**"Hope Is Not a Strategy"**
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**
**December 3, 2006**
**Bruce A. Bode**

**Call to Worship**

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this second Sunday of the Christmas season.

Here we are come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness and 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; blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

**Lighting the Chalice** (in unison)

We light this chalice
For the renewal of faith,
The wonder of hope,
The beauty of love,
And the gift of joy.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: On this second Sunday of the Christmas Season we celebrate the quality of hope, forever springing up in our hearts and minds, forever being rekindled.

CONGREGATION: There is no state more desperate than hopelessness. When people lose hope, they die. As long as we continue to hope, we find courage and strength.

MINISTER: Hope is born of faith. As long as we have faith in the eternal, faith in our better selves, we shall believe that good will win, evil will be overcome, injustice defeated.

CONGREGATION: However deep our faith, it is sometimes shaken. However strong our hopes, they are many times crushed. Life does not always conform to our wishes and desires.

MINISTER: Faith must be deepened and enlarged. Hope must be confirmed and renewed. When the Candle of Hope is quenched, it must be relighted.

CONGREGATION: We must find a way to protect the flickering Candle of Hope. Each person must find a way of confirming and renewing the hopes that sustain and inspire.

MINISTER: We find hope for ourselves when we move with those who have visions and dreams. We find new meaning for our life when we share in the courage, devotion, and dignity of others.

CONGREGATION: So we come together to celebrate the qualities of Christmas. Our faith is strengthened by the love of our friends. Our lives wing with new expectancy. The hope of Christmas brings joy to the world.

(Duncan E. Littlefair, adapted)

**Lighting the Candle of Hope**

As you children see, there are five candles in our Christmas candelabra. Last week we lit the first candle, which is burning right now. There are three more candles to light in our Christmas candelabra before it is Christmas, which is the time when we light the final candle.

Each of these first four candles is a different color, matching the colors of the beautiful banners that are being hung each week on the front wall of our sanctuary.

These first four candles are called the Advent Candles. Advent has to do with the coming of some event – in this case, the event is the coming of Christmas.

The candle we lit last week, the purple candle, is named the Candle of Faith. This week we light the green candle, the Candle of Hope. Next week, the blue one, the Candle of Love. And in two weeks the red one, the Candle of Joy.

After all four of these Advent candles are lit, we will know that Christmas is very near.

And then on Christmas Eve, we will light the white candle, which is the Christmas candle and contains all the colors in itself.

This Sunday we light the Second Candle of Christmas, the Candle of Hope.

And so we ask, what is hope?

Perhaps some of you children are hoping for a particular present that you might receive this Christmas, maybe under your Christmas tree or in your stocking. Maybe this is a present you have wished for or wanted for a long time.

That is one kind of hope, and it is a lovely thing. It's an important part of life to be able to hope for something or to look forward to something, whether it be a certain gift, or some place you like to go, or something you want to do, or some accomplishment you'd like to make.

But what if you don't get the thing you were hoping for this Christmas, or what if you

don't get to do the thing you wanted to do?

Or what if you get the thing you were hoping for but it doesn't make you as happy as you thought it would. Or what if you discover that the thing you always wanted to do or be doesn't make you happy like you thought it would?

Does that mean there is an end to hope?

I don't think so … because there is a deeper level of hope. And it is this deeper hope that makes it possible for us to keep going and to find value in life even when many particular hopes and dreams are not fulfilled.

It is almost like hope is something at the very core of our being, part of the very energy of life itself. It is something that is always there, if only we can find a way to connect to it.

So even when a particular hope is not fulfilled, it's important to know that hope itself is still present.

It is especially that kind of hope that we remember at Christmas.

Irina Lyons (9:15) Isaac Urner (11:15), will you please light the second candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Hope.

**Meditation**

On this Sunday when we light a Candle to Hope, let us enter into our Period of Silence and Meditation with these words of Wendell Berry from his novel, Hannah Coulter:

> 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 musn'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.
>
> (Hannah Coulter, p. 146)

**Introduction to Reading**

My reading this morning is one I like a great deal and have given you before. It's from a book of essays that our Early Bird Book Discussion Group read a couple of years ago titled, The Impossible Will Take A Little While. And the essay from which I will read is titled, "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, written at a time when things looked anything but "hopeful" in terms of an optimistic estimate of the way things were moving.

**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.

## "HOPE IS NOT A STRATEGY"

**Introduction**

My reflection today begins with a little story I heard last summer on my car radio, the story of a salesman recounting a business lesson he had learned many years before as a young sales representative.

Enthusiastic and ready to be successful as he started his career, he sat down for the first time with his boss. They exchanged pleasantries, then got down to the point of the meeting, namely, the work that the new young sales representative would be undertaking.

