

“More Important than Oxygen”
a sermon delivered at
the Unitarian Universalist Church
Central Square NY
by Dave Weissbard
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READING
from **Eternal Hope** by Emil Brunner

What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life. Take oxygen away and death occurs through suffocation, take hope away and humanity is constricted through lack of breath; despair supervenes, spelling the paralysis of intellectual and spiritual powers by a feeling of senselessness and purposelessness of existence. As the fate of the human organism is dependent upon the supply of oxygen, so the fate of humanity is dependent upon the supply of hope.

. . . Hope means the presence of the future, or more precisely it is one of the ways in which what is merely future and potential is made vividly present and actual to us. Hope is the positive, anxiety is the negative, mode of awakening the future. Through anxiety and hope [people] relate [themselves] to the future in passive expectation. But [they] may also have an active rather than a passive attitude towards the future. [They] may make plans and projects in order to shape the future according to [their] wishes. Through such an active attitude [people] imagine [themselves] to be the architect[s] of [their] own destiny. . .

But no one can altogether conceal from him [/or her] self the fact that [we] are far from being the unqualified arbiter[s] of our future. [We] cannot remain unaware that [our] power and freedom to shape the future is limited because [we] are dependent on factors over which [we have] no control.

THE SERMON

[ambivalence]

Our subject this morning is hope. As the reading suggested, there is a sense in which hope is as critical to us as oxygen, and yet hope has a problematic dimension. We have some ambivalence towards hope in our culture.

George Herbert suggested that “He who lives in hope, dances without music,” and later referred to hope as “the poor man’s bread.” In **Poor Richard’s Almanac**, Ben Franklin suggested that “[One] who lives on hope will die fasting.” Edgar Watson Howe wrote, “Hope lies to mortals, and most believe her.”

On the other hand, we have Samuel Johnson,

“It is necessary to hope, though hope should always be deluded: for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are yet less dreadful than its extinction.”

Martin Luther, in his **Tabletalk**, observed that:

Everything that is done in the world is done by hope. No husbandman would sow one grain of corn if he hoped not it would grow up and become seed; no bachelor would marry a wife if he hoped not to have children; no merchant or tradesman would set himself to work if he did not hope to reap benefit thereby.

And then there are the words from our reading:

What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life. Take oxygen away and death occurs through suffocation; take hope away and humanity is constricted through lack of breath. . .

Hope, as we understand it, is not truly universal. Many cultures have been centered around a cyclical understanding of existence. If existence is a recurring phenomenon with no change observable from epoch to epoch, then the only hope is to somehow get off the eternal treadmill, but that has no effect on the treadmill itself.

Judaism developed a sense of linear history. According to its teachings, there was a beginning and history has been continuous and directional ever since. Judaism has a sense of purpose and a sense of progress. It has a dream of a future when the messiah will come and usher in a time of peace “when the lamb and the lion will lie down together.”

Christianity, the child of Judaism, arose with the claim that the Messiah had, in fact, already come. The problem was that he was not recognized for who he was and so was crucified as a common criminal. But that, his followers decided, was actually a part of a divine plan, and he will return soon to usher in the millennium. For the Christian, the source of hope lies in the belief that the father-God cared so much for our human condition that he sent his only begotten son to serve as an atoning sacrifice to ransom us from the necessity of paying for the sins of our ancestors. Now, that is a truly complicated concept. We are asked to believe that a father who made all the rules had a son who was fully god and fully human, who was made to suffer to pay off our debts. And then, after he suffered, the laws of nature were interrupted to raise the son from the

dead. Belief in such a Byzantine theological structure demands a great deal of faith, and, as theatre-people say, quoting Coleridge, “a willing suspension of disbelief.”

[humanistic optimism]

As knowledge increased and people gained understanding, and thereby some measure of control of the world around them, there was, among some people, an observable shift away from that traditional faith and an increasing emphasis on the ability of the human species to work toward its own perfection. As we learned more and more about the nature of nature, that is, about the laws under which the universe appears to operate, and we learned how to intervene in those processes, our species became increasingly self-confident. We looked back at where we had been, and we looked at all we had accomplished, and we knew that it was good. And we decided that we were capable of almost everything, and Humanism was born.

