

Scram**A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on December 27, 2020**

This is our final Sunday service for 2020. We say goodbye to 2020. We say get lost, disappear, high tail it out, depart, scoot, skedaddle, vamoose, beat it, don't let the door hit you on the way out, clear out, go away, make yourself scarce, make tracks, take off, flee, shoo, bolt, get out, run, hotfoot it, buzz off, bugger off, git along, scramble, clear out, get away, off you go, run along, move along, shove off, take a hike, go jump in a lake, sling your hook, hit the road, vacate, leave, and finally, scram. Not using expletives was harder than you might think!

Yes, we are kicking this most horrible year to the curb. It has robbed us, bruised us, and tested us. We have lost hundreds of thousands to the pandemic and even though we are saying goodbye it will follow us into 2021. We may not be out of the woods, but 2021 promises to be better, safer, our spirits will recover. I've spent the last 9 months offering support and hope. I've encouraged you to hang in there, and to see the pandemic as temporary. I've held up acceptance, hope, gratitude, and offered messages that might keep despair from growing in our hearts, minds, and spirits. Looking back, I would not have changed this approach. It was what we needed at the time. But, perhaps it's time for me to hold you in a different way as we enter a new year.

Mid December I received an email from two members of our congregation. An email that I appreciated and have thought about daily since receiving it. The email offered a possible topic for our Sunday message. The possible message topic they were thinking of came out of a conversation they had had that morning. They wrote that the message should center "on the dichotomy of the drive and desire to improve our circumstances ("betterment"), which has served our species and civilization well, versus being grateful for and satisfied with what we have, which many offer as the definition of happiness." These words struck me and haven't left me. I, too, had been thinking along these lines. I was asking myself if I should continue with messages that led us to maintain hope, to be grateful for what we have, and to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Truth be told I was sickening myself with these messages in the end because they felt redundant, and less inspirational. But again, that was needed then.

But this is now. We need messages of strength and action. Messages not leading us to stay put but messages leading us to improve our circumstances as the email expressed. It is time for us to shed our coats of despair and to look forward to action. That's what we do as Unitarian Universalists. Would you believe I would tell you to reconsider hoping? Hope provides fuel for possibilities but hoping for it doesn't get you there. You have to start doing if you want to breathe life into hope. Otherwise, it withers into a wish and then fades into a whiff of smoke. I married a realist . . . he doesn't see the glass as half full or the glass as half empty, he wants to know who took his drink. "Hoping won't make it happen," he has reminded me on more than one occasion. It doesn't slow me down. I still believe. I still dream. I still hope. I need a realist in my life.

The other day someone made the declaration that it was time to stop hoping and to start getting it done. I almost took offense. Why look down on hope. Instead of getting defensive,

I listened. She went on to explain that without the action then hoping is meaningless. THAT made sense. HOPE is an action word – it means that a seed is being planted (action). The seed will need to be nurtured (more action). The seed will grow (and more action). Hoping is a linking verb – it links an idea without actionable results. I can be hoping for a result, but until I take purposeful actions, the hoping will be for naught. Hope holds potential. Hope drives possibilities. Hope is about hearts open to pursuing the extraordinary. You have to make the choice to stop hoping and start doing, but never give up on HOPE!

So, you see, we shouldn't abandon hope. We should eventually link our hope to action. Hope is a catalyst. When I talk with people, whether it be you, family, friends or people in our community, we can talk, talk, talk about the state of the country and the world and how awful it is: how scary climate change is, the injustice of homelessness in our community, the horrifying rise of white nationalism—all critical problems we must face. Many of us struggle right now with being able to transform that sentiment into action by seeing our place in changing this reality, and I know we/re not alone in that struggle. Our despair can be demobilizing, and demobilization serves the interests of the people in power. But, with hope as a catalyst, I know that we can move through it together, and that we all have a place in the work of building a people- and planet-centered world. As Dale Carnegie (who was probably one of the sensible ones) said, *“Inaction breeds doubt and fear. Action breeds confidence and courage”*.

Looking at crises as opportunities to rethink and reorganize our priorities will prove beneficial. Crises bring opportunities for improvements that are not always possible in other conditions. The analogy of a diamond may apply here. The beauty of the diamond comes about from the extreme experience of pressure and heat. The same is true for us. We will emerge stronger from this situation and the complex challenges we have faced and are still facing. Let's focus on a future that is filled with hope. Optimism is the tendency to see and judge things in their most positive or favorable outcome. Resilience is our ability to overcome difficult circumstances and grow in the face of adversity. These qualities will be key in our efforts to recover. When we are anxious, we tend to overestimate and exaggerate the impact of a negative event and underestimate our chances of recovery. Resiliency gives us a realistic balance. The ability to handle adversity will be another critical component to our success moving forward. The experience of the coronavirus does not have to become a traumatic and overwhelming experience that marks us for life. On the contrary, it can be an excellent opportunity to exercise our resilience — that is, to grow in the face of adversity.

Leonardo DaVinci wrote, “It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.” As Unitarian Universalists this has always been who we are. We don't wait for things to happen to us and our world. No, we are those who make things happen. This is where we find ourselves now. Rising out of despair and looking toward betterment. Let us reconnect to the present moment. Let us be accountable to one another. Let us now consider the betterment of society. Ask yourself, What can I do to make things better? Working with an intent to make things better for society is our source of happiness rather than what might bring us happiness right now, in this pandemic, which has reduced happiness to a gruel so thin we will surely starve.

Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*, wrote, "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places...where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction." This is key. If we want to be part of the movement toward creating a more just world and toward saving the planet, hope alone will not accomplish much. But for hope that ignites our spirits and sparks us to take action, there's power in that combination. We Unitarian Universalists bring hope in the here and now. Not a wishful hope. Not a hope for some distant future, but a living, breathing hope that is alive in us, right now. The vision of hope is emerging.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, in a video clip I saw around 15 years ago, used the image of a tree as a metaphor for centering oneself in times of chaos. It's been a long time, so I'm sure I'm paraphrasing greatly, but it was something like this: In wild, windy weather, if you look at the tops of trees, the ends of the branches, the tiny twigs way out there, they're shaking and swaying and moving all over the place. But look lower, at the trunk, even the roots - they're not moving. So when the storms of life start to beat you up, refocus on your center, ground yourself, and find some calm.

The teaching only gives you half of the story. You have to fill in the blank on the second half yourself. First half: When the storms of life start to beat you up, refocus on your center, ground yourself, and find some calm. Second half: Don't STAY there with the roots and the trunk forever. Stay long enough to regain the strength to go back out there, and then GO BACK OUT THERE. Reach out with your branches, experience the world, get involved, do some good. It's important that we not get too comfortable with the retreating, that we not shut ourselves off from the world. There are so many ways to contribute, some big and some small, some short term projects and some long hauls. You are needed! Your neighbors, friends and family need you. Your church needs your participation. Your political system needs your participation. We say it takes a village to raise a child. I think it takes a village to do almost anything.

We can all benefit from linking hope to action. Therefore, let us start filling our world with music and songs of hope in preparation for the great celebration that awaits us. We will meet again. We will celebrate again. Let's get started. And as for you, 2020, Scram!

May it be so.