. It tells us that we can make a difference. We are unique but we are part of a community. Hope is the ability to know, to choose to act. It is looking forward to accomplishing those things we so desire as long as we choose to live. Hope is existing in a community of caring people.

Goethe has said: "It would appear that our nature is not, for any length of time, capable of perfect resignation. Hope will make its own way into the mind, and with hope activity, and with activity, the realization of hope." Yes, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." Hope overcomes anxiety. Hope leads to action. Action leads to satisfaction and more hope—another of those circles of life.

I began this sermon with May Sarton talking about how delicate life is. Sarton also talked about the bird as one example of this delicacy. I will conclude with the words of Emily Dickinson who uses the same metaphor:

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. ("Poems", 1830-86)

May we all look around us this spring, and see and hear the birds, and find the tune that may sing in our heart when we most need it, when senseless murder surrounds us, and war does not cease.

May we welcome spring. May we have hope. Look up not down. Look to the best, not the worst. Look forward, not backward. This is the message of spring. The birds are returning. The sound of cheer is in the air. Life returns when once it was barren. Where there was death, the human community can come together to overcome loss. The leaves, flowers and buds are for all to see. Hope springs eternal. Amen and Blessed Be.