"So," said the young man's boss, "what is your sales plan for your first year with our company?"

"Well, sir," the young man replied with great enthusiasm, "I hope to be able to sell thus and so – and he gave some very large number."

“Young man,” replied his seasoned boss, “hope is not a strategy” … a phrase which struck this young man with such force that he took it to heart so that it became an important part of his approach in sales.

“Hope is not a strategy.” That is to say, one needs not only a vision or a wish, but also a strategic plan to make the vision real or the wish actual.

**A second example**

This was the first time I recall having heard this phrase, but it may be that it’s making the rounds, because just a couple of weeks ago I both read in the newspaper and heard on the television news the very same words. This time they were spoken by Hillary Clinton.

In a hearing before the Senate and the House Armed Services Committee, there was an exchange between Senator Clinton and the top commander of the U.S. forces in Iraq, General John Abizaid, who was present at the hearing to report on the situation in Iraq.

Senator Clinton, apparently exasperated at the lack of progress and the continuing escalation of violence in Iraq, said at one point to General Abizaid, “Hope is not a strategy. Hortatory talk about what the Iraqi government must do is getting old. ... The brutal fact is it is not happening" …

… to which, General Abizaid, quick on his feet, replied, “Senator, I agree with you – and I would also say that despair is not a method.”

**Two ways to take the phrase**

But putting aside the interest in sound bites and the political use of this phrase, on this Sunday when we light a candle to hope I’d like to explore what hope is and isn’t, what it does and doesn’t do, beginning with this phrase, “Hope is not a strategy.”

And I’ll take this phrase in two different ways:

First, in the way that both the businessman and Senator Clinton meant it, namely, that something more than hope is needed to accomplish a vision or purpose: one needs a concrete plan, a strategy, a method, a tactic, a line of attack. Nothing potential is made actual without concrete strategy and action.

But a second meaning of the phrase, something different than was meant by either the businessman or Senator Clinton, can be this: “Yes, that’s right, hope is not a strategy; it’s something quite different; hope is, in fact, the power that makes all strategies possible.”

Without specific objectives, strategies, and plans, one’s vision and mission does not get accomplished, but, on the other hand, without hope no strategies would ever be conceived. Hope is the one indispensable thing, the essential element, the *sine qua non* of all visions, purposes, goals, objectives, and strategies.

So the ideal and the real must be brought together; and this phrase, "Hope is not a strategy," can be taken both ways: on the one hand, pointing to the importance of the imaginative, and, on the other hand, pointing to the importance of the pragmatic.

**Vision and strategy in our building project**

I think of this combination of factors as we are now involved in plans for a possible building expansion. To this point we have primarily involved in imagining, envisioning, and dreaming possibilities. Of course, a lot of very concrete work has also been done to bring us to this point. But, primarily, up to this point we have been involved in imagining, as our Capital Campaign slogan "Imagine" has it.

Currently, a number of different task forces have been at work on different aspects of our potential building expansion, each being asked: What do you hope for? What would you like to see? What do you think you need? And what do you think you need most?

But now – particularly today with the end of the Capital Campaign – the part of making the dream a reality begins in earnest. Now begins the really practical part, the strategic part, the deciding part, the making of the dream into concrete reality. And now questions like these present themselves:

How far will our finances go on this?
What can we realistically build what the funds we have raised?
How do we decide between different visions, dreams, hopes, and wishes?

Hope is not a strategy, but, on the other hand, we would not even be concerned about strategy with regard to this project if hope and vision and dream and imagination were not initially present.

**Beyond Hope**

Now, leaving this example aside, I want to go into this subject of what hope is and isn't and what it does and doesn't do a bit more deeply.

Earlier this week, Don Berg, a QUUF member and the co-chair of our Social Action and Education Committee, e-mailed me a magazine article he thought might be related to my announced theme for this morning. Indeed, I found that the article was related.

It's an article that questions and challenges the very idea of hope, an article that goes further than saying that hope to be valuable must connect with strategy and be made concrete; rather, according to this article, hope is something of a curse.

The article to which I refer appeared in the May/June issue of the Orion magazine. It is titled "Beyond Hope," written by author and environmentalist Derrick Jensen.

I will quote this article at considerable length, then follow with some commentary on its main arguments.

