

Give Them Hope a sermon delivered to the
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Sunday, November 9, 2014

Reading #1 “To Be Hopeful in Bad Times” by Howard Zinn

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 – and there are so many – 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.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live *now* as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

[Howard Zinn, professor emeritus of political science at Boston University, in *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*]

Reading #2 “Hunting for Hope” by Scott Russell Sanders – Suzanne

[From Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope: A Father's Journeys* (8-10)]

Sanders and his sixteen year old son take a hiking trip to the Rocky Mountains. Tension fills the air as they are driving from one hike to another starting point. Sanders writes:

‘We drove. In the depths of Big Thompson Canyon, where the road swerved along a frothy river between sheer rockface and spindly guardrail, I could bear the silence no longer. ‘So what are my hang-ups?’ I demanded. ‘How do I ruin everything?’

‘You don't want to know,’ my son replied.

‘I want to know. What is it about me that grates on you?’...

‘You wouldn't understand,’ my son said.

‘Try me.’

(My son) cut a look at me, shrugged, then stared back through the windshield. ‘You're just so out of touch.’

‘With what?’

‘With my whole world. You hate everything that's fun. You hate television and movies and video games. You hate my music.’

‘I like some of your music. I just don't like it loud.’

‘You hate advertising,’ he said quickly, (on a roll) now. ‘You hate billboards and lotteries and developers and logging companies, and big corporations. You hate snowmobiles and jet skis. You hate malls and fashions and cars.’...

‘You look at any car and all you think is pollution, traffic, roadside crap. You say fast-food's poisoning our bodies and TV's poisoning our minds. You think the Internet is just another scam for selling stuff. You think business is a conspiracy to rape the earth.’

‘None of that bothers you?’

‘Of course it does. But that's the world. That's where we've got to live. It's not going to go away just because you don't approve. What's the good of spitting on it?’

'I don't spit on it. I grieve over it.'

(My son) was still for a moment, then resumed quietly, 'What's the good of grieving if you can't change anything?'

'Who says you can't change anything?'

'You do. Maybe not with your mouth, but with your eyes... Your view of things is totally dark. It bums me out. You make me feel the planet's dying and people are to blame and nothing can be done about it. There's no room for hope. Maybe you can get by without hope, but I can't. I've got a lot of living still to do. I have to believe there's a way we can get out of this mess. Otherwise what's the point? Why study, why work – why do anything if it's all going to hell?'

Sanders wonders: 'Had I really deprived my son of hope? Was this the deeper grievance – that I had passed on to him, so young, my anguish over the world? Was this what lurked between us, driving us apart, the demon called despair?'

'You're right,' I finally told him. 'Life's meaningless without hope. But I think you're wrong to say I've given up.'

'It seems that way to me. As if you think we're doomed.'

'No, buddy. I don't think we're doomed. It's just that nearly everything I care about is under assault.'

'See, that's what I mean. You're so worried about the fate of the earth, you can't enjoy anything. We come to these mountains and you bring the shadows with you. You've got me seeing nothing but darkness.'

Sermon: *Give Them Hope, Not Hell*, the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

What darkness and despair needs to be heard, in the violence of approaching Winter, this time of cracking coldness and danger?

This stone we hold in our hearts, in our stomachs, is fear. Fear that the world is too broken to mend. Fear that we are too broken to mend.

Do we see nothing but dry leaves, sorrow, grief at the immeasurable loss of potential, loss of full and joyful and flourishing life?

Hold a stick of anger, outrage, that so much money and energy and time is given to wars, to greed and miserliness, to mindless consumption?

Feel like a bowl – emptiness, despair at finding solutions, a longing to be filled?

We all know the litany:

Global weather change.

Violence – in Syria, Palestine, the Islamic State, here in Canada .

Hunger. Homelessness.

The insidious spread of a virus for which there is no sure cure.

On a personal level – divorce, addiction, depression, failure.

Disease. Death.

These are the pain-filled truths that need to be heard. Need to be heard.

Where do we find hope in this scenario?

