

## **HOPERS, UNITE!**

Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change, no, make that, helping the evidence change. Hope is the dynamic of history and the energy of transformation. Every morning, you don't want to leave home without hope!

Clearly, there are those who are always wallowing in the world's woes, and there are those who turn up heartening news in the nooks and crannies of daily existence. I'm not suggesting that the world's problems are solved, far from it, but good and hopeful news too frequently slips beneath our radar screens nowadays. And it's the job of those of us who belong to a genuinely life-affirming, this-worldly, hopeful faith such as Unitarian Universalism to stand tall and shout forth items of good news.

Like the fact that since 1990, more than 100 nations have cast aside military dictatorships or one-party rule and have chosen elected governments. For example, Bolivians have, for the first time in their history, have elected an indigenous president, Evo Morales. The former llama farmer and coca grower has fought against the privatization of his nation's resources, therewith bringing new hope to indigenous people throughout South America.

And many of these same nations have also ratified the world's major human-rights treaties. Now that's some hopeful news, folks.

Labor, community activists, and women's groups have mounted a spirited campaign against the behemoth of behemoths, Wal-Mart, and a California jury awarded \$172 million to thousands of employees at Wal-Mart Stores who were denied such basic rights as lunch breaks, with 40 similar lawsuits pending in other states. Don't you consider that hopeful news for the average American worker?

And although the world's population has doubled between 1960 and 2000, the rate of growth is now declining. Families on every continent are having fewer children, and in the past 30 years the global average fertility rate has fallen from 6 children per woman to 2.8 children per woman. Now that's hopeful news, folks.

And what about food? Fewer people are malnourished today than in 1970, because global food production has grown faster than the population. Again, hopeful news.

And literacy in the developing world has jumped from 47% in 1970 to 70% today, meaning that many more people have tools to improve their standard of living. Certainly, something to crow about.

And with respect to the environment, global production of ozone-depleting chemicals has dropped more than 80% since an international agreement was reached in 1987.

And as for health, a child today will live, in developing countries, an average of 8 years longer than a child born 30 years ago. Life expectancy is more than 60 years old in all regions of the world except for sub-Saharan Africa, where, because of HIV/AIDS, it's just under fifty years.

I know negative stats exist as well, but, friends, don't forget the positive facts. It soothes the soul to know that progress isn't a pipe dream, but a genuine possibility when people put their hearts and minds into making the world a better place, when you and I don't just make wishes but embody resolves.

What dreams, both private and public, are you realizing in your daily life? Are you saying yes to love more deeply those near and dear to you? Are you saying yes to greater mercy and justice where you work, play, and worship? Are you saying yes to a one-world family, to a planet at peace, to the well-being of all children, everywhere?

My friends, try saying yeses aloud every day, yeses from the heart, and watch some of your yeses take wings and become more real than you could ever imagine.

As a Unitarian Universalist you've consciously thrown your lot with an unrelentingly hopeful faith, and by hope I'm not referring to optimism. The optimist tends to be fanciful and dreamy-eyed, often leaving the world's problems up to George or God, Gertrude or Goddess to solve while remaining a bouncy, mindless cheer-leader on the sidelines. The optimist resembles the person who gazes at the stars but is perennially at the mercy of puddles in the road.

Instead the hoper isn't convinced that something will happen but is willing to work his or her rear off to make sure that it might just come to be. The optimist lays back; the hoper moves forward. The hoper is an activated human being, one who arouses in self and others a **passion for the possible**. Hopers stay on purpose even when not immediately successful.

I wasn't surprised, the other day, when I discovered that the words *hope* and *hop* come from the same root, one that means "to leap up in expectation." Isn't that how it feels to be hopeful—that palpable eagerness for what is to come? When I'm hopping, I'm a real hoper, and conversely, when I hope, I'm likely to be hopping about.

Now the hoper differs from the pessimist as well as the optimist. Realism would often demand pessimism. But the hopeful person talks not in terms of crisis, a concept that usually overwhelms and immobilizes us, but in terms of issues and challenges and jobs...with our names on some of them. You see, everything grows manageable when reduced to doable tasks. Remember hope arouses passion for the possible!

The pessimist (who's but a cynic in the early stages of the disease) says: "Blessed are they who believe in nothing, for they shan't be disappointed!" Hopers, on the contrary, agree with that portion of the *Desiderata* that says: "Whatever your labors and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it's still a beautiful world."

Hopers know that the best anti-depressant available on the market involves movement of mouth, movement of body, movement of conscience, movement of heart...moving outside our own self-pity to connect with the larger world in loving deeds.

Cynicism is all around us; in fact, in the past few years, a new sort of progressive cynicism, if you will, has arisen. Progressive cynics harbor the conviction that Western culture and American society are **hopelessly** oppressive. I would agree that our culture is drenched in racism, sexism, homophobia and a whole array of interlinking oppressions. I know, for as a white heterosexual male I'm the Pharaoh in most freedom-fighter's Exoduses, simply because of my given identity. But while reality is profoundly oppressive, it isn't terminally so!

We Unitarian Universalists believe that cynicism is spiritual treason. We harbor a bias that leads us to assert that no problem in human relations is ever truly insoluble. Now we may never solve it in our lifetimes. But you and I belong to a religion that refuses to quit on justice, quit on mercy, quit on civilization. We keep on keeping on, because we're incurable hopers!

Our Unitarian Universalist goal is faithfulness not success. Especially in the greater world, it's downright crucial for each of us, in our own ways, to go on record as opposing evil. Of course, it's important to be effective in halting some of the rampant injustices in society, but if we can't stop them, then at least we must oppose them.

I can't save everyone, but I can stand at the gates of hope and sometimes people enter and sometimes they don't, but that's my job as a Unitarian Universalist sentinel: to stand watch ...to never stop singing at the gates of hope.

