

Hope in the Dark
Rev. Linda Simmons
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It is an interesting time to talk about hope, what so many consider a quality associated with faith, religion and I know too with weakness. I know that sometimes hope is considered something that is left to those who sit in contemplative prayer and do not have the power and/or the ability to affect real change. I understand the sentiment.

And yet, and yet, do you ever wake up hopeless or spend moments hopeless? That heaviness, that aloneness, coupled with a sense of inability to make a difference in whatever situation that is driving us down is breathtaking.

It is a state that numbs our ability to reach out and to give and to receive. It is a dark and empty and barren place without capacity. So although hope seems without power, without it, we are powerless.

Joanna Macy is an environmental activist, author, scholar of Buddhism, and deep ecology. She is the author of many books including, Active Hope: How to Cope with the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy.

Macy writes about what she calls active hope. Here are its qualities:

- Active Hope takes a clear view of reality
- Active Hope requires something from us – a vision – a direction we want to move in, the values we'd like to see embraced
- And, Active Hope becomes the steps we take to move forward¹

Hope for Macy is not a byproduct of action, it is the basis for action. It is what keeps action alive.

People who shape change all talk about hope, like Patrisse Cullors, artist, organizer, freedom fighter and cofounder of Black Lives Matter. She writes that the purpose of Black Lives Matter is “to provide hope and inspiration for collective action, to build collective power to achieve collective transformation, rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams.”²

Providing hope is one of the first things Patrisse mentions, hope not as a palliative measure or a measure relieving pain or alleviating a problem without dealing with the underlying cause, but hope that gives courage so that visions can be built and sustained; hope as fuel to relieve underlying causes.

¹ Quoted in sermon by Rev. Alison Cornish, “Hope in the Dark” Main Line Unitarian Church, July 31, 2016
<http://paipl.us/2016/08/30/sermon-hope-in-the-dark/>

² Ibid.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy and one of my personal heroes. He writes among many others things, the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He said that we bring each other and the world into existence by way of words, a world that in turn names each of us and gives us life, and that this gives births to us and our humanity only when we are equal players in dialogue. About hope he wrote that “without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle.”³

As I wrote this I began thinking, but oh we have been writing and speaking and hoping and struggling for justice for so many years, and how far have we come only to see so much of what we have created erode before our very eyes. All the more reason to hope my dear friends!

I was interviewed by the INKY Mirror the other day about immigration and what is happening with the non-renewal of the temporary protective status TPS for El Salvadorans. I spoke about the work that we are doing through the Immigration Resource Center and with immigration lawyers to see if we can find another status to offer people losing their TPS status'. My interviewer said that he was not hopeful about the prospect of this happening and asked if I was. I was surprised to find myself saying that without hope how could I find the courage to get up each day and offer people compassion and courage and do the work of seeking another path that is more humane?

Virginia Woolf wrote ‘the future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.’⁴ I think she meant that it is best if we do not know what the future brings or we might all go crazy. Hoping in the dark, keeping our humanity alive in the unknown is required of us I believe, more now than ever.

Rebecca Solnit in her book Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities writes, “Hope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises...hope doesn’t mean denying reality. It means facing them and addressing them by remembering what else the 21st century has brought (besides the attack on civil liberties and minorities of all kinds and the media, economic inequality, the erosion of social services, and climate change denial and erosion of its protections).

“Hope doesn’t mean denying these realities. It means facing them and addressing them by remembering what else the twenty-first century has brought, including the movements, heroes, and shifts in consciousness that address these things now.”⁵

In that same INKY interview, my interviewer asked me if I thought showing up and telling people I stood with them as a human being and advocate, even as I admitted that I did not have answers, made a difference. I responded by relating a story. I told him that when we

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2016), xii.

first started meeting to put together the materials for the Immigration Resource Center in our diverse team of people from all over the island, we were so overwhelmed.

We kept delaying and delaying saying that we were not ready, what if someone came in and had a question we could not answer or did not know where to refer them to for an answer? And then one of the people on our team who is undocumented said to us, "You know, just that you are here, that you listen and care and open these doors and when someone walks in that you look them in the eyes and see their humanity and want so deeply to help them...this is more than they had without you. Please, open the Immigration Resource Center now." We opened the following week. So yes I said, I think it makes an ultimate difference to see another's humanity. I base my life on that belief.

Solnit goes on to say in her book, Hope in the Dark: "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes... Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable...It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand."⁶

As Unitarian Universalists, we are a people of science and facts. Some say if we were a state we would be Missouri, the 'show me' state. And yet, we are also a people who take risks time and time again throughout history:

The Edict of Torda which in 1568 dared to proclaim that no one be persecuted for the religion they practice and whose Unitarian writer, Francis David later died in jail where he was sent for his radical views. Or standing for the rights of the mentally ill and those on death row and the rights of children to be fairly educated in the 1800s. Or more recently standing on the front lines in the 1970s of the LGBTQ right to marry before any other religion stood there, and with immigrants and with climate justice. Or the choice of Beacon Press to publish the Pentagon Papers in the 1970s and so much more.

We do not shy away from our ethical duty as Unitarian Universalists and I dare say that it is hope that gets us up and out and inspires us to the action that allows all of this to happen, a hope that tells us all that we all have worth, that we are worthy of showing up for, seeing, reaffirming the worth and dignity of. A hope that promises that there is still enough left of what is good in this world that we can continue to build on, build with and build together.

Worldwatch Institute is a globally focused environmental research organization based in Washington, D.C. named as one of the top ten sustainable development research organizations. They wrote in one of its annual State of the World reports 'the biggest obstacle to reinventing ourselves may be simply a kind of paralysis of hope.'⁷

⁶ Ibid, xiv.

⁷ Quoted in Rev. Alison Cornish sermon

It was our Unitarian ancestor the Reverend Theodore Parker who said 'I do not pretend to understand the moral universe: the arc is a long one ... from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.' The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. often used this quote. Former President Barack Obama also used this often but added to it: "... but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice..."⁸

Today is our annual meeting. This is a time when we come together to hope, to love, to remember who we are, to affirm that together we are worthy of seeing, affirming, saving, lifting up.

Let's close today with saying our 7 principles, so full of hope, printed on the back of your order of service:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

These are concepts built on hope that fuel action. May this hope and the actions of love it inspires light up the world.
Amen.

⁸ Ibid.