[and yet. . .]

Many years ago, rummaging in the basement of the meetinghouse First Parish in Bedford, Massachusetts, which was constructed in 1817, I found, in a dusty frame, an old illuminated poster which bore the words of an old Unitarian affirmation:

We believe in:

The Fatherhood of God,

The Leadership of Jesus

The Brotherhood of Man, and

The Progress of mankind onward and upward forever.

Unitarians were more blatant about it than some, but that last phrase spoke of a broad American attitude. Noting the sexist dimensions of the language, there was confidence in “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” Now that was hope. No, it was more than hope, it was trust; it was certainty: given just a little more education and a little more science, the world would be perfected.

It must be acknowledged that this confidence was not necessarily evenly distributed throughout society. Those who were on the bottom rungs were much less confident. Those who were doing well wanted to see the present trends continue. Those who did not see their children starving, those who had a sense of power over their own lives, those who were never dragged out of their homes by the authorities of the state and deprived of their liberty or their lives, found comfort in imaging the status quo continuing and getting even better. Those who were less fortunate tended to continue to focus on the religious hope of the coming of a Messiah who would turn the status quo upside down.

But then came the Second World War, and the holocaust: the willful destruction of six million Jews, and gypsies and homosexuals – not even as pawns in a war, but as a blight to be eliminated. Then came the explosion, by what we believed to be the most peace-loving nation on the planet, of a weapon more terrible than any before in history. The Second World War put our species in touch with itself in a new way, and even among confident Unitarians, that old affirmation of hope was stored in basements

because who in their right mind could any longer affirm a belief in “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.”

[despair]

Not only did naive hope move from center stage, it seemed to be replaced by despair. In literature, in film, in the common culture, the more despair replaced hope, the more reality seemed to justify it. People began to question whether any real progress had been achieved. Have we really moved that far from the caves? Is our killer instinct really a thing of the past, or does it merely sleep from time to time?

As the secular hope faded, there was a resurgence of sacred hope. People returned to the ancient theology in droves. Liberal denominations have suffered while those churches which offer the security of an ever-present, all-powerful, all-knowing father who will ultimately protect his obedient children, have grown by leaps and bounds. Look at the TV shows that feature angels intervening in life. Angels are very in – even among some Unitarian Universalists. Practical solutions of the myriad problems we face seem so distant, that what was unbelievable has again become believable to those who were suffocating without hope. There are people who are sustained by their confidence in the existence of a divine plan and magical interveners. You do what you can to keep on going.

The Camelot days of the sixties restored hope for some, but then came the morass of Vietnam and the movement of the hands of the doomsday clock toward midnight as mutually assured destruction saw two world leaders with their fingers on the buttons that could end it all.

An important element of the campaign which took Bill Clinton into the White House was that he was the “man from Hope, Arkansas.” Some people really bought into the “hope” theme, but those hopes were soon dashed by the reality of politics.

[theology of hope]

The Clinton theme tapped into the rise within mainline Christian churches following World War II of what has been called a “Theology of Hope.” While traditional in its language and in many of its concepts, the theology of hope took the radical stance that we have the responsibility for changing the world, and from the Theology of Hope there emerged the various liberation theologies among Hispanic, African American, and feminist cultures.

The African American theologian James Cone says:

No [theological] perspective is sufficient which does not challenge the present order. If contemplation about the future distorts the present reality of injustice and reconciles the oppressed to unjust treatment committed against them, then it is unchristian and thus has nothing whatever to do with him who came to liberate us. It is this that renders white talk about heaven and life after death fruitless for black people. We know all about pearly gates, golden streets, and long white robes. We have sung songs about heaven until we were hoarse, but it did not change the present state or ease the pain. To be sure, we may “walk in

Jerusalem jus' like John" and there may be "a great camp meeting in the promised land," but we want to walk in this land – "the land of the free and the home of the brave." We want to know why cannot Harlem become Jerusalem and Chicago the Promised Land? What good are golden crowns, slippers, white robes or even eternal life, if it means we have to turn our backs on the pain and suffering of our own children? Unless the future can become present, thereby forcing us to make changes in this world, what significance could [theology] have for black people who believe that their self-determination must become a reality NOW! White missionaries have always encouraged blacks to forget about present injustice and look forward to heavenly justice. But Black theology says, "No!" insisting that we either put meaning into Christian hope by relating it to our liberation, or drop it altogether.