The article begins this way:

> The most common words I hear spoken by any environmentalists anywhere are, *We're [doomed]*. [I'm cleaning up his language a bit.] Most of these environmentalists are fighting desperately, using whatever tools they have … to try to protect some piece of ground, to try to stop the manufacture or release of poisons, to try to stop civilized humans from tormenting some group of plants or animals. Sometimes they're reduced to trying to protect just one tree….
>
> But no matter what environmentalists do, our best efforts are insufficient. We're losing badly, on every front. Those in power are hell-bent on destroying the planet, and most people don't care.
>
> Frankly, I don't have much hope. But I think that's a good thing. Hope is what keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing the destruction of the Earth.
>
> To start, there is the false hope that suddenly somehow the system may inexplicably change. Or technology will save us. Or the Great Mother. Or beings from Alpha Centauri. Or Jesus Christ. Or Santa Claus. All of these false hopes lead to inaction, or at least to ineffectiveness … False hopes bind us to unlivable situations, and blind us to real possibilities.
>
> Does anyone really believe that Weyerhaeuser is going to stop deforesting because we ask nicely? … If only we get a Democrat in the White House, things will be okay. If only we pass this or that piece of legislation, things will be okay. If only we *defeat* this or that piece of legislation, things will be okay. Nonsense. Things will not be okay. They are already not okay, and they're getting worse. Rapidly.
>
> But it isn't only false hopes that keep those who go along enchained. It is hope itself. Hope, we are told, is our beacon in the dark. It is our light at the end of a long, dark tunnel…. It is our reason for persevering, our protection against despair (which must be avoided at all costs). How can we continue if we do not have hope?
>
> We've all been taught that hope in some future condition—like hope in some future heaven—is and must be our refuge in current sorrow….
>
> The more I understand hope, the more I realize that …it serves the needs of those in power as surely as belief in a distant heaven; that hope is really nothing more than a secular way of keeping us in line.

Hope is, in fact, a curse, a bane. I say this not only because of the lovely Buddhist saying "Hope and fear chase each other's tails," not only because hope leads us away from the present, away from who and where we are right now and toward some imaginary future state. I say this because of what hope is…

…what, precisely, is hope? …hope is a longing for a future condition over which you have no agency; it means you are essentially powerless….

To hope for some result means you have given up any agency concerning it. Many people say they hope the dominant culture stops destroying the world. By saying that, they've assumed that the destruction will continue, at least in the short term, and they've stepped away from their own ability to participate in stopping it.

I do not hope coho salmon survive. I will do whatever it takes to make sure the dominant culture doesn't drive them extinct….

When we realize the degree of agency we actually do have, we no longer have to "hope" at all. We simply do the work. We make sure salmon survive….We do whatever it takes.

When we stop hoping for external assistance, when we stop hoping that the awful situation we're in will somehow resolve itself,… then we are finally free—truly free—to honestly start working to resolve it. I would say that when hope dies, action begins.

People sometimes ask me, "If things are so bad, why don't you just kill yourself?" The answer is that life is really, really good. I am a complex enough being that I can hold in my heart the understanding that we are really, really [doomed], and at the same time that life is really, really good….

Many people are afraid to feel despair. They fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate our situation really is, they must then be perpetually miserable. They forget that it is possible to feel many things at once. They also forget that despair is an entirely appropriate response to a desperate situation. Many people probably also fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate things are, they may be forced to do something about it.

Another question people sometimes ask me is, ‘If things are so bad, why don't you just party?’ Well, the first answer is that I don't really like to party. The second [answer] is that I'm already having a great deal of fun. I love my life. I love life. This is true for most activists I know. We are doing what we love, fighting for what (and whom) we love.

I have no patience for those who use our desperate situation as an excuse for inaction. I've learned that if you deprive most of these people of that particular

> excuse they just find another, then another, then another. The use of this excuse to justify inaction—the use of any excuse to justify inaction—reveals nothing more nor less than an incapacity to love.
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> … if you love, you act to defend your beloved. Of course results matter to you, but they don't determine whether or not you make the effort. You don't simply hope your beloved survives and thrives. You do what it takes. If my love doesn't cause me to protect those I love, it's not love.
>
> A wonderful thing happens when you give up on hope, which is that you realize you never needed it in the first place. You realize that giving up on hope didn't kill you. It didn't even make you less effective. In fact it made you more effective, because you ceased relying on someone or something else to solve your problems—you ceased *hoping* your problems would somehow get solved through … magical assistance …—and you just began doing whatever it takes to solve those problems yourself.
>
> When you give up on hope, something even better happens than it not killing you, which is that in some sense it does kill you. You die. And there's a wonderful thing about being dead, which is that they—those in power—cannot really touch you anymore … Once you're dead in this way, you can still sing, you can still dance, … -- you can still live because you are still alive, more alive in fact than ever before. You come to realize that when hope died, the you who died with the hope was not you…
>
> (Excerpts from "Beyond Hope," Orion, May/June 2006, by Derrick Jensen)

**Four agreements**

There are many points I like a great deal in this article – some other points I don't like so much that I've largely skipped and won't go into here – but many points I like and agree with and think they may help clarify what hope is and isn't and what it does and doesn't do. Let me summarize four points of agreement:

1) First, I agree that to live in this world one must go beyond optimism or expected results. The hope to which I would light a candle this morning is the not the same as the optimism that what you are working for will turn out as you wish. I agree with the author that one's path in the world and one's work in the world ought not to be determined by the likelihood of its success. The fuel for our action cannot ultimately depend on our expectation of its success. Rather, we act because we are moved to do so by an inward necessity, a kind of faithfulness to life and being that emerges from within and is not driven by outer circumstances. As Albert Schweitzer says, "My thinking is pessimistic, but my willing and hoping are optimistic."