As author Barbara Kingsolver puts it: "The very least we can do in our life is figure out what we hope for. And the most we can do is live inside that hope."

In counseling, whenever someone feels despondent, the best therapeutic advice I can muster is to help break down their seemingly monstrous malaise into manageable units and then

to locate one or two relatively easy, beginning homework assignments—actions they can successfully achieve in order to nibble away at their misery.

The tasks may be small, they usually are, seemingly inconsequential, but slowly and surely a breakthrough may emerge. For when we're weary and beaten down, it's wise for us to do small rather than think big, to take a step rather than fantasize a leap

Thus the essence of hoping is its capacity to generate new directions, to turn problems into bite-size options. Optimism leaves us imagining; pessimism leaves us paralyzed; hope gets us going.

Sadly, morally progressive folks like Unitarian Universalists often fail to act until all the facts are in, which never happens. Or fail to act until the experts agree, which seldom occurs. Or fail to act until a more favorable time, which doesn't arrive. Consequently, lots of well-intentioned people simply never witness to our moral commitments and spiritual changes. In short, we weasel out!

Of course, we can't say or bear everything, but we can say somethings and we can bear a lot. And we must. If not now, when? If not us, who?

St. Augustine was right: "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they don't remain the way they are." So, if we really want to understand, let alone live, hope, then it's smart to celebrate these two children.

Now let's be clear. First off, we need to make sure that our anger is used for impact not injury. And secondly, we need to be careful never to mistake courage for foolishness, or doing crazy Evil Knievel kind of stuff. In short, don't confuse anger with vengeance or courage with stupidity. Anger is rage for a worthy result, and courage is boldness for a useful outcome.

Two mighty fine children are anger and courage—beautiful daughters born of hope. And you and I have been privy in the last few years to so many sterling examples of anger and courage, haven't we, since the terrorist bombings in New York and Washington D.C., the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the horrendous fires here in San Diego and the devastating hurricanes in the South. I mean, think of all the angry and courageous—therewith hopeful—people, who've chosen to convert their fury into brave deeds of compassion.

Yes, we humans are capable of answering hate and handling tragedy with sufficient anger and courage...born of hope.

You may recall that, awhile back, a bakery in Sarajevo—and one of the few that still happened to have a supply of flour—was making bread and distributing it to the starving, war-shattered people in that zone of the globe. At 4 p.m. a long line stretched out into the street. Suddenly, a shell fell directly into the middle of the line, killing 22 people instantly and spattering flesh, blood, bone, and rubble over the entire area. Not far away from the gore of ground zero lived a 37 year-old man, a musician named Vedran Smailovic.

Before the war, he'd been the principle cellist of the Sarajevo Opera—living a distinguished and civilized life, and one to which he deeply and patiently longed to return. But when Vedran saw the carnage from the massacre outside his window, he was driven by anger and courage to take action. And Smailovic resolved to do the one thing he could do best. He made music. Public music, daring music, music on a battlefield.

Every day thereafter, at 4 p.m. precisely, Vedran Smailovic put on his full, formal concert attire, took up his cello, and walked out of his apartment into the midst of the battle raging around him. He placed a little camp stool in the middle of the crater that the shell had made, and he played a concert. He played to the abandoned streets, to the smashed trucks and burning buildings, and to the terrified people who hid in the cellars while the bombs dropped and the bullets flew.

Day after day, Vedran made his unimaginably brave stand for human dignity, for all those lost to war, for compassion, for peace, for hope. Although the shellings went on unabated, and death and destruction stalked the streets, Smailovic was blessedly never hurt; even during his darkest hour when his beloved cello was itself destroyed.

I know, I know, our lives aren't as dramatic as firefighters or hurricane survivors or a cellist in the midst of warfare in a far-off land, but my fellow San Dieguitans, never ever belittle the efforts you and I can make everyday on behalf of hope. Efforts at school or work to right a wrong, efforts in San Diego to support affordable housing or foster a more inclusive Boy Scouts organization or elect a more compassionate school board, as well as efforts to create more justice and joy in your very own job or household. There will never be a shortage of ways for each of us to do what we do best...in order to make our world a wee bit better.

Come on, come on, in this crucial spring of 2008, don't fail to get angry as necessary. Don't fail to be brave when your name's called. Don't fail to join the caravan of the hopeful. For hope's the central imperative of *your* chosen faith, and hope, my friends, is the main reason for our being alive.

I charge you to be a hoper. Where? Wherever you live. When? Right now? How? Through being angry and courageous enough to make your corner of this county more merciful and more peaceful.

Imagine three candles burning slowly. The ambiance is so soft you can hear them speak.

The first candle says, "I am Faith, but these days, I'm no longer indispensable." Then Faith's flame slowly diminishes and dies out.

Then the second candle pipes up, "I'm love, and I haven't the strength to stay lit much longer. People fail to understand my power, reducing me to schmaltz and syrup." And waiting no longer, the candle of Love weakens, then goes out completely.

Suddenly, a child enters the room and sees the two candles no longer burning and begins to weep and wail: "Faith and Love, why aren't you burning? You're supposed to stay lit until the very end. I can't find my way without the two of you."

Then a third candle speaks gently yet firmly to the little girl, "Don't be afraid, my child, for I am Hope, and while I still burn, we can re-light the other two candles."

The apostle Paul said "faith, hope and love abide and the greatest of these is love." Well, folks they're all great, they're all crucial; but hope, the unsung virtue of the three, dare not get lost in the shuffle. For we can't keep faith nor share love if we're not brimming with genuine, durable hope.

For, whenever the candle of Hope remains aglow, there's enough candle power to light faith and love, throughout our homes and the world. Oh yes there is; you bet there is.

Tom Owen-Towle  
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