That kind of theology has been invigorating the churches of Latin America and many African American churches in the United States. It is a theology of hope – but not of hope in another world – hope in this world. It is a theology which acknowledges the existence of evil and that demands the kind of systemic changes which will transform society. It has not become a major force in our society.

St. Augustine observed that " Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are." The anger part of hope worries us: look at our reaction to the passion of The Rev. Jeremiah Wright's preaching of black liberation theology.

Sad to say, the kind of hope and progress in which we white liberals believed has been pale by comparison. Too often, ours was hope for larger homes and happier children and peaceful retirements. As raving individualists, we have tended to celebrate individual hopes "and, oh yes, can we have more of the same for our friends, if there is enough left over."

[many kinds]

It should by now be clear that there are several kinds of hope. One is the passive kind of hope which believes that there is a power that will protect us and requires little from us.

The story is making the rounds again about the faithful believer who was not fazed by the forecasts of floods because of a hurricane that was moving in, because he knew that God would protect him. As the waters began to rise, a National Guard jeep appeared at his door and he was urged to evacuate. "I have hope in the Lord," he told the guardsmen, "He will protect me." As the water rose to the second floor and he was hanging out the window, a boat came by and he was urged to get in. "No need," he said, "I have hope in the Lord and He will protect me." As the waters continued to rise, the man was driven to the roof, and a helicopter came along and a ladder was dropped to him, but he declined to avail himself of it, telling the rescuers, "I have hope in the Lord and He will save me." And the waters continued to rise and he drowned. As he passed through the pearly gates, he demanded to see God. "How could you let me die," he

asked. "I had hope in you, I trusted you, and you did nothing." And God said, "What more could I do? I sent you a jeep, a boat and a helicopter!"

There are people who go through life passively expecting that they will be taken care of if only they believe. It is remarkable how often they survive.

And then there is the kind of faith I spoke of earlier which believed that progress would be "onward and upward forever" and that we would make the world perfect if only we had a little more education and a little more science. That was an earnest kind of hope, but it was not very deep – it was not well suited to dealing with adversity. One of its problems was that it was too limited – it did not factor in those among our brothers and sisters who were less fortunate than we - it focused too narrowly and therefore did not have deep roots.

[active hope]

The kind of hope which the theologians and the psychologists and the political scientists speak of as essential is what Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker has referred to as "active hope." That is the kind of hope which looks realistically at the world, sees challenges to be addressed, and sets about addressing them. He says:

One group of the population is passive, the other group is progressive; one is holding back and living on false hopes, the other is moving forward spirited by active hope.

A large segment of the passive group is suspicious of change, as suspicious as the peasants who fought the first vaccinations against smallpox. Many feel too powerless and helpless to fight City Hall. They frequently display a doomsday philosophy and the belief that everything is up to the government anyway. They pay their taxes and go to war because Big Daddy says so.

The second group responds to new events with keen interest and renewed hope in the betterment of the lot of mankind. It has been people of this group that have tirelessly struggled for progress and, indeed, have advanced civilization to a point where they succeeded in pressuring their governments to build such monumental institutions as the United Nations and adopting universal policies of human rights. Frail as these first steps may appear, in the history of mankind they are giant steps. When we consider the relative shortness of time since the rise of civilization, these milestones are a far cry from the time of burning witches or a world with no law, rule unopposed by brute force.

[dying epochs]

I believe that part of our despair today is the result of our failure to understand that every dying epoch goes through a spasm in which it flails about, trying to cling to life. The Chinese ideogram for crisis is also the ideogram for opportunity. If we were to allow our defeats to so discourage us that we give up the struggle, if we were to choose the passive path of least resistance, then we would probably deserve the defeat we would experience.

