

*Hope Lives***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on March 29, 2020**

We are all latching on to the same thing these days. Hope. Hope for our health. Hope for our national safety. Hope that a leader will rise in this crisis. Hope that we soon see the other side of this pandemic. That is what is on all of our minds right now. But we haven't reserved hope only for this crisis. Hope is part of our Unitarian Universalist theology. We live hope. In the here and now we create justice and build a world that we dream about where there is equity and compassion. It is hope that motivates us to live this way. We hope because we know there is more love somewhere. We hope.

Let us return to this morning's reading. We learned that it only takes one person, one interaction, one action to remind us that there is hope for mankind. We experienced a good example of this this past week. A reporter asked our President what he might say to Americans who are afraid. The President became angry, lashed out, and shamed the reporter. I say the President panicked. If you can't access compassion or empathy or decent emotion you don't know what to do other than panic and act out. Watching this interaction brought us back to a place where we've been since the 2016 election results were announced. Hopelessness. How will we politically, emotionally, physically, financially, spiritually survive within this hopelessness?

There is hope. There is hope for humanity. Hope lives. School bus drivers are delivering lunches to students, businesses are being offered no interest loans, neighbors are shopping for the most compromised in our communities, restaurants are feeding out of work service workers, companies are chooses to maintain the livelihoods of their employees.

All of this represents hope. It restores hope in humanity. Hope lives. These examples remind me of one of the sources of our UU theology. Direct experience. You see we are allowed to hope because we've experienced people rising to the occasion and laying down their swords to outstretch their hands. 19th Century Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing named something very important in our UU theology that relates to salvation. That is, how is it that we will be saved. He called it salvation by character. We can save ourselves and hope must be the underpinning of this idea.

Unitarian Universalist minister James Ishmael Ford tells us, "Now, while what precisely the term means has changed a bit over the years, for us, I think we can hear that our salvation, salve, that is our healing from the hurts and bruises of life, the woundedness we experience, our shortcomings we're so painfully aware of, our failing our ideals so often, and all the harm that follows these failures of our deepest aspirations, for ourselves and the world, is resolved in how we choose to live, in who we become through what we do. That is salvation by character. Healing, the great healing is in our hands. Channing preached this good news from the rooftops. Who we are counts. What we do counts."

One who has hope lives differently. To have hope is to want an outcome that makes your life better in some way. It not only can help make a tough present situation more bearable but also

can eventually improve our lives because envisioning a better future motivates you to take the steps to make it happen.

Whether we think about it or not, hope is a part of everyone's life. Everyone hopes for something. It's an inherent part of being a human being. Hope helps us define what we want in our futures and is part of the self-narrative about our lives we all have running inside our minds.

The definition of hope can differ depending on the person doing the talking. When people speak about hope in a spiritual context, it might mean believing good things will happen with faith in a higher power. They might direct their hopes outward in prayer. For others, it might mean always looking on the bright side and seeing challenges as opportunities. In other words, always "hoping for the best." Merriam-Webster's definition makes "hope" seem close to "wish": "to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true." Whatever the details, hope in general means a desire for things to change for the better, and to want that better situation very much.

Hope is not the same as optimism. An optimist generally is more hopeful than others. On the other hand, the most pessimistic person you ever met can still be hopeful about something. Hope is very specific and focused, usually on just one issue. Such as "I hope I get that job I interviewed for" or "I hope she calls me." Or, for a little kid during the holidays, "I hope I get that bike I wanted!"

Most people associate hope with a dire situation. People hope to get out of difficult circumstances. That is often when people do find themselves hoping fervently! But hope also can provide the key to making everyday life better. That's because just envisioning something hopeful gives a person a moment of happiness,. It can make present difficulties much easier to bear.

An example of that is reported by the American Psychology Association. Children who grew up in poverty but had success later in life all had one thing in common – hope. Dr. Valerie Maholmes, who worked on the research, said hope involves "planning and motivation and determination" to get what one hopes for. In a way, having hope links your past and present to the future. You have a vision for what you hope will happen. Whether it does or not, just envisioning it can make you feel better. And if it's something you can somewhat control – like the kids working to get out of poverty – then hope can motivate you to take whatever steps you need to take.

Dr. Neel Burton, a book author who writes about emotions, writes that he always asks patients for what they hope for, because if they say "nothing" then that is a sign of depression or worse. Having hope is important to the very act of being a human being. As Dr. Judith Rich writes, "Hope is a match in a dark tunnel, a moment of light, just enough to reveal the path ahead and ultimately the way out."

We all have stories of hope. So our question today is: what is your story of hope? The Rev. Mark Worth tells us, "When everything is going wrong, what gets you through? What sustains you through the loss of a job, the death of a parent or spouse or sibling, a cancer diagnosis? When your heart is broken, what gets you through? It's not a rhetorical question. I'm asking, in your darkest hour, what is your story of hope? There are few questions that can be as important as this.

The Rev. Robert Hardies of All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C., says his definition of religion is: “people telling stories of hope.” That’s people like us, “telling stories that sustain us, that inspire us, stories that give us courage in difficult times.”

As religious people we search for stories of hope. Siddhartha Gautama almost lost hope when he came to realize that all people get sick, all people grow old, and all people die. But he searched for an answer until he found enlightenment – and became the Buddha, “the one who is awake.” Even Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He felt alone and abandoned. But three days later, his followers somehow – somehow – experienced his continuing presence among them, and something new was born.

And so, while I don’t know about you, I have faith in the future. And when I talk of faith, I don’t mean “belief” in the way that some people do. By faith I mean trust. It’s not so much a theological position. It’s really a matter of confidence. Faith. Trust. Confidence. It is, as a Warsaw Ghetto survivor said, “I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.” Bernice Johnson Reagon of the singing group Sweet Honey In the Rock, tells about how songs lifted the spirits of the Civil Rights marchers and workers during the 1950s and ‘60s. Raising their voices with freedom songs, in the gospel cadence of the black church, Reagon and her fellow marchers could feel the songs change the atmosphere. The freedom songs built community, nurtured courage, and fostered hope.

Is that realistic? Can we sing ourselves into a better world? Can we live out the stories of hope? I say yes. It is my faith that we can build a better world. I have hope for the future, and trust that we can live in justice and harmony and peace. We cannot expect a world free of illness, suffering or pain, but we can sustain one another in communities of respect and compassion and loving-kindness. I have this faith. And I believe my hope is realistic.” Hope lives.

May it be so.