

Hope: Hype or Practice
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Tryon
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Abstract: By the time we get to the age we are, we have had numerous reasons to lose, or re-evaluate, or dismiss hope, and even “fuggedaboutit” ... Hope’s not worth it. “*Been there, got let down, why return to Hope?*” In his talk on _____ Marc Mullinax will address the practice of hope as an essential human and core spiritual practice. Hope is more than a vitamin pill, more than icing on the cake of a good life, more than some religion’s hype. It is at the core of who we are already; hope is the software we are born with, and to lose hope is to lose our humanity. To live out hope is an essential human task.

Reading: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front, by **Berry, Wendell**

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.*

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.*

*Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.*

*Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.*

*Listen to carrion – put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.*

*Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.*

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*So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?*

*Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.*

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*As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.*

On January 18, 1915, six months into WWI, as all Europe lay convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal: *The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.* When she said “Dark,” she seems to be saying mysterious or inscrutable, not terrible. How often we mistake the mysterious for the terrible. How often do we, with television news on, consider ourselves to be at the end of things, end of a civilization, end of an era. Darkness, gloom, global warming, useless leadership, ISIS, terrorism. Are you sometimes tempted like me to think, or post on Facebook, that the end really is near? Does our imagination fail us when it comes to the future? Darkness, gloom, bad leaders. Darkness gloom, bad leaders. Scenario after scenario playing re-runs in our heads where there is no way forward?

I suggest that far stranger things have happened than the “end of the world.” Those of you alive in 1989 ... Who imagined the end of the Soviet Union as you had known it all your lives? The fall of the Berlin Wall? Who dreamed of Nelson Mandela, a prisoner for 27 years, becoming the president of that most unlikely state South Africa? Who woulda thunk that in the summer of 2015 the Supreme Court of this land would make gay marriage a constitutional right? Are these accidents?

Let us face an obvious: We are not// who we feared //we would become. Forces are at work, I tell you, that say, “It is too early to go home. Giving up prematurely closes accounts with reality.” Listen to them. [slowly] History is not some gross balance sheet of always-obvious always-dualistically-opposed forces attacking and retreating. Nah, that's big screen stuff. History is more the crab scuttling sideways, or a drip, drip, drip of soft water wearing away the mountain. Sometimes a few passionate people do change the world; but most often they are the first snowflake // in the first moment // of an avalanche /// that will involve trillions of other flakes.

Anyone really alive changes, or interrupts, their status quo. Just ask Martin Luther King, Jr. Seeking a holy interruption to his status quo, he looked for changes with lenses ground in hope. *“I have a dream.”* To hope is to gamble, to bet on the future, to wager that an open and vulnerable heart is better than gloom and a gun. *“Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the entire staircase.”* To hope is dangerous, but this danger we do not fear, for it is the risk of living as we are meant to live. *“I have been to the mountaintop. And I've seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But my eyes have SEEN the glory of the Lord!”* This kind of hope is the core of who we are. *“Everything that gets done in the world is done by hope.”*

So, my friends, let's see what this risk is all about! Because as Brother Martin said, *“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”*

First of all, hope means getting in the game, staying involved in life. Even in gambling there is no lottery ticket unless one rises from the easy chair to purchase one. And whether you get involved in this life may depend on whether your family was a player. In this case, did your family feed on hope, or dwell in gloom? I'll never forget Mrs. Mashburn in our church when I was growing up. “A fine day, Mrs. Mashburn, a great day to be alive!” “Well,” imitating Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh*, “But it's going to rain tomorrow.” Getting involved and staying in the game means living a life of noticing this wild, precious, miraculous day. Turning off the news, turning down the volume of the background white noise, and ... noticing. Noticing the way that maple tree just keeps holding on to its brilliant red leaves. That's got to be news, right? Noticing the spaces between the music notes, instead of the notes themselves. Seeing the Jehovah Witness door-knockers as the pioneers of First Amendment religious freedom that they are, instead of

the interruption everyone says they are. Get with it. Stay involved. Start buying those lottery tickets. Hope is a verb, with its sleeves ever rolled up.¹

Second, what if the emergency that FOX or CNN breathlessly reports is there ... really isn't? When something happens fast and becomes breaking news that takes us over, we can oftentimes just give up, get all fearful & anxious, and we ... freeze. It's like we have this love affair with defeatism, when people find the end of the world easier to imagine than change. It's like the phone-text that my friend's mom once sent him: "Start worrying. Details to follow" When the waves come, we dwell more on their heights and speeds, on how much damage they do, rather on how to surfboard them. One way to re-imagine all this: In the word emergency is the word emergence. What new thing is about to be born? Hafiz the Sufi poet wrote: *Fear is the cheapest room in the house ... I'd like to see you in better conditions*. In the calculus of hope, see emergence more than emergency.

