

**“How Shall We Live? Part V:
The Difference Between Optimism and Hope”
March 13, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode**

Quotation for Order of Service

“Living without expectations is hard but, when you can do it, good. Living without hope is harder, and that is bad. You have got to have hope, and you mustn’t shirk it. Love, after all, ‘hopeth all things.’ But maybe you must learn, and it is hard learning, not to hope out loud, especially for other people. You must not let your hope turn into expectation.”

(Wendell Berry, Hannah Coulter, p. 146)

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Lighting the Chalice (spoken in unison)

We gather this hour as people of faith
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.
We light this beacon of hope,
Sign of our quest for truth and meaning,
In celebration of the life we share together.

(Christine Robinson)

Introduction to Responsive Reading

The responsive reading this morning consists of statements taken from a sermon of Dr. Duncan Littlefair, mentor and colleague to me for many years in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Just a note about these responsive readings: they are not necessarily intended to express common values. Sometimes, as with this one, it is presented to stimulate thought related to my sermon theme.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Any solution to a given social, cultural problem will be very, very difficult.

CONGREGATION: Don't be seduced by the quick fix, the easy answer, or the substitution of a nice feeling for an intelligent action.

MINISTER: Look for it this way: it will be slow; it will be painful; it will be uncertain; it will be partial.

CONGREGATION: It will be temporary – not for all eternity, but just for now.

MINISTER: Most answers to serious problems are unsatisfactory in some degree.

CONGREGATION: A good solution to a real problem may be largely unattractive.

MINISTER: Such solutions may be much less than we had hoped for.

CONGREGATION: However, they will be much more than we have, and they will open the way to endless development.

MINISTER: We will have the satisfaction of knowing that our answers are honest, open, and hopeful.

CONGREGATION: More than this we really cannot ask.

(Statements from "Retreat to Sentimentality," by Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair)

Introduction to Reading

My reading this morning is a repeat of a reading I did on the second Sunday of the Christmas season when I talked about the quality of hope. The reading is from a book of essays in a recently published book titled, The Impossible Will Take A Little While, edited by Paul Loeb.

The title of the essay from which I will read an excerpt is, "An Orientation of the Heart," written by Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic. This essay was written in 1987, three years *before* the fall of the Communist dictatorship in that land, and written at a time when things looked anything but "hopeful" in terms of an optimistic estimate of the way things were moving. Vaclav Havel writes:

Reading

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from “elsewhere.” It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.

“HOW SHALL WE LIVE? PART V: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OPTIMISM AND HOPE”

Introduction

This is the fifth sermon in a series titled, “How Shall We Live?”

I undertook the series because I wanted to address the concern that was in the air following the last presidential election – the concern about the divisiveness and polarization that was obvious in our country, the concern about who we are and where we are going as a society and a people.

For many persons in this congregation I suspect this last election, more than most, was felt as a kind of test as to what vision is guiding us as a nation – *E pluribus unum* or *Pax Americana*. I further suspect that for many here we believe we failed that test.

In light of that I put out as an initial question: Have you felt a change in the rhythm of events different than the ordinary ups and downs of our social and political life? Do you think we as a society are on an inevitable downhill slide, and are recent events in our country simply an affirmation of that – the crumbling of another layer of the strata upon we have stood indicating another slip down the slope toward societal collapse. Another way to phrase the question is this: Are you optimistic or pessimistic with regard to our future as a society and a world?

This initial sermon was followed by two sermons related to the development of fundamentalism in our world, sermons in which, following the lead of scholar Karen Armstrong, I spoke of fundamentalism as a response and reaction to modernity, the new conditions of our world relating to scientific and secular approaches that emerged out of Western Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries and have now spread throughout the globe.

One of the identifying characteristics of fundamentalism is that it believes that that truth is singular. Therefore, it rejects democracy and the principle of pluralism – the notion that truth can be plural or that revelation can be plural. It is, thus, marked by an either/or

approach. Either you have the truth or you don't. Either you are for the truth or you are against the truth. And since the truth – singular, full, and final – has been revealed to our group, either you are with us or you are against us.

Thus, in last week's sermon I looked at religion and politics in our country, exploring the principle of religious pluralism. This is a principle that was present at the founding of our nation, a principle forged perhaps more by necessity than by moral ideal, though I think both were involved, but, at any rate, a pluralistic principle that caught hold and became institutionalized in the doctrine of the separation of church and state, religion and government.

Last week I also spoke about government as a friend of religion, not an enemy, for it is in religious institutions, when they are fulfilling their appropriate role, that one is called, with intention, to seek sustaining beliefs, meanings, values, and ideals for one's individual and communal life.

Our form of government is pledged to promote and protect religious liberty – liberty that may be seen as the empty container providing the necessary space our respective religious institutions are to fill with their stories, symbols, rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, values, meanings, and ideals. And would that we could respect and honor the various ways this is accomplished in our various religious institutions.

