

“Hope: Yearning for What Can Be”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Readings

selection from “The Small Work in the Great Work” by Victoria Safford
“Merger Poem” by Judy Chicago (no. 464 in Singing the Living Tradition)

Sermon

Let me start by saying: it feels like a tough moment to be thinking about the theme of hope.

Truthfully, about a year ago, I had pretty much given up on hope. Hope felt like it just wasn't a robust enough emotion or spiritual virtue to stand up to the kinds of attacks we were facing on civil liberties, on immigrants, on the poor, on the LGBTQ community, on the environment, and on our democracy. There is still a part of me that feels this way.

And, this past week's news, including the U.S. Senate's passage of a tax overhaul which would put more money into the hands of corporations at the expense of students, the elderly, and the poor, does not brighten up the picture.

Yet, I also recognize that I had been thinking about hope in that flimsy, garden gate way that Victoria Safford describes - hope as the notion that “everything is gonna be all right.” My fear was that embracing this kind of hope could lead to complacency and, perhaps, an unintentional disengagement with the vast challenges before us.

We join with over 150 other Unitarian Universalist congregations that are reflecting on the theme of “hope” this month. And, in preparing for this Sunday, and for this entire month, really, I am reminded that being on a spiritual journey, whether you're a preacher in the pulpit or a congregant in the pews, isn't easy. We are asked to consider questions that are difficult and to make meaning in challenging times.

And, so it is with the theme of hope for me, because, although my approach to the emotion and value of “hope” has shifted, my heartache at the state of the world still remains.

I want to start in our reflection on hope with the season of Advent.

Advent is a time of anticipation and expectation. Like other Christian traditions it is connected to ancient pagan traditions for making seasonal transitions. It draws upon naturalistic symbolism. The evergreen wreath speaks of the vitality and endurance of life. The light of candles speaks of warmth in the cold and light in the dark.

For Christians, Advent encompasses the hope of the coming of the messiah - one who would save the world. Christians understand Jesus of Nazareth to be this messiah, and Christmas is the day that celebrates the birth and arrival of this savior into the world.

The Advent season also speaks to a greater hope - a hope spoken about in the ancient prophetic tradition of hope for a dramatically different world, a world transformed into heaven on earth - God’s kingdom made real. A world where peace reigns and justice prevails.

This ultimate hope is expressed in the words of our opening hymn this morning, O Come, O Come Emmanuel. The version we sang has been further translated from the original 9th century text to reflect our contemporary Unitarian Universalist theology.

The original first verse of the hymn may be familiar to some:

“O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear”

This text refers to a time when the people of Israel, who understood themselves as God’s chosen people, had been pushed out of their land. The familiar hymn expresses the longing for the one who can bring an end to their suffering.

The version in our hymnal extrapolates this longing out from biblical times to the modern day. It expresses the yearnings of our broken and aching hearts for the arrival of love, truth, light, and hope.

“O come, you Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your presence here. And dawn in every broken soul as vision that can see the whole.”

The words of both versions and the music itself captures so well the sense of longing embedded in the Advent season.

Although it may feel as if Christmas has already arrived, Advent reminds us that there is usually a time of waiting and preparing for the arrival of that which we most hope for. So, even as you begin to take part in holiday celebrations and festivities, I would encourage you to dwell for a bit in the spirit of Advent.

As Unitarian Universalists we, of course, have different theological beliefs. And, whether you espouse any level of Christian beliefs or not, I think that Advent offers us all an invitation. It asks us, what are we waiting for and preparing for in our own lives and in the life of our world? In this time of long nights, we can offer ourselves this time and space to sit with this question and with our own longings.

What is it that you long for?

On a personal level, this might be longing for love and intimacy. Companionship. Relief from loneliness. Longing for stillness. Quiet. Peace.

Some of your longings might turn outward. Longings that you hold for others in your life and for the world at large.

Longing for the divisions amongst us to be healed.

Longing for the safety and well-being of those subject to violence.

Longing for our collective awakening to the climate crisis.

