

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Emerging Hope: Glimpses of the Promised Land”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore April 29, 2018

Call to Celebration

Many of us feel as if we are living in fearful, pessimistic times right now. Many of us are on the defensive. These are not times that stimulates a lot of hopeful, optimistic thought. Many people in this congregation are hunkered down waiting for big changes with the mid-term elections in a little over six months.

And in that waiting is a kind of defensive resistance to hope.

Howard Zinn suggests another way to approach these times in these words:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives.

If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. 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

Spoken Meditation

Pablo Neruda - Die Slowly

He who becomes the slave of habit,
 who follows the same routes every day,
 who never changes pace,
 who does not risk and change the color of his clothes,
 who does not speak and does not experience,
 dies slowly.

He or she who shuns passion,
 who prefers black on white,
 dotting ones "it's" rather than a bundle of emotions,
 the kind that make your eyes glimmer,
 that turn a yawn into a smile,

that make the heart pound in the face of mistakes and feelings,
dies slowly.

He or she who does not turn things topsy-turvy,
who is unhappy at work,
who does not risk certainty for uncertainty,
to thus follow a dream,
those who do not forego sound advice at least once in their lives,
die slowly

He who does not travel, who does not read,
who does not listen to music,
who does not find grace in himself,
she who does not find grace in herself,
dies slowly.

He who slowly destroys his own self-esteem,
who does not allow himself to be helped,
who spends days on end complaining about his own bad luck, about the rain that never stops,
dies slowly.

He or she who abandon a project before starting it, who fail to ask questions on subjects he doesn't
know, he or she who don't reply when they are asked something they do know,
die slowly.

Let's try and avoid death in small doses,
reminding oneself that being alive requires an effort far greater than the simple fact of breathing.

Only a burning patience will lead
to the attainment of a splendid happiness.

Sermon

We live in a time when it is easy for the thoughtful person to be pessimistic and hopeless.

Leah, Eileen and I began this series of services titled “Emerging Hope” on April 1 with stories of those who were also in a fairly hopeless state, the Jewish slaves in Egypt and the Jews suffering under Roman oppression. Hope emerged for them through Moses and Jesus, unexpected leaders in their midst. The next Sunday we found emerging hope for our congregation through our building expansion, a source of hope that continues to unfold today. Eileen found hope the next Sunday in relation to the marginalized. Last Sunday we found hope through scientific research and dedicated scientists like my award winning sister.

In each expression of hope, there was a vision of a better future if people opened up and moved toward it. Unfortunately, in each case, we haven't gotten there yet.

Sometimes the promises were immediate. As the Jews wandered in the desert following Moses, they cried out, are we there yet? If not, why not? They lamented even in under slavery they were fed by their captors. Jesus promised the Realm of God would appear within the lifetimes of some of his followers. When they all died out and Jesus had not returned, the remaining followers wondered why ... and if not now, when? In the preparation for the tenth anniversary celebration, I read our optimistic predictions of growth that could happen from our expansion. We did get a bump, but things have leveled off. And the environment, well, we have a long way to go to address the problems of today.

Without an optimistic forward looking attitude hope can easily give way to despair. Brace yourself, this is the section of the service for the hard-headed realists who lean toward pessimism. Yes, we are living in scary times.

Just to get us started at seeing things as they are, the world is bristling with nuclear weapons that could trigger a cataclysmic conflagration that could easily drive all vertebrate life to extinction. I dearly hope we don't have a trigger happy President who is willing to use them to try to prove a point that quickly becomes pointless.

Our nation has been living beyond our means to feed our addiction to military power driving up the national debt. The war mongers have a vested interest in a destabilized world to sell their weapon systems and to foster the belief that our economy is the only safe place to keep your money thus funding that debt. Investing in weapons systems keeps us from repairing our roads, bridges and dams; supporting our public educational system; and managing health care costs. The school to prison pipeline is the latest manifestation of the white supremacy culture that began with the slave trade over 500 years ago. Much of our political polarization today is rooted in protecting the racial divide in our country. Yet protecting that divide is an insidious disease that cripples white's moral character.

Bad as all this is, it pales in comparison with what we are doing to the environment we depend on for survival. We are mostly aware of the dangerous and relentless rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Last week I talked about the dangers of acidification of the oceans and estuaries. Resource crises are developing in drawing down reserves of fresh water, loss of top soil to erosion and deforestation. Species extinction rates accelerate. Fish stocks are being vastly depleted. Mining and fracking waste despoil our land, air and waterways.

One form of waste is having a devastating effect on our oceans. Plastics. That plastic bag drifting down the street is quite likely to end up in the Hudson and float down to the sea along with plastic bottles and cups, candy wrappers, and aluminum beer cans we cleaned up in the Corning Preserve last Saturday. Staggering amounts of this stuff is filling up our estuaries and harbors on its way out to sea. There ocean gyres create trash islands of plastic waste that breaks down to smaller and smaller pieces that kill the sea life that eat it thinking it is food.