But one of the dangers of religion – in that it works close to the bone, handling the fire of ultimate questions – is that a given group will insist that its revelation is the only true revelation, that it is the only one that can fill the religious longing at the center of the human heart and mind, it is the only one whose religious substance can fill the empty container provided by religious liberty and protected by our form of government.

This is a thumbnail sketch of the issues I have addressed to this point in this sermon series.

Where does that bring me today?

Unaddressed concerns

I want to acknowledge again, as I did briefly last week, all the concerns that are being left out of this sermon series that relate to who we are as a society and a world and the direction we are going – all the issues, some global in scope, that I have not addressed and will not be able to address

In the follow-up discussion related to last week's sermon that took place in this sanctuary this past Thursday evening, our gathering of about twenty persons spoke in a kind of free-for-all way of the various issues and concerns that are present in our world, the rise of fundamentalism being but one concern, and by no means the central concern ...

...for, as I have been saying, fundamentalism is a response and reaction to *modernity*, and it is modernity that is really the central concern – the way of life that we have evolved and are evolving, a way of life that has brought us numerous and marvelous blessings; but perhaps also a way of life that cannot be sustained, and, beyond that, a way of life that has unleashed forces that may completely devastate our planet: the threats of nuclear annihilation, unrestrained capitalism, and environmental collapse through overpopulation and over-use of resources.

In the face of this crush of threatening forces the desire to escape this reality through a miraculous rapture such as is envisioned by many fundamentalist Christians – a lifting into the air to float in the clouds with one's savior above this difficult world – such a vision, if not plausible in concrete reality, is at least understandable in psychological reality.

So how shall we live our lives in the face of all that is coming at us – coming at us, it sometimes seems, with tsunami-like stealth, speed and strength?

How far do you dare to open your eyes to take in the problems and concerns of this ever-shrinking and complex world?

How tempted are you to close yourself off from the world and to throw up protective barriers against it – to live in a gated community, if not physically, then at least mentally and psychologically?

How much of the weight of the world and its various problems and injustices can you take upon yourself before you crack under the pressure?

How much time should you spend trying to pay attention to the larger picture of the world, and how much energy should you expend working on its behalf?

Or is such time and energy expenditure a deflection of your own best substance? Do you believe that if you just tend your own garden plot, follow the vitality, energy, and interest of your own individual soul, that this is the best contribution you can make to your society and the world?

Or is that a cop-out, perhaps similar to the argument for unrestrained capitalistic competition, namely, that an invisible hand will coordinate and guide things to a fulfilling end, freeing you from concern and responsibility with regard to the larger picture?

So what plot of ground are you responsible for, and in what measure? How do you divide your life's energy and substance between the concentric circles of your own soul, your family, your religious community, your town or city, your county, your state, your country, your world?

And how much of the creature-comforts that modernity has brought you are you willing to sacrifice for the "larger good?"

How much are you willing to try to change your life to make possible a decent life for future generations?

In the local newspapers I've been following the question of whether the corporate enterprise of Hollywood Video should be allowed into Port Townsend. Hollywood Video represents, what might be called, "the juggernaut of modernity," those powerful forces that modernity has set in motion that will chew up anything and everything in its path.

There are probably very few places in our country where this question would even be considered, for how in the name of the progress, and how in the name of the values of liberty and free enterprise, can you say that Hollywood Video should not be allowed to set up their business here in Port Townsend?

But here at least an opposing question is asked, namely the question: How in the name of quality of life, and how in the name of care for the values and integrity of an individual community, can you say they should be let in?

(Last year, just about this time, when I was in search for a ministerial position and was reading the Search Committee's advertising packet, the line that most arrested my attention was this one. A sentence in the packet said of the Port Townsend community, "We live in a place that 'progress' has not yet destroyed beyond repair.")

So this is just a small example relating to the question of "How shall we live?" How do we find our way in the midst of all of this?

What sustains our spirit?

I turn now in this series to what sustains and strengthens us in the midst of all these concerns, feeling almost apologetic for turning so soon in this direction, as if only brushing the surface of a few of these large and complex social and political issues. But, on the other hand, not apologetic, realizing that there is only so much one can take in, and that inertia and despair through being inundated and overwhelmed is a clear and present danger.

So what sustains our spirits, helps us to be sane, and provides us the strength and courage to live and contribute in some way to our society and world?

I begin with hope – the reality of hope, the substance of hope.

The hope I'm talking about has to be distinguished, as in my reading this morning, from optimism. Often we use the two terms in interchangeable ways. We may say, for example, "I am very hopeful about this possibility," or, on the other hand, "I am not very hopeful about this possibility." We could equally say, "I am optimistic about this possibility," or, "I am pessimistic about this possibility."

“Hope,” as used in this example, has to do with an evaluation of a situation, whether positive or negative. But that is not the meaning of “hope” that I am after. It’s not related to an optimistic or pessimistic judgment about a given outcome.