I believe that getting in touch with these deep longings is essential as people of faith. Staying in touch with this place - often deeply buried within us - broadens our view and keeps our vision long.

Holding onto hope in these times means holding onto those yearnings and longings we have for a different reality. It means holding onto a vision of the world as it could be without knowing if we will ever get there.

Judy Chicago's poem articulates this sense of vision - it projects a world that has not yet arrived, even though it was written in 1979. A world in which all are free, all life is cherished, all are cared for. It is truly a picture of Eden.

Reading this poem today makes it clear just how far we are from fully living in that envisioned world. And, it can be painful to acknowledge what might feel like a giant chasm between what actually is and what we hope will be.

Holding onto hope can also be difficult when perhaps we are trying to have hope in something we don't fully understand.

The philosopher Jonathan Lear calls this "radical hope." And, he describes it this way: "What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it."¹

The things that we hope for may not even be things we can describe - our current culture may not provide us the language that can truly articulate that future goodness that we long for. Or, perhaps we hold hope for our own lives to be different yet we can't yet fully imagine what that would mean.

Not being able to fully articulate this future goodness also means that we can't be certain we will ever achieve it.

To have "radical hope" means to hope, without any certainty that what we hope for, will come to pass.

Lynn Ungar describes this as "a Christmas kind of hope." She writes: "It is a hope that lives in an open heart that longs for the best, but admits that we never quite know what the best will be. It is a hope that is more about listening and watching than about making

¹ As quoted by Maria Popova: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/11/28/radical-hope-jonathan-lear/> and also by Junot Diaz: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/under-president-trump-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon>

sure that everything turns out the way you planned. It is hope that stands in awe in front of the cradle, knowing that you are at the beginning of an important story without any idea of how the story will turn out.”²

We often talk about the things that are difficult in our spiritual lives, and I will dare to say that this is one of the hardest. To imagine that there is something better in store for us and to sit with the uncertainty of whether that will ever come to pass.

Judy Chicago’s poem is idealistic and, perhaps, even utopian. The far-off world she describes seems so starkly different from the world we live in today.

Yet, these “and then”s connect us back to the ancient longings of our ancestors and connect us forward to the dreams yet to be dreamed of the generations to come.

In the book, *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times*, the writer Cristina García shares a letter written to her great-great-great-great-great granddaughter.³ The letter articulates the unknowing and the aching yearning at the heart of radical hope, and, though it is written as if to a specific person, I believe it speaks to us in our time as well.

I close by sharing parts of her letter, written to Palomita, meaning, “Little Dove”:

“Muy querida nietecita,

I am writing to you from some two hundred years (or more) earlier than your birth. What I wouldn’t give to have been there, or at the birth of each of the previous six, bighearted women who preceded you. Why six? Because I am trying to imagine a world, *your* world, seven generations from now. Why bighearted? Because I trust the long line of women originating with Pilar Akiko García-Brown (b. 1992), my own luminous daughter and your great-great-great-great grandmother. I want to believe—believe fervently—that bigheartedness is a trait that can be passed on and lived fully, along with other precious bequeathals: generosity, spiritual beauty, creativity, a sense of humor, gentleness, a concern for others, hope, tolerance, a seeking nature, the ability to forgive, strength,

² “Resources for Living” column, Quest, Church of the Larger Fellowship, December 2015.

³ *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times*. Ed. Carolina De Robertis. Vintage Books, 2017.

vulnerability, encouragement, curiosity, sensuality, adventure, protectiveness, and a love for nature and all its creatures...

[some parts of reading omitted to honor copyright restrictions]

It isn't easy to change the world, corazón. No easier for you in your time than it is for us in ours. But what I wish for you is to keep trying, nietecita mía, perpetuating our most precious bequeathals, living with grace and dignity and passion—and ensuring these possibilities for all. Keep trying, too, for the seven generations who will come after you, and after them, and after them again. Sí, I wish for you adventure and loving protection both—and for you to help sustain the unbroken chain of hope.

Sending all my love to you in the future,
Tu abuelita Cristina”

May we also hold onto this unbroken chain of hope.