

*Living in Hope ~ April 10, 2005*  
*Palomar Unitarian Universalist Fellowship*  
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Life is beautiful – it offers itself to us with countless delights and loves; children, and mountains, communities and birds. Life is beautiful. So much is in bud...

Life is heartbreaking – it offers to itself to us with countless demons and losses; depression and floods, anxieties and deaths. Life is heartbreaking. There are hurts not yet forgiven...

Life is beautiful and heartbreaking. And we make our way in it the best we can, traversing these two realities.

Life brings a poignancy to its beauty and the heartbreak is inescapable no matter if we rail against the dying of the light or embrace life in all of its fullness; in all of its depth, in all of its wonder.

Let me say here that I think that there is a difference between evil and the tragic in life. The tragic - that memory dims, loves leave, all are subject to death – we must deal with finitude as one of the conditions of life.

Evil, on the other hand, is related to preventable suffering and the proper response is to work toward its elimination. Yet the heartbreak of life need not mean that we live despairing lives. Rather, it equips us with the wisdom to know the difference between natural sufferings and that which we must work to end. In the face of each – tragedy and evil - we are helped by living in hope.

In fact, I would suggest that to embrace all of life – in its beauty and tragedy, its loves and evils - is to live with an open, and even broken heart...it is to hope.

To face illness and loss, frailties and failings – our own and others’ – with the ability to seek wholeness, is to hope.

The “imagining of justice and mercy” necessary to dispel the evils of life – oppression, the poisoning of the earth, disregard for life – require our wholeness and our hope.

This is the “hope sermon” in my faith, hope and love trilogy. You may remember that I received the insight during a labyrinth meditation that key words for my ministry would be faith, hope and love.

I mentioned before that I was helped in my thinking about faith, hope and love by UU theologian, Gene Reeves, who conceives of these three – faith, hope and love - as oriented to different periods of time. Reeves suggests that faith is oriented primarily to the past, love to the present, and hope to the future.

For Reeves, as I mentioned when I spoke in February, “faith is what makes life meaningful.” He states it is “the deeply held conviction that my life – what I make of it, what I respond to, what I do - makes a difference.”

For me, that also means that faith inspires us – the meaning that we find in life grounds our actions – our love. Faith asks us to journey in love toward the future where hope lives.

As we face personal challenges, the natural stuff of life, we gain the ability to hope in other areas - and with social justice challenges - war, economic injustice and environmental degradation, this hope gains even greater import and prophetic possibilities.

But what is this hope to which we are called?

I see hope as an existential condition that asks us to live in uncertainty and toward an open future – we build boats, make plans, go to treatment, work for justice – not knowing the outcome, but nonetheless venturing forth.

Now hope often tends to be equated with optimism and wishing – and that attaches an element of expectation to it.

Optimism is that self-assertive, cheerful expectation...believing it/she/he/we will succeed. We're told to "cheer up," "look at the bright side," or that "God is on our side!" We know, however, that success is not assured and failure sometimes haunts us.

And wishing, too, is aimed at particular objects and goals – we wish that this would all go away, we wish that everything would just get back to "normal." And we know, too, that wishes don't always come true.

I want to suggest that, while they have their place in our lives, neither wishing nor optimism are realistic, or even helpful responses to our significant personal sufferings, or to the current global or social justices crises with which we are faced – for these wishes, this optimism, when dashed or unrealized leave in their wake no resources for reconstruction.

For here we must reckon with another reality that resides along side of hope – that is despair or complacency.

For it is the failure of optimism and wishing that leaves us bereft – leaves us to deal with the loss – loss of security, of health, of love, of dreams, or of meaning.

These are the times in our lives when we learn that goodness and fairness do not always prevail, that even if we do the very best that we can and treat others well, that all will not necessarily be well with us or those we love.

We are all faced with trying to make sense out of our lives when the ground has shifted beneath our feet and the bottom has fallen out – and we must somehow resist retreat to naïve optimism or the inertia of despair or complacency.

Despair is that feeling of futility and inner emptiness or meaninglessness. This puts hope and despair in a dialectic relationship.

Complacency on the other hand says, "What can, I, one person do?"

By this I do not mean that we do not grieve our losses or tragedies – for grief is a natural and necessary response to loss. During times of grief, the support and comfort we give and receive makes a space for hope.

In the face of intractable illness or unending war, we may grieve *and* we are changed... like it or not...bidden or unbidden...*in* the depths of our souls, *from* the depths of uncertainty comes the rich stuff of transformation - of losses counted, of dreams deferred, of wisdom gained, of love embraced.

Therein lays the hope...that out of the dark nights come transformation... out of endings comes new beginnings - the shape of which we know not.