Also, I want to cut “hope” away from a person’s disposition. The hope I am speaking about is different than a person with a naturally sunny or “hopeful” disposition. Some people see lighter; others see darker. Some dance lightly over the world; others walk with heavier tread. But neither is related to the reality of hope as I wish to speak of it. The hope I am speaking about is other than and independent of one’s natural disposition.

In this regard Mary Oliver has a poem that one of our poetry classes studied this past week that relates to one’s natural disposition, but also to something deeper than disposition, a reality that I would relate to hope. She writes:

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange

sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches --
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it

the thorn
that is heavier than lead --
if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging --

there is still
somewhere deep within you

a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted --

each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,

whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.

(“Morning Poem,” Mary Oliver, from Dream Work)

In other words, whether you are of a light, buoyant, and optimistic nature; or whether you are of a darker, heavier, and more pessimistic nature; there is still somewhere within you another independent power and energy – a “beast” the poet calls it – that can propel you forward.

Emily Dickinson speaks of a similar energy that upholds us – not a beast but a little songbird perched at the center of our being that asks nothing of us and sings through all kinds of weather. She begins the poem saying:

“Hope” is that thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –

Hope is that interior surge toward life and wholeness, independent of our ups and downs, whose flame is seen to burn most brightly in difficult and seemingly hopeless circumstances.

This is the hope Vaclav Havel speaks of in the reading this morning when he says that hope is “a dimension of the soul,” an “orientation of the heart.” “It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.”

“Hope,” he says, “is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

So to the question, “How shall we live in this world?”, I would answer that, first of all, we live by the reality of hope, which is ultimately independent of given circumstances. By being attached to this transcendent, interior, eternal reality, we are detached from expectation and from our optimistic or pessimistic evaluation of things.

Hope relates to our vision for things and not to what degree that vision is achieved or fulfilled. It has to do with a deep affirmation of that vision, not how near or far one is from it.

The reality of hope of which I'm speaking doesn't look for easy answers. It has nothing to do with naiveté, though the accusation has been made. Rather, hope, by freeing one from expectations, gives one a chance to be more realistic so that, as in the responsive reading this morning, one will not be surprised to discover that:

“Any solution to a given social, cultural problem will be very, very difficult.”

Or that, “Most answers to serious problems are unsatisfactory in some degree.”

Or that, “A good solution to a real problem may be largely unattractive.”

The kind of affirmative and visionary hope I am talking about would not be discouraged by this kind of “realism.” It would be made concrete in given, particular hopes – in goals, aims, and objectives that one reaches toward and works for.

But, again, these goals and objectives are ultimately independent of Hope (I should really capitalize it). They arise from the reality of Hope, but they do not exhaust the reality of Hope.

Quite naturally the ego will attach itself to particular hopes, to particular aims or goals. Perhaps those particular aims need such ego-participation to have any chance of success. But there is another part of one's being, a deeper part, not touched by the success or failure of a particular goal or objective. To the degree one is attached to this deeper interior reality of Hope, one can live anything. This is the Hope which, as the poet Robinson Jeffers says, “failure cannot cast down/ nor success make proud.” (from “Rock and Hawk”)

Yet I believe in giving the ego its due, its rights, so that when a particular goal is achieved, an exclamation of joy is expected and appropriate; and, conversely, when a goal is not reached, I believe in the value of the presence of grief.

In that regard, I spoke in the first sermon of this series about my hopes following 9/11 – the possibility, based on the initial world-wide response to 9/11, that there might be the recognition of a new consciousness that was already present in our world, namely, the consciousness of a single, unified humanity that was more valued than the particular religious, national, ethnic, and racial groups to which we also belong.

I had some optimism, some hope, about that outcome. And it has been a great disappointment to me to see the way our government responded and the way our world has split apart. I was surprised when speaking about this to you at my own emotional reaction to this. But one needs to grieve and feel sorrow for dashed hopes.

But that is not the end of Hope or the end of that vision. The dashing of a *particular* hope is not the dashing of Hope as such, though the ego may sometimes think so. For when one is attached to the deeper reality of Hope, one may be cut, but not to the core, not to the center of one's being where Hope itself resides.

Out of that center new particular hopes and visions will arise, for Hope continually sends out its energy to lift a life and transform a situation. It looks for the possibilities in each situation, not clinging to the past, but giving power to move forward. Indeed, Hope will find a way.

Invitation

Next week I will speak about how we relate to and with those who have different visions than ours, different versions of what is good and true.

Again, I invite you to join me this Thursday evening for a discussion of these topics in this sanctuary at 7:00 p.m.

Benediction

We are of all time past and our aspiration is that of all time to come.
Our hope is as ancient as eating and breathing and the rising of the sun.
Our hope is as new as the first leaves, as young as the baby not yet born.
Remember to be patient, holding to our faith and our hope.

(Ken Patton)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Sunday, March 13, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)