

AND THE GREATEST OF THESE IS HOPE
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Contemplation: from “Hope,” by Emily Dickinson

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all.

Reading: “Healing,” by Patrick Murfin

In the deepest cave where no light seeps,
where cold and damp prevail,
Recall your blessings.

Among the blind albinos
and the skuttering things
that trespass upon your cheek,
bring back the brush of her lips.

Deafened by the echoing
pong.

pong.

pong.

Of water eating limestone,
Remember wind in the aspens.

Wrapped in the fetid stench
of the leavings of a million bats,
recollect bacon at sunrise.

Lost in the blackest maze,
bring to mind each cracked and canted
cement square of the sidewalk
leading
home.

Sermon

If you look through the glass of the doors behind me, you will see purple and red and green and pink and white ribbons hanging from a line strung across the courtyard, like Tibetan prayer flags. A couple of weeks ago, the junior high youth group—which had been studying world prayers—asked us each to write our prayers, wishes, or hopes on the ribbons.

I hope you take a look at them—the range of human longing and hope is well represented. The larger-community issues are represented in abundance. World peace is the odds-on favorite, no surprise given that we are at war, sending our young people to far lands to become intimate with death. A lot of flags express hope for an end to poverty and hunger. Many of them pray for our environment. (“No plooshin.”)

Maybe half embody hope that problems will be solved on a world-wide or larger-community scale. The other half or so pray for things closer to home.

(One of my favorites of the latter is “equipment for my himmit crabs.”)

Following the premise that peace can also happen closer to home, many people expressed their hope that we will learn to embrace each other in all our differences—that we will learn to practice generosity and honesty, accepting our own responsibilities in all situations. There are touching ribbons from people who clearly have personal burdens, or whose hearts go out to other’s griefs: simple names of individuals—“a cure for multiple sclerosis—“peace for Eric’s son.”

Two flags suggest that we all practice the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” One is a Buddhist prayer:

I offer this day to all of my teachers. That teacher which is this birth I have taken, that teacher which is this life I continue to lead, that teacher which is all obstacle and calamity in my way. That teacher and those teachers who sit nearby and that teacher who is beyond all this, formless and supreme. That teacher who is beyond all this, formless and supreme.

Clearly, the human spirit hopes and prays for all kinds of things.

Once we look at all of it, the inevitable and very-difficult question arises: “How do people maintain hope?” All of us here today have either experienced or observed times of hopelessness. This church, within the past year, has stood with two member families whose children have taken their own lives—we have tragic evidence that people do, in fact, sometimes give up hope completely, at least for this lifetime.

Poet Patrick Murfin’s images evoke the despair that humans can feel: “deepest cave where no light seeps”: “deafened by the echoing pong—pong—pong—of water eating limestone”; “lost in the blackest maze.” The lostness that is despair—“the fetid stench of the leavings of a million bats”—can be felt as a personal dark cave, and it can be felt as a dark cave of the world, created by the evil and ignorance and apathy of human beings. Although in both cases we are trying to find our way to what the poet calls “home”—energy, light, life’s return—we deal with each kind of hopelessness in slightly different ways.

The personal kind—while deeply serious, sometimes life-threatening—is easier for us to envision. I have a close familiarity with it from some times of my life. An old friend of mine, doing very well right now, has had bouts of depression throughout her

life. Many of us understand all too well: that feeling of why-get-up-in-the-morning? the pervasive sense that there's no meaning to our lives. falling into the habit of isolation.

Wanting more than my experience only, I asked my friend (I'll call her Julia) how she had come out of her times of hopelessness, how she had kept hold of that feathered thing that perches in the soul. The first thing she said rang so very true to my personal experience: "I just keep hoping. Hoping for hope, I guess." I recall, one exhausted morning during the months I was raw with grief at my sister's death. My feet reluctantly hit the floor and I said, "I will be so glad when it is not a major effort just to get out of bed in the morning." Julia's and my "hoping for hope" is actually closer to faith than hope. Something healthy in us knows that we can get back home, if we look at our darkness directly and have the fortitude to live it through. Something larger than our despair allows us to pay attention, recall our blessings, to recollect bacon at sunrise—to "bring to mind each cracked and canted cement square of the sidewalk" leading us back to wholeness. (Medication helps sometimes, too.)

Julia's and my faith does not exist in isolation, either. The generosity and understanding of other people is absolutely vital. Julia tells me of someone asking her how she was doing, and her honest answer, "Not so good." And that person showing up at Julia's house later, willing to spend a couple of precious hours with her, just talking about whatever they wanted to talk about. I recall starting to weep when a doctor acquaintance of mine asked, in a social setting, "How are you?" She showed up at my house the next day with balloons and literature on clinical depression.

Make no mistake about it, we are each others' lifelines, whether we know it or not. We can choose to dismiss the despairing person, or advise them to go to a movie or

read a book—and sometimes our own condition requires that we do that. But we are neglecting our sacred responsibility if we do not pay attention to the people around us and minister to them with our presence, in the ordinary course of our lives. The human connection—which, as loving incarnation embodies connection with The Great Mystery, the divine connection—is so very often what gets us through the night.

No one can **make** other people have hope, and it can disrespect them to try too aggressively. But, in others' personal times of despair, we **can** offer our experience, strength and hope. And, the hopeless person can choose to accept the lifeline.