We are not certain, and yet we live in hope, perhaps not for a cure, or for the return of the lover, or for the good old days, but with the possibility that wholeness is possible even if curing is not; that there is that in life that calls forth love and impulses to justice even in the midst of fear or hatred.

There is that in life that lures us to beauty, truth and goodness. And it that that is the ground of our hope.

We live in hope with the assurance that even as our heart breaks, the dove is winging its way to *us*.

This means that we remain present to the possibilities in each moment... it means we stay open in the process, even in incertitude.

When we're living in hope, we're sitting in the question mark.

I see the question mark as a new crescent moon – symbol of new beginnings.

And sometimes I'm cradled in that question mark, swinging my legs in blessed openness to the next moment; but at other times the question mark becomes an exclamation point and I'm just hanging on for dear life.

In the space that hope provides we can experience connection to ourselves and to others, in the words of theologian John Cobb, "we open to the novelty and creativity of each moment that call us to weave healing patterns out our past." Indeed, it is connection and creativity and love that express hope.

For me, hope for wholeness in my personal life has enabled me to be able to hope for the wider world.

Adrienne Rich spoke to heartbreak and hope when she wrote, "My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed, I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world."

There are those who are struggling with us in realistic hope, which abides, according to Cobb, in "those who view the threat unflinchingly." He says, "They do not deny its seriousness either in their thought or in their feelings. Yet their hope is the refusal of despair. They seek openings, assume responsibility, endure failure after failure, and still seek new openings for fresh efforts."

Perhaps those of *every* age have said, "If ever there was a time in need of fresh efforts, surely it is ours;" and certainly we are in need of such efforts in this age.

To say that these are troubled times is stating the painfully obvious. Social injustice, ethnic cleansing, and protracted occupations – a few of the challenges with which we are faced

These are uncertain times...for us all – here in this country, for our sisters and brothers across the world, for the planet.

It is in times like these that the desire for certainty is most pronounced...we look for familiar hand-holds, for a way to make sense of dizzying developments – there is a trend in the society toward grasping for certitude where none is possible.

We long for clarity – yet simple and reductionistic arguments fail to persuade. There is much ambiguity, and yet the opportunity for reasoned public discourse has never been greater.

As persons of faith we must embrace the opportunity to engage in such discourse. Not to convince another of the error of their position, but to raise our collective level of understanding, to wrestle with the ambiguity, to create new categories of thought and analysis, to imagine new possibilities.

We may join with the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office to call for an end to the violence in the Darfur region of the Sudan. We may join the UU California Legislative ministry in Marriage Equality efforts. We may join interfaith neighbors to bring a living wage to San Diegans.

By entering into and struggling with others we offer hope, live in hope, and bear public witness to our hope.

We are continually called by the Spirit of Life to work in and through the incertitude of these times – not to give pat answers and brave predictions – but to live into the possibility of a reconstituted world.

We each come, each of us, each day, with our desire to "cast our lot," to "join our solitudes in the communion of struggle."

And we are not alone in our strivings...the Spirit of Life is present in and through each moment, is indeed that connection and love that works quietly and persuasively within us all.

So much is in bud.

When the war in Iraq started a little over two years ago I was at my church for a meeting. I received a call on my cell phone – it had started. We adjourned to the lounge to turn on the television – our deepest fears playing out before us. We watched in a stunned, somber silence as the inevitable unfolded. My heart hurt. I thought of the death and displacement that was to follow.

A reporter stood outside; it was early morning in Iraq and in that moment I was struck by the absolute beauty of the sky behind him. Amidst the destruction about to occur, the sky still held its lovely clouds oblivious to horror being played out beneath in.

And then later, in a split screen shot, one screen projected the imagines of bombs falling and the other featured a reporter who had to yell to make herself heard over the din of birds clamoring and chattering in the early morning light.

And, friends, therein lays the hope - that despite the devastations of this world, hope sings and the spirit of life still lures to love. Truly this made clear Emily Dickinson's meaning when she wrote:

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

But how long can we live in hope you may ask?  
For however long there beats in the human heart the longing caused by the breath of a breeze, or the caress of the sun, the pulse of the ocean.

For however long the rush of stunned wonder is evoked in the presence of hurricanes, and earthquakes, sunsets and grizzly bears;

For however long there are human beings capable of compassion for the suffering of those unlike themselves whether the difference be in color, or language or species;

For however long there are those who feel undeniably connected with all that is - linked one to the other in a web of relationality;

For as long such people exist and raise their voices on behalf of the earth and all who dwell here - it is for that long that we may hope.

And it is in the here and now that we act in love, out of the faith that presses into this moment bearing traces of the Holy Reality, and we move forward creating the future – living in hope.

May faith inspire us, Love compel us, and hope sustain us.