

The Limits of Hope in Hard Times

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A Sermon given at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, December 17, 2017

Our worship theme this month is Hope. Two weeks ago we received more hope into this congregation in the form of our new and returning members, Steve, Jodi, Cie and Judy. Each person who comes here brings with them the seeds of a different future for this congregation, because everyone who comes here changes us in some way, thus changing our future by their very presence.

Last week, I believe you heard about how video games can be inspirational, how they can encourage people to lead ethical and moral and just lives, not in their imaginations alone, but in their actual lives. This kind of inspiration, an inspiration that helps us to change who we are and what we do, this kind of inspiration embodies hope.

Today, I want to dig in a bit more on what hope is and what hope means, especially in these times that we are living in. What does it mean to be a people of hope in these disturbing, frightening, shocking times?

This week, as I looked at my computer, I put my head down on my desk and just cried. That happened twice.

The first time was a couple of days ago. I was reading an article at The Guardian newspaper's online website. It is the story of an Australian professor with a very special title. Philip Alston is the United Nation's rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. Rapporteur means something like investigator in this context. He is appointed by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate and hold accountable any and all countries in the world regarding poverty and human rights. His core question, wherever he goes, is whether the persistence of extreme poverty in a country undermines the enjoyment of human rights by its citizens. He was invited by the Trump Administration to come to the U.S.

You can read his entire report online at The Guardian. What he found is that in the richest nation on the earth, a nation of 325 million people, 13% of its citizens live in extreme poverty. That is 41 million people. Nine times the people in the Omaha metro area. Nine Omahas. Of these, 9 million people have no income of any type. Nothing. From any source.

Here Alston is in downtown Los Angeles, whose population of people who are homeless has grown to 55,000 over the last few years. There is a permanent encampment of people in tents and cardboard structures that stretches for blocks in downtown Los Angeles.

Alston also visited West Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Washington DC and Puerto Rico. He says that income inequality in the US is now the most extreme in the industrialized world. Three US citizens – Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos and Warren Buffett, have as much wealth as one-half of the American people. These 3 men have as much wealth as 163 million people do. One of them, Jeff Bezos, holds wealth valued at 98 billion dollars. To try to put that into perspective. If you could save \$100,000/year, it would take you 980,000 years to save 98 billion dollars. 98 billion dollars is 98,000 million dollars.

Philip Alston's report and The Guardian's story on his travels made me cry. How did we get here, to this place in time where this story is true in our country?

The other story that made me cry was yesterday. It came when the new Secretary of Health and Human Services went to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The CDC is the country's national public health agency. He told the CDC staff that in their budget proposals for this coming fiscal year, there are seven words they are NOT allowed to use for any reason. Those words are:

Transgender, Diversity, Fetus, Vulnerable, Entitlement, Evidence-based, and Science-based.

We've now arrived at 1984, just a few decades late.

This story made me cry because I am a public health professional. That was my calling for 30 years before I became a minister. I've gotten grants from the CDC, I've worked with the CDC, I know quite a few people there. The CDC had already endured a great deal during the administration of George W Bush. ***This*** is beyond my belief. ***This*** is personal. ***This*** made me cry.

I am sure that many of you, in the past year, have had reason to put your heads down and cry as you read the news. Moments that have given you despair.

Hard times. We have them. As a nation.

And it is always important to remember that for many people, too many people. It has always been hard times. People of color. People in poverty. People who are marginalized because of how they look or whom they love. Their hard times have been left unaddressed because too many of us do not identify with people who are different from us. We judge them. We assume that somehow they deserve their hard times. We have not been doing "okay" as a nation since our beginning days.

So that brings me back to hope. What does hope even mean when our collective moment seems so horrible?

When we are hopeful, when we have hope – we have faith, we have trust, that something we desire will happen. Hope is often described and claimed as that expectation of what is to come. That the future will be good, will be right, will be beautiful and rich with all that we yearn for.

Miguel Clark Mallett, a writer and teacher of writing, speaks of his childhood, when his life was threatened by severe asthma, accompanied by painful eczema, and how this orients him now. He says:

The heightened turmoil we're living through these days echoes my despair from that time. I think of it when so often we're urged to embrace hope as an antidote. Hope for a brighter day. Hope for justice. Hope for peace. Hope that compassion will win out. But speaking for myself, I'm giving up hope.

Not that I don't understand the impulse. It's tempting to think that looking to the future will get me through hardship. But in my life's struggles, hope hasn't worked out that way. Too often hope has hardened into anticipation and expectation for specific outcomes. At times, I've believed that if only I could reach that next achievement — an age, a job, a relationship, a house, a car, an academic degree, a lifestyle — then I'd be content.

