



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

When hope is hard to find

Clay Nelson © 18 November 2018

Sometimes a sermon topic comes along like an interruption while I am going blithely about my life. This one came during my most recent session with my supervisor, who I check in with every couple of months to reflect on my spiritual and emotional state.

The question of hope came up after her asking my view of having an afterlife. I answered I wasn't expecting one. She was intrigued that a minister didn't believe in life after death. I told her it was worse than that. I didn't believe in a personal god either. At that point she asked where do I find hope. The question lingered with me. The next twenty minutes are my attempt to answer it.

When looking for something in my experience it is good to know what it is you are looking for. The problem is, where hope is concerned, I find it hard to describe or even where I left it last. It's not like looking for your lost car keys. Sure, we have lots of Unitarian songs that mention it. People speak of hoping all the time like they found it or at least know where it is, but what does it look like? How does it feel? How important is it that I find it? These questions will not be satisfied by a dictionary definition. If that were true I could cut this sermon down by eighteen minutes and just tell you hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen.

Unfortunately for you, I don't find a pie-in-the-sky or wishful thinking definition worth looking for. I'm going to need the full twenty minutes. After all, Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians linked hope with the mysteries of faith and love. I'm willing to look for that.

So where did we lose it? Unitarian theologian the Reverend Dr Parker suggests we are living in a post-apocalyptic world. We are living in the aftermath of devastation. The world is filled with remnants surviving fallen towers, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, famine, disease and war.

In her book *What can save us now*, Parker writes: "*We are living in a post-slavery, post-Holocaust, post-Vietnam, post-Hiroshima world. We are living in the aftermath of collective violence that has been severe, massive, and traumatic. The scars from slavery, genocide, and meaningless war mark our bodies. We are living in the midst of rain forest burning, the rapid death of species, the growing pollution of the air and water, and new mutations of racism and violence....* I'd say it hasn't got much better since she wrote that in 2006.

In the same year a haunting film was released that captures the feeling behind her words, *Children of Men*. The year is 2027. The place is southern England and the world is a different place. For some reason that scientists cannot determine, humankind around the world have become infertile. The last child born on the planet, eighteen years earlier, has just died. Humankind is less than a generation away from extinction.

Society is on the brink of collapse. Economies and governments all around the world have ceased to function. Refugees have flooded the United Kingdom, which is now a police state that is rounding up immigrants and incarcerating them in concentration camps. A suicide drug is distributed to citizens who can no longer live in a world that has no future or meaning.

And then, a militant immigrants' rights group, The Fishes, discovers that a young West African refugee named Kee is pregnant. The Fishes kidnap Theo, a disillusioned former activist who is now a government bureaucrat, and force him to help them smuggle Kee to the coast where they say they will deliver her and the child she is carrying to a mysterious group called The Human Project which is supposedly based in the Azores and dedicated to curing infertility.

To make a long story short, the film ends with Kee, her newborn baby, and Theo huddled together in a small rowboat in the English Channel in the dark of night waiting for the Human Project's ship, which bears the name *Tomorrow*. It appears through the fog only seconds after Theo dies from the wounds he sustained in saving Kee and her child from both the militants and the British Army.

The film's dark premise and uncertain end raises the question of what meaning, if any, hope could possibly have in the face of overwhelming hopelessness, futility, and despair.

Is it possible to live with hope in the face of a future that is, almost certainly, no future? Is it possible to live without hope?

These questions are real, not hypothetical, and personal, not abstract.

Where can we find hope for the earth and future generations when our factories and automobiles have put so much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere that we may have already passed the point of no return with respect to devastating climate change?

Where was hope at Auschwitz?

Where is hope for a colleague of Rachel's whose son committed suicide this week?

Where is hope for our deported Indian students still seeking permission to return to complete their interrupted education?

Where is hope for those sleeping rough on our streets?

Where is hope when we receive a terminal diagnosis, lose a mate, are made redundant too young to retire and too old to begin a new career?

So, what can I say about hope when hope is hard to find? What can I say about hope that does not ignore the reality of hopelessness, suffering, uncertainty and despair? A hope that is more than just wishful thinking or irrational optimism.