2) Secondly, I agree that hope to be hope must be more than the mere wish that things might get better or the desire to be rescued from without. The kind of hope I am thinking of has nothing to do with avoidance of reality, pipe dreaming, passivity, or

disengagement. Indeed, as stated earlier by the businessman, hope is not a strategy. One needs to be realistic, one needs to strategize, to engage, to enter into action.

3) Thirdly, I agree with the author that hope should be not separate us from feelings of despair, sadness, or loss. The hope to which I would light a candle is not hope as a cover for or refuge from such emotions and feelings. The hope I'm talking about does not turn its face from such feelings; rather, it enters and embraces all despair, all sorrow, all feelings of "hopelessness."

4) And, finally, I agree with the author's point on the importance of the spiritual principle of detachment. To find our way through the world, we must be inwardly prepared for the loss of everything to which we've been attached. Our identity cannot be ultimately attached to any particular hope, goal, object, plan, person, relationship, or love. As poet Mary Oliver says:

> To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
> To love what is mortal;
> To hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
> And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.
> (Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods," American Primitive)

This is the principle of spiritual detachment, and this is where freedom is found – freedom, as the author says, to live and to love and to work for what matters to you.

**Deeper hope**

Thus, I agree with the author that we must go beyond optimism and expectation, and beyond mere wishing and waiting for rescue by outside agency, and beyond the avoidance of so-called "negative feelings," and beyond being attached to particular hopes. And if this is only what is meant by "hope," then, yes, I agree, we must go beyond hope.

But to me there's something deeper than these things that I would name "hope." And, actually, it is precisely in burning these other things away – these things that the author of this article has identified – that allows us to see a truer and deeper hope.

So here's what this deeper hope is to me – three things, briefly:

1) First, hope is a basic attribute or feature of all being, part of the basic urge and surge and push and energy of being. It has to do with the power of being to be, the power of being to continually overcome non-being. And when this basic urge of propulsion evolves into creatures like us with language, we may call it "hope" – though there may be other words that you would prefer. To me, hope has to with our basic affirmation of life and being – the imaginative power in creation that in us humans produces individual hopes and dreams.

2) Secondly, hope is the energy that enables us to pursue those dreams and individual hopes. It's the energy that attaches itself to visions, goals, and purposes, and provides the *power* to work toward these ends, to devise plans and to create strategies. Have you not felt yourself pulled by a dream, a vision, a goal, a possibility – swept along and drawn along in enthusiasm, in anticipation, in strength, and in joy? This, too, belongs to hope.

3) Thirdly, hope enables us to go on when particular hopes are dashed. The nature of reality is such that each individual form, including this precious earth, will at some point cease to be. One needs to be inwardly prepared for such losses – so much as one can be prepared – and be willing to grieve for these dashed hopes and dreams. But here's the thing: on the other side of our grief, and underneath our grief, is a power that can carry us through. I name that power "hope."

Thus, the shattering of a *particular* hope is not the shattering of hope as such, though the ego may sometimes think so. But the hope I'm talking about this morning is stronger than any particular hope, and stronger than any particular attachment. Hope is that power that enables us to detach from any particular goal and still go on. For when an individual hope is shattered, and when all individuals hopes have ceased to be, hope itself remains, that deep urge and push at the center of being.

When one is attached to that deeper reality of hope, then one may be cut, but not to the core, not to the center of one's being, which is where hope itself resides. And out of that deep center of our being – a center connected to all being – new hopes and new visions are born and arise, for hope continually sends out its energy to lift a life and transform a situation.

Hope looks for the possibilities in each situation, not clinging to what has been, and not ultimately concerned for what might be, but moved by its own inner necessity, gives us the power and courage to go forward.

It's to that understanding of hope that I would light a candle this Sunday morning.

And that is also the kind of hope that poet Emily Dickinson discovered, comparing hope to a little songbird singing its tune deep within her – never stopping, never tiring, always singing.

> "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 –
> And sore must be the storm –
> That could abash the little Bird –
> That kept so many warm –

I've heard it in the chillest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet, never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of Me
(#254, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed., Thomas H. Johnson)

**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 the second Sunday of the Christmas Season, December 3, 2006. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)