Third on my list, O Candidates of Hope, is incrementalism. Gradualism. I was born in a world of walls, Jim Crow, profiling, hate crimes, domestic violence, homophobia, perennial national enemies, Cold War, to start a list. But now, while nowhere near perfect, we inhabit a world that was unimaginable a few decades ago. What happened? ... *Only what did not make the news*. People kept up their quiet reading of Thoreau, Emerson, Harper Lee, Shakespeare, Mary Oliver, the Constitution. They kept singing. They kept hope alive. They changed and they still change our culture, creating grassroots, from-the-bottom movements. Our culture is still powered by writers, with ideas that remain the most dangerous things around. Meters get moved, slowly. And we sit in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.

Hope that is quick and easy is spelled h-y-p-e. Hope is not a quick fix. History is made not by great men and women, but by average dreamers, meeting on common ground, turning dreams into deeds, inspiring millions of quiet followers to join, who link arms together to make turning points, and then watersheds, and finally points of no return. An idea whose time has NOT come, no matter how wonderful, is not going anywhere. But when the idea falls seed-like into prepared and cultivated human soils, sequoias happen. But sequoias take centuries. And sequoias can grow in no other way. So too, hope.

Gandhi said, "First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win." These stages take time. Slavery took almost a century to end. But the abolitionist movement won, and that fueled the women's rights movement, which survived to cross-fertilize the civil rights movement, which provided both vocabulary and a tool box for gay rights. Where will this train stop? Try as he might, #45 cannot stop these deep rooted, baked-in movements. Spreading seeds of hope is not a quick trip to Lowes, but a plunge into the unknown uncertain. But that's where hope begins its long and winding road. Hope is not so much a destination, but the way, the Tao, the road.

¹ David Orr.

“Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.”²

Fourth, hope, and the faith to hope, are mystical. There is no standard, boilerplate blueprint for hope, just preparation for it. It may be that our greatest task is but to gamble, to seek out a plot of ground, some community, and scatter seeds. Which rats might eat. Or they might rot. Or a developer might build a condo over them. But Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Whitman, Woolf achieved their greatest impact – surprise, surprise! – decades after they died. They were seed-scattering gamblers of the first order. And while you cannot map a direct road from their lives to our, our times would not be the same without them.

One day in Auschwitz, the writer Primo Levi recited a canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and that poem reached out from 600 years of dormancy to roll back Levi's despair and dehumanization. He lived, and became one of the Holocaust's greatest writers, perhaps inspired by these words: “*Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang; / Ye were not made to live like unto brutes, / But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge.*”

It is not the Holocaust that I worry about, as horrible as it was. It's boredom. Every seed we succeed in planting, every word we leave behind, no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it – is a victory wrenched from the powers of blasé, I-don't-care-boredom. Our main battle is against the concretized forces of status quo.

But the light we can make today, I trust, gives a young person a different path to take tomorrow. You and I are beneficiaries of untold millions – no billions – of light bearers in the past, whose stories we shall never know, but who have contributed to our rich lives, because they sowed seeds of hope.

There is something stubborn about hope. It has little to do with that part of us that thinks that if we just diet right, or work out hard enough, or take the right vitamin cocktail, and contribute to NPR and eat our kale ... then hope happens. Nope. No shortcuts. We need to filibuster the Heavens. The problem is not that God forgets us. The problem is when we stop wanting hope and justice. Are we willing, or not, to get down and dirty long enough to be transformed by what is a burning-hope in us? Long enough to then release that newborn into the world? We have to WANT it, even if the universe as we know it laughs in scorn. We must stubbornly wrestle today's hope into existence, like our ancestors wrestled today's equality, peace, and freedom into reality.