Alright, I want to call the sensitive optimists back – you can bring your attention back and stop watching cat videos on YouTube now. The problems in the world are overwhelming for any one of us to take in. They are deadly to our vulnerable sense of hope for our future.

But there is hope to be found, fragile as it might be.

I started with a source of that hope our children and youth; the [ones you saw in the videos I edited](#) together from the March for Our Lives in Washington DC March 24th. The high sense of commitment and vision of these youth touches my heart as I hope it did yours as well. They are not stepping back in the face of gun violence in schools. They are demanding change in gun laws to prevent more school shootings. They are young enough that the sense of hopelessness that came after Sandy Hook with a Congress held hostage by the NRA didn't stop them. They amazed many of us when they got gun law changes in Florida that I doubted could happen.

Another young person you may have heard about is a fellow named [Boyan Slat](#) from the Netherlands. Diving in Greece, he was disturbed by how much trash he found and wondered if there might be a way to clean it up. He did a [TED talk in 2012](#) at the age of 16 that went viral. In it, he talked about cleaning up the trash in the oceans using simple skimming systems that took advantage of ocean currents. While his ideas are a little utopian, he is gifted with the persuasive power to stimulate hope. [He has assembled a team](#) of 70 people and over 30 million dollars to build a prototype of his design to collect all this floating ocean plastic and recycle it. He hopes to deploy a prototype this summer. Will it work? We'll see. It is part of many solutions along with stopping the flow of all the waste to the ocean and collecting all the plastic that is already on beaches around the world too. There is [another TED talk](#) by David Katz to pay poor people in Haiti to pick up plastic and bring it for recycling, paying the collectors for the trash.

What these youth remind us is we have enormous capacity for change to solve these problems. We could solve most of the world's problems if human organizations and governing bodies changed their ways. Institutional and corporate change away from waste production and toward green manufacturing processes could go a long way to stopping the problems at the source.

But institutional change is very slow isn't it?

Yes, and sometimes no. I've been watching the tremendous changes that have happened in our own Unitarian Universalist Association in just one year. Starting with the resignation of Peter Morales, the three interim presidents, the election of Susan Frederick Gray and the deepening commitment to root out systemic racism in our institutional structures, tremendous changes are happening in Boston, rippling out to the regional staff. With good leadership, institutions can make huge changes ... if there is the will to do it and the moment is ripe.

With the March for our Lives and the MeToo movement, it clearly is a combination of both. The accumulation of floating plastic trash also seems to be spilling over the dam of indifference. All of a sudden the moment is ripe and change starts happening at a rapid clip.

Could we have predicted such a readiness for change two or ten years ago? I doubt it. But it emerged all the same.

It is this very process of unexpected emergence itself that gives me great hope.

When the crises that face us get through layers of denial and defenses, the way for action and transformation opens up and solutions are found.

- We've done it ending the mass manufacture of ozone depleting Freon 12
- We stopped using DDT and other toxic chemicals over the years
- We've created laws to make our workplace, roads and cars more safe
- We've gotten labor standards and minimum wages to protect workers.

Today, sensible gun laws can get passed when politicians realize the public will support them and vote against NRA primary challengers. It is possible to live without unnecessary plastic and recycle 100% of what we do use. We can live well greatly reducing our use of fossil fuels. Our quality of life is not bound up with ever increasing materialistic consumption. Yes, I like electricity and hot showers as much as the next guy – but there are paths to enjoying them that don't depend on old carbon.

What has been happening lately encourages my hope that big, important changes can and will emerge in unexpected ways. Yet there is no assurance that the unexpected will indeed emerge when needed. Basing one's hope on what hasn't yet emerged can seem almost ridiculous. It feels embarrassingly laughable to stand here in the pulpit offering hope with no visible signs of support.

But that is often just what happens. Out of nowhere, a child steps to the microphone and touches something deep within us. Tell me you were not touched by what you heard these young people say. Watching a 16 year old talk about cleaning up the oceans is humbling. Why weren't adults already proposing and working on solutions too?

This is the greatness of humanity and what I hope will save us from almost certain mass destruction waiting for us down the path we are moving faster and faster. There is a creative, inventive capacity in us that will find a way when there seems to be no way. Even in the teeth of fierce hatred, sometimes love finds a way to open a heart. Love breaks down systems of oppression again and again.

There are absolutely no guarantees here. It could all fall apart tomorrow. But our capacity for learning and creativity and our capacity for love and relationship ground my hope that we will not exterminate ourselves. The lack of certainty however inspires both urgency and meaning to our efforts.

May the ongoing emergence of young life give us hope to keep going.