Every understanding of hope begins with an honest reckoning with “the absence of hope, the dark night of the soul when nothing comforts and nothing reassures.” (*Hunting for Hope*, 19)

Scott Sanders writes: “Unless we acknowledge the power of despair, sooner or later it will overwhelm us, if only because we cannot escape our own death or the spectacle of pain.” (HH, 19)

We cannot forget or “unlearn the dismal numbness” – the litany of pollution and poverty, pain and death – that is a part of our lives.

We need to look hard and deep and long for hope.

A first step – to recognize the power of our despairs.

For many of us this isn't hard to do, especially with the coming of winter – the blanketing grayness, the knife-like cold, the treacherous footing – only highlight our feelings of helplessness, hopelessness.

We heft the rock of fear. We finger and crackle the leaves of sadness. We wield the stick of anger. We gaze into the emptiness of the bowl.

And this, indeed, is a first step in our journey toward hope.

We need to look hard and long and deep for hope.

And what exactly is hope? How can we possibly measure it? How might we distinguish hope from

Hope is the wish for something in the future, and expecting that what we wish for will come to pass. Hope is a certain confidence in the future.

Hope, in the classical theological sense, is a virtue and is defined as the desire and search for a future good, difficult but not impossible to attain, and, in the classical Christian sense, this hoped-for future good is always attained with God's help.

Of course, we can have secular sorts of hope – not just a wish, but a desire, an ambition, a longing, craving, yearning, hunger. We may have hope that an ideal may be realized – for justice, peace, equity.

We may have hope for more material sorts of attainments: Hope for power or prestige; hope to win the lottery or the next edition of “Survivor;” hope for more stuff.

American founding father Patrick Henry, in a speech he made in 1775, stated: “It is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren, till she transform us into beasts.”

Benjamin Franklin, wrote in *Poor Richard*, (1758) that “He that lives upon hope will die fasting.”

Hope may be illusory, self-indulgent, delusional, so pie-in-the-sky as to be unobtainable.

But hope is something more. Hope needs to be anchored to a present, an “infinite succession of presents,” of present moments, to be more than illusion.

Unitarian Universalist minister John Fredric Muir writes: “The Latin word for **hope** is *sperare*, which comes from an Indo-European root meaning ‘to expand.’ To be of hope means to feel expansive, to feel no constraint, to go beyond the limits and embrace a wider view, to think beyond the boundaries.”

In his book *Hunting for Hope*, Scott Sanders calls hope “an orientation of the heart.” (27) He searches for hope in his own life, and produces his own litany of sources, his own foundation, his own rock, on which to anchor hope.

Sanders finds hope in wildness – its beauty, the generosity of wild gifts, “the fertility of nature, and the abundance of creatures and forms constantly rising.” (35) The very resilience of the fabric of life fosters hope.

Sanders finds hope in the body – in its sensuality, its healing powers, its fierce desire to be whole. We can, if we exert our will, wake up, open up, pay attention, act, and change.

Further, hope can be found in family and community. Yes, families and communities can be dysfunctional and damaging. But, in many ways they can go right, give us support while we grapple with the dark, teach us generosity and fidelity and mercy. Help us to negotiate differences.

There is hope also in this fidelity – in faithfulness to “a person, a vocation, a cause to embrace with the whole heart.” (80) Our ability to stand fast to a course, to a partner, to a faith community is filled – with “an infinite succession of present” moments, and with hope for the future. (89)

Sanders further finds hope in the burgeoning idea of simplicity, that more is not always better, and in our capacity for restraint based on our knowledge of the world and our compassion for others.

Hope arises from beauty – the beauty of nature, the beauty of music and ritual. The beauty of “quantum mechanics” and “patchwork quilts.” This beauty expands us, gives us a wider view of life. Takes us beyond our personal boundaries. “Beauty,” Sanders writes, “feeds us from the same source that created us. It reminds us of the shaping power that reaches through the flower stem and through our own hands. It restores our faith in the generosity of nature. By giving us a taste of the kinship between our own small minds and the great Mind of the Cosmos, beauty reassures us that we are exactly and wonderfully made for life on this glorious planet, in this magnificent universe.... A universe so prodigal of beauty may actually need us to notice and respond, may need our sharp eyes and brimming hearts and teeming minds, in order to close the circuit of Creation.” (153)

Sanders ends by saying: “My aim is not to persuade you to accept my vision, but rather to invite you to clarify your own.” (166)

My aim, in this sermon, is not to persuade you to adopt my litany of hope, but to think about your own theology of hope, or a-theology of hope. What buoys you up to move toward the future?