Despair for the world at large is harder to get a grip on. I, personally, have not experienced that kind of hopelessness—whether from denial or faith or something else, I do not know. But my friend Bernie Zaleha has, so I called him up. Bernie is and always has been a passionate advocate for the environment, working tirelessly to save wilderness and make polluters accountable and speak up for the parts of creation that cannot speak for themselves. (He is currently on the national board of the Sierra Club.) I remember so vividly, about three years ago, when despair for the world hit him. Some of you will recall the haunted look he wore for months. Some of us recall conversations in which he recounted the shattering realization that maybe humans really are evil, and that maybe the efforts toward the good are simply empty and meaningless gestures. Ultimate despair seemed to hover near him.

Looking at all the people I know who say they are close to giving up hope for sanity in the larger world, I went to Bernie to find out how it is that he is no longer in that terrible state. His first response was, “I’ve just learned to live with hopelessness.”

It turns out that it is also more complicated than that.

It has to do with religious convictions. With the conviction that we human beings must rise above eons of individualistic, self-perpetuating evolution—we must realize that we, each and all, have responsibilities to the divine unity of which we are a part. Bernie reminds me of Jesus' words in the Gospel of Thomas (77:1-3): "I am all. Split a piece of wood and I am there; Lift up a stone and you will find me."

There is a Buddhist element to Bernie's choice to carry on with his life's good works, in the face of the apparent likelihood that it will all be futile. He said, "I've learned to give up attachment to the outcome," and he quoted a Zen master: "Infinite gratitude towards all things past, infinite service to all things present, infinite responsibility to all things future; that is Zen." (Zen master to Huston Smith, recounted to Bill Moyers in *The Wisdom of Faith* PBS series.)

I am reminded of the Serenity Prayer....

Bernie's transcendence of hopelessness also has to do with the religious concept known as humility. Whatever our theological or philosophical position, it is stupidly prideful to consider that we human beings *know* the Larger Picture, know the nature of Mystery. Yes, what we see at this time is not encouraging, and it surely looks as though life on earth is rushing to a close. But we do not know. (Remember those who were certain of imminent nuclear holocaust during the Cold War?) We can choose to hold out hope that the Good may prevail. We can make this choice without being Pollyannaish, without indulging in shallow, smiley-face optimism in the face of facts to the contrary—without giving up our tireless efforts. Bernie reminds me of John Adams words to his granddaughter, Caroline, at the end of his life:

"You are not singular in your suspicions that you know but little," he had told Caroline, in response to her quandary over the riddles of life. "The longer I live, the more I read, the more patiently I think, and more anxiously I inquire, the less I seem to know... [Paraphrasing the prophet Micah) Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly. This is enough." McCullough, 360)

For me personally, this reverent humility is the most important part of my not despairing for the world. It doesn't quite lead me to *faith* that all will be well—but it does keep me in the place of hope, the place where I can do my work. It keeps reminding me to do my best to rise above self-absorption.

And there are the words of great transcendents, words that almost shame us out of our despair, words that chide and nudge us into the choice we can make—the choice to hope. John Muir spoke eloquently about the ethics of the environmental struggle, back in the 19th century: "The battle we have fought, and are still fighting . . . is a part of the eternal conflict between right and wrong, and we cannot expect to see the end of it." (John Muir, *Sierra Club Bulletin*, January 1896)

Brock Evans, a well-known Pacific Northwest environmentalist says he has hope for three reason: 1) we have won victories, like wilderness designation; 2) victories are still being won, small as they may seem, sometimes; 3) Why should we be depressed? We should consider ourselves a blessed generation to have such mighty battles to fight.

I am grateful for all the heroes. I am grateful for Bernie's journey from terrible darkness into at least provisional light, and for Julia's journey, and for the personal trek

of every person who has hoped for hope—who has been able to recollect the smell of bacon at sunrise.

I am grateful for what these two kinds of journeys have in common: a getting out of one's self; a realization that we are so connected with each other and with all of creation, oh so entangled in our living and knowing and choosing and dying; a dawning recognition that we have responsibilities larger than ourselves or our families, and that it is our joyful duty to carry them out.

I remind you once more of our prayer/hope ribbons. Go outside after service and take a look. See how our hearts ache, and how we long to comfort the pain of others. See how poignantly we long for peace and well-being for all people, even though we see the terrible conditions of our world. As we reflect upon all the hopes, let us take a special look at one:

I offer this day to all of my teachers. That teacher which is this birth I have taken, that teacher which is this life I continue to lead, that teacher which is all obstacle and calamity in my way. That teacher and those teachers who sit nearby and that teacher who is beyond all this, formless and supreme. That teacher who is beyond all this, formless and supreme.

From that flag, and from the examples of all who have transcended despair, let us take heart. Let us remember to break out of our own self-absorption. Let us have the humility and courage to keep on working, even though it doesn't look so good. Above

all, let us feel—in our hearts and souls and bodies and minds—that we are connected with everything else that has ever been or is or will be.

May it be so.

Sources

McCullough, David. *John Adams*.

Murfin, Patrick. *We Build Temples in the Heart: Side By side We Gather*. Boston: Skinner House Books.