We find ourselves in a time of great anxiety. We have gone from living in one of the most admired nations on the face of the earth, to living in what surveys show has

become one of the most feared. We have gone from being confident in our liberties, to learning that our phones can be tapped, our banks accounts and homes secretly searched, and that we can be imprisoned indefinitely without a trial because someone labeled us an enemy. We thought we lived in a country safe from enemy attack, and we have learned that our oceans do not protect us. And to all that, we now add rampant economic insecurity. I depend upon a retirement fund that today is 28% smaller than it was nine months ago, and I know I am not alone. Millions fear they will lose their homes. Many of them, and millions of others, fear they will lose their jobs. It feels as if the ground has been pulled out from beneath our feet, and the truth is that we are more secure than those who have been living on the edge of disaster right along. How dare I speak of hope in a time like this? How far in the sand have I stuck my head?

[the election]

The election campaign, now blessedly completed, had a lot to do with hope. Both candidates used the word change, but one was deemed more believable in that context. Obama supporters who were interviewed in exit polls talked a lot about hope. The election was about the elusive dream that people can shift the direction of our society in positive ways. It was about a kind of naiveté. If you look back at the speeches of the President-elect, they were never about him as hero, as messiah – they were about the people, about us. I have no certainty that we will not be let down, our hopes not dashed, but I am hope-full.

[naïve?]

One of the books on my short list of the most valued is Paul Rogat Loeb's, **The Soul of a Citizen**. One of the passages I cherish is one in which he quotes a young woman from Atlanta who pointed out that the people she knew who had given up because the challenges were too great could make as good case for their position as those who remained optimistic. However, when she considered who she would rather be with, it was the people who were willing to fight on for what they believed to be right even in the face of defeats, those who still had hope in the face of despair.

We Unitarian Universalists tend to get labeled and dismissed as “bleeding heart liberals” because of our commitment to a more just and loving world. The realists out there know that what really counts is standing up for number one, doing unto others before they can do unto you. But when you consider the company we get to keep, in contrast to the crowd those so-called “realists” travel with, I'm happy to accept the label.

Martin Green, in his book, **Prophets of a New Age**, wrote:

What we have in our New Age is only a cleft in a mass of storm clouds, through which a shaft of light gleams. It's the whole sky that is covered, and the clouds have that coppery gleam that means trouble – to put it mildly. The shaft of light is not much.

He acknowledges:

That is not a very brilliant metaphor, either; rather familiar and tired; but the weariness is part of its truth – any hope we have must be against hope.” We

have already heard every promise, as well as every threat, and every possible analysis of our situation. So our sense of reality tells us to be realistic, to stop hoping. But that is because hope in itself belongs primarily to the naive strains in our temperamental mix; it is restrained and restricted by the authoritarian and the systematic strains. Only by trusting to our naiveté, believing in the possibility of a New Age, can we recharge our batteries.

As I told the children, in the ancient myth, Pandora was sent by the gods to Prometheus and his brother – one version says she was sent to curse them; another says to bless them. Regardless, the story says she opened her box to peek and all of the contents save one, escaped from the chest. The one blessing remaining was Hope, and it alone could mitigate the damage done by the others.

The benediction with which I grew up and which I have used throughout my ministry speaks of “the Hope that never dies.” I am not suggesting that our hopes are not challenged and often battered. I do not believe that the world in which we live is rational, that it can be depended upon to operate on the basis of laws that we can ever fully understand. I do believe that somehow, it is possible for each of us to do something during the course of our lives that will make some difference on the side of goodness and justice. It is that hope, that confidence which has given shape and meaning to my life. I cannot reason you into certainty that my hope is justified; there is, however, nothing more certain than that giving in to despair always means defeat.

It is my experience that the church is critical in times like these. When facing uncertainty, one of the most important sources of strength is the knowledge that we are not alone in our hope and commitment. Our Universalist forebear, John Murray, proclaimed in his first sermon in the New World, that our churches should be about delivering “Not Hell, But Hope and Courage.”

Do you have a hope chest?

How healthy is your hope?

What is its shape?

What are you going to do because of it?

Can you share it?