Hope is the muscle of the imagination, not to be any more neglected than our heart muscle. It is to be exercised ... put through its paces. Every day. The world will give us crap, the world will give us many reasons to doubt, many reasons to be certain that hope is no more than

² Ann Lamotte

whistling through the graveyard. That to hope is somehow to deny the blunt force instrument of reality. I am here today to declare otherwise!

My wife, who is preaching at this moment in Swannanoa, once worked with Palestinians in the West Bank. She told me once of the illegal Palestinian settler, squatting on what to him was termed illegal land, but who nevertheless spent his days planting and tending fig trees, all of which could be plowed under on any given day or, if they survived, would not produce a crop for another 5-7 years. [Just give that a moment.]

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers – wrote Emily Dickinson
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -³*

Author E. B. White wrote books that are still best sellers, like *The Elements of Style*; *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*. He also wrote hundreds of wonderful letters.

In March of 1973, he wrote the following reply to a Mr. Nadeau, who sought White's opinion on what he saw as a bleak future for the human race.

Dear Mr. Nadeau:

As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness.

Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say, the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society—things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly. It is quite obvious that the human race has made a queer mess of life on this planet. But as a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right. Our curiosity, our relentlessness, our inventiveness, our ingenuity have led us into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable us to claw our way out.

Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.

Sincerely, E. B. White⁴

We can lose our hat, get discouraged. Despair. See no reason to wind the clock. And there will be bottom-feeders who will want to drag us down to their level. I don't know your

³ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R. W. Franklin (Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴ Source: *Letters of E. B. White*, edited by Dorothy Loblano Guth.

stories that well, or the pains, the setbacks. But I do know we have some pretty irresistible forces to manage. They have names, like your CEO, a president, some boss, perhaps a relative who keeps on tearing ya' down, denying your humanity, your worth, your part and portion on Earth. /// What do you do with all the poo? One **can** stockpile it until it becomes a toxic mess. Or you can turn it into fertilizer. All the crap they're handing out, it's just fertilizer. This is job One of hope: making fertilizer out of the compost of our times.

Exhibit A is something I brought to show you today. I've taken this cross to Cuba and around the WNC area, to demonstrate the power of hope that transforms poo into fertilizer. Wiley Dobbs is on death row in Georgia. He would be dead by now, except for his case's complications that slow down the death machinery there.

What he does is take the blue and white towels of the prison system, and over the weeks and months pulls out a few threads so as not to make anyone suspicious, and these he knits. It takes quite a while to gather enough thread on the down-low to knit a cross this size. But that, my friends, is visible hope. All the poo our systems give him ... it's just fertilizer. He told me once, "The state seeks to bury us but what they don't know is they're helping me plant seeds."

The Journey

*One day you finally knew, writes poet Mary Oliver,
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!" each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little, as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,*

*and there was a new voice
which you slowly recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.”*

Final story: Back in 1986, before South Africa was free and President Nelson Mandela was Prisoner Nelson Mandela, I heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak outside the South African embassy in Washington. His words, directed to those within that embassy, went like this:

You inside, do you hear me? You have lost already. Do you understand what that means? You on the inside have already lost and we on the outside have won. We all know how this struggle for freedom and liberation will turn out, for God is on the side of the oppressed. It's not, “We shall win.” Oh No. We have already won. Only you have just not yet realized it. We outsiders have, and we know the future. We are that future. Come outside and meet your future.

Conclusion: Impossible things takes a little longer, but when fertilized with hope, they become possible. All I can do — what I am called to do — is to plant myself at the gates of Hope — not the prudent gates of Optimism, nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance.⁵ Don't like the news? Keep winding your clock, go out and make some news of your own. Plant sequoias. Stay strong! Practice resurrection.

Benediction: We can get drunk on the liquor of despair and hopelessness. And stay drunk, oblivious to the signs of hope that we each are. Or, we can sip the liqueur of hope, little by little, and change the world. We are made of magic, of lighter and finer stuff than your local prophet of doom says. O yeasty seeds, spread yourselves in this world, and grow!

⁵ Victoria Safford, “The Small Work in the Great Work,” *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times*.