Hope looks to the future. Believes we will have a future. And believes that this future will be a decent world, a world in which we, and our children, and our grandchildren can lead useful, joyful, purposeful lives.

Realistic imagination fosters realistic hope.

Joanna Macy, a Buddhist and ecologist, writes of our “coming back to life,” coming back to a bone-deep knowledge of our connection with all things. This coming back is a journey through our despair, through our hopelessness, a breaking through the hard and cold ground of our lives.

Coming back to life we recognize the profound commonality of our caring. Coming back to life we commit to a deep and careful search for our sources of hope.

This hope is rooted in our Unitarian Universalist history.

In 1770 John Murray came to America from England. He had been excommunicated from the Methodist Church for his unorthodox beliefs in salvation, his wife and son had died, and he had served a term in debtor’s prison. While in England Murray had converted to Universalism. Universalism, in this country and abroad, was a response to the idea of predestination – that it has been predetermined at the beginning of time who among us would go to heaven and who would go to hell. Universalists fervently believed that God was a God of love, who embraced all his children and who, in the end, gathered all to eternal life with him. God was simply too good to condemn folks to eternal hellfire.

John Murray preached to his followers, saying :

“Go out into the highways and the by-ways.

Give the people something of your new vision.

You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage;

preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”

Hope – the belief that we will have a future, and that this future will involve a decent world in which we, and our children, and our grandchildren can lead useful, joyful, purposeful lives – hope is rooted deeply in our history.

Hope – *sperare* – a feeling of expansiveness, an embrace of a wider view, made up of an infinite succession of present moments.

Macrina Wiederkehr in *Seasons of Your Heart*, writes:

I was just thinking

one morning

during meditation

how much alike

hope

and baking powder are:

quietly

getting what is

best in me

to rise,
awakening
the hint of eternity
within.

I always think of that
when I eat biscuits now
and wish
that I could be
more faithful
to the hint of eternity,
the baking power
in me.

This kind of hope encircles the ideas of faith in humankind and faith in the future; the idea of possibility, of anticipation and expectancy; the feeling of being on the edge of our seats, filled with a vision of the future in which all are welcomed at the bountiful table of existence; a future that assumes the best about people – their abilities, their goodness, their potential. A future that works toward the sweeping away of injustices so that all God’s people may flourish.

Hope

It is told that when God finished with Creation, She had a desire to leave something behind, just a small piece of Divinity and Wholeness so humans could experience this delight. But God was a bit of a trickster, too, so She didn’t want this to be too easy for human beings. She wasn’t sure, at first, where to put this special something, so she asked the other living things in creation.

Someone suggested in the stars and God replied, “No, I have this feeling that that might be too easy. Some day humans will explore space and they will find it.”

Someone else suggested hiding it in the depths of the ocean. God thought about it for a moment and answered, “No.” She also had a feeling that one day humankind would explore the deepest places in the seas – that was also too easy a hiding place.

Then, suddenly, God had it. “I know where I’ll put this special something, a place where they will never look. I’ll hide it inside of them, inside of humans. They will never look there.”

And so it was. And so it has been.

This small piece of Divinity and Wholeness goes by many different names. Love. Compassion. Joy. Hope. We each have it. Deep inside of us. If we only look.
[Adapted from Fredrick Muir, *Heretics’ Faith: A Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*]

In the deepening cold of late autumn, in the approaching hardness of winter, may we come back to life. Recognize our strengths, our interconnections, our baking power.

May we live fully into an infinite succession of present moments.

May we find within us courage, compassion and care.

To make ourselves whole. To make the world whole.

To come back to the fullness of life. With hope.

May it be so. Make we make it so. Blessed Be. Amen.