Václav Havel, a playwright and first president of the Czech Republic, tells a story that reveals finding hope in the absurdity of life:

In 1989, only a few months before I was to become, to my bewilderment, an actual head of state, I survived my own death.

I had arrived in the countryside outside Prague to visit artist friends. After a feast by a bonfire, I led a friend who had had too much to drink down a dark path toward a house nearby. In this total darkness, though completely sober, I suddenly fell into a black hole surrounded by a cement wall. The fact is, I had fallen into a sewer, into what can only be called, you'll excuse me, shit.

My attempt to swim in this fundamental mud, this strange vegetation, was in vain, and I began to sink deeper into the ooze. Meanwhile, a tremendous panic broke out above me. Local citizens flashed lights, grasped one another's arms, legs, offering limbs, articles of clothing to grab; a chaos of impossible rescue techniques followed. This brave fight for my life went on for at least thirty minutes. I could barely keep my nose above the dreadful effluvia and thought this was the end, what a way to go, when someone had the fine idea of putting down a long ladder.

Who could have known I was to leave this unfortunate sewer only to end up in the president's office two months later? I was not, after all, to have the distinction of becoming the first playwright to drown in shit.

From this experience he had these observations about where to find hope:

What was striking about the sewer experience was how hope had emerged from hopelessness, from absurdity. I've always been deeply affected by the theatre of the absurd because, I believe, it shows the world as it is, in a state of crisis. It shows man having lost his fundamental metaphysical certainty, his relationship to the spiritual, the sensation of meaning — in other words, having lost the ground under his feet. This is a man for whom everything is coming apart, whose world is collapsing, who senses he has irrevocably lost something but is unable to admit this to himself and therefore hides from it.

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in hopeless situations like prison or the sewer) is, I believe, a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't. Hope is not a prognostication — it's an orientation of the spirit. Each of us must find real, fundamental hope within himself. You can't delegate that to anyone else.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now. In the face of this absurdity, life is too precious a thing to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, and, finally, without hope.

What I take from Havel is that hope is a part of who we are and what it means to be human — “hardwired” by genetics or evolution as part of the human spirit. Hope is a natural, human capacity, like the capacity to love. It lives as much in the heart as in the mind or will.

And yet, hope is also a choice — an existential choice that goes to the heart of who we are as individual human beings and how we choose to live — whether we will live in hope or without hope; whether and how we will orient our spirits and hearts toward possibility, meaning, connection, and joy in the face of chaos, uncertainty, suffering, and despair.

So when hope is hard to find, the first place to look is within ourselves. What it looks like is not the probable but the possible. It acts as if the possible is, in fact, possible, and in doing so, may make the possible more possible. Because I believe that the future is genuinely and radically “open,” that the universe is continually evolving, that life is continually unfolding, that nothing is absolutely certain or fixed or finally determined. All things are possible. Anything is possible. There is more than enough room for hope.

There is a corollary to finding the hope within. We are unlikely to see what is right before our eyes unless we look for it within community. Linda Hansen, a Unitarian minister and professor of Philosophy has noted, “In a world of greater and greater mistrust, people are desperate for the hope found in community—the hope that it is possible not just to tolerate, but to benefit from, to live fuller lives because of, ‘the company of strangers.’ It may be that the greatest contribution our religious communities can make to the larger world is not our social justice projects—important as those are—but our modelling for the larger world an alternative reality to the mistrust, inequality, and narrow self-interest that is rampant there.”

“The way to change the world,” contemporary Unitarian activist Betty Reid Soskin tells us, “is to be what we want to see.” Hope is easier for others to find if we are being hope.

What Unitarians have to offer a world fearful of vulnerability and death is the possibility of genuine hope — hope in the world we have, hope in the finite interdependent creatures we are, hope in our relationships of love and friendship, hope in the communities we create not only with one another but with the strangers with whom we are lucky enough to be in company.

“Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted,” writes Garrison Keillor in *Lake Wobegon Days*, “but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.”

It’s taken me most of my life to become smart enough to know how lucky I am to be a human being. Now I’m beginning to know how lucky I am to be risking community with friends and with strangers who offer me a “song of love and a rose in the winter time.”