Similarly, our culture encourages us to believe that reaching the next societal goal will create the utopia (or a reasonable facsimile) that we crave. Getting this court decision, passing that law, having this candidate elected will mean we've finally arrived. We'll become in reality the country we've always pretended to be.

But I think we've hoped our way into this current crisis. Rather than facing the hard truths about our historical and continuing inequality and doing the hard work of examining our institutions, our traditions, and ourselves, we've floated along hoping things would inevitably get better. We've lived too much in the rosy future and far too little in the messy present. And we've allowed the hope-turned-expectation of progress to blind us.

Mallet's assertion that when hope is **only** our faith that a wonderful future is inevitable, it can make us forget to work for that future in the present moment. This assertion is echoed by others.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way:

*Western civilization places so much emphasis on the idea of hope that we sacrifice the present moment. Hope is for the future. It cannot help us discover joy, peace, or enlightenment in the present moment. Many religions are based on the notion of hope, and **this** teaching about refraining from hope may create a strong reaction. But the shock can bring about something important.*

I do not mean that you should not have hope, but that hope is not enough. Hope can create an obstacle for you, and if you dwell in the energy of hope, you will not bring yourself back entirely into the present moment. If you re-channel those energies into being aware of what is going on in the present moment, you will be able to make a breakthrough and discover joy and peace right in the present moment, inside of yourself and all around you.

Howard Zinn, the peoples' historian, chimes in:

*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 spinning 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 utopian 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.*

Here it is: Hope means to act. In this very moment.

The quote from author Rebecca Solnit on the cover of your OOS says it clearly. Let's read it together:

I still value hope, but I see it as only part of what's required, a starting point. Think of it as the match but not the tinder or the blaze. To matter, to change the world, you also need devotion and will and you need to act.

Bruce Springsteen said it in our meditation words. He says you can get to that river of love, that river of grace and happiness, that river of hope. **But you have to work at it.**

Hope in hard times cannot be just faith or a feeling. Let alone a sense that we are guaranteed the future we yearn for and dream of.

Hope has to be lived in action.

Hope is sustained by the way we live our lives. Hope is sustained by the way we live our lives.

As my colleague Kaaren Anderson says:

In other words, hope doesn't just promise us that change will come in the future; it also changes who we are in the present. When we believe that a new day is dawning, we don't just sit down and wait. We get up and go out to meet the light.

When hope convinces us that there are unseen forces working for the good, we begin to look around more closely, and in doing so we notice that darkness and pain are not all that is there. When hope's holy impatience gets into our bones, we start acting as if we deserve that new day now. Which in turn changes others by convincing them that we all have waited long enough.

Bottom line: listening fully to hope makes you dangerous, not just soothed! It doesn't relieve us of duty as much as it reminds us that wind is at our back and unseen reinforcements are at our side. Yes, hope reassures, but it also emboldens. It doesn't just offer us a promise; it gives us a push.

I will probably put my head down on my desk and cry again in the coming months. Maybe you will, too. That's OK.

Then I know that we will pick ourselves up again and keep moving into action, keep pressing. We will kindle the fire that never dies away. We will persist and above all, we will resist. Together, here, in this beloved community. And beyond.

I close with this prayer from Valerie Kaur, an American lawyer and human rights activist. She offered this prayer to all of us from her faith. On election day last year. She is a member of the Sikh faith.

A SIKH PRAYER FOR AMERICA ON NOV 9, 2016

In our tears and agony, we hold our children close and confront the truth: The future is dark.

But my faith dares me to ask:

What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor?

What if all the mothers who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and Jim Crow, racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia, political oppression and sexual assault, are standing behind us now, whispering in our ear: You are brave? What if this is our Great Contraction before we birth a new future?

Remember the wisdom of the midwife: "Breathe," she says. Then: "Push."

Now it is time to breathe. But soon it will be time to push; soon it will be time to fight — for those we love — Muslim father, Sikh son, trans daughter, indigenous brother, immigrant sister, white worker, the poor and forgotten, and the ones who cast their vote out of resentment and fear.

Let us make an oath to fight for the soul of America — “The land that never has been yet— And yet must be” (Langston Hughes) — with Revolutionary Love and relentless optimism. And so I pray this Sikh prayer:

*“In the name of the Divine within us and around us, we find everlasting optimism.
Within your will, may there be grace for all of humanity.”*

Together, we made that oath a year ago. That oath to fight for the soul of America. However long it takes.

We will live our hope for the future as action in this, our present moment.

So may it be, blessed be.