

## **A Meditation on Hope in the Dark Season**

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, December 10, 2017

### ***Reading***

“Still the Moon Increases”

- by Nancy Schafer

Trust is completely paradoxical:

The thing with which to begin when  
you have nothing.

The end point, which  
somehow you must find first.

The smallest of present moments,  
measured haltingly into a past.

Both question and answer, when every  
word of your acquaintance has fled.

You think the arc of the horizon  
should split, one side jaggedly askew,  
one forever gone.

The horizon doesn't split.  
Its edges remain.

You think the ocean should dry to sand because  
all the tears it held, you have used up.

You have stolen water even from the clouds.

But the ocean is not dried, nor the clouds  
gone, though you have cried them both,  
multiplied, and more.

You rub your eyes that grains still ripen,  
plums turn blue, still the moon increases.

You thought all of this was gone.  
Such is the unimaginable you have lived.  
You thought everything was gone.

But,  
without your doing, the world is fashioned  
in this way: moments  
become other moments; steps  
lead somewhere; all things breathe,  
even without remembering.

One day, after a very long time,  
without rubbing your eyes you see  
the arc of the horizon still  
an arc; the ocean, full.

And you are not betrayed, but glad.

### ***Sermon Reflection***

Our worship theme for the month of December centers on the question: What does it mean to be a people of *Hope*? Even if we weren't entering the darkest time of the year in our hemisphere, the subject of hope in our present cultural and political climate seems to me a necessity of utmost urgency.

For this morning's reflection I want to share with you an adaptation of a **meditation on hope** that was written seven years ago by Joshua Mason Pawelek, then the minister of a UU congregation in

Manchester, CT. He speaks to my heart and I find his message almost eerily prophetic in its necessity for the times we now live in.

**He writes: [...]**

We arrive in the dark season. [...] In this season we light lights in anticipation of the returning sun. The winter solstice is not far off—just [eleven days] away. On that night the northern hemisphere will look long and deep into the dark of space, as long and deep as is possible through the cycle of a year. On that night the earth will slowly begin tilting its northern reaches back toward the sun. And just as the ancients saw fit to celebrate the returning light, so shall we—each in our own way, each for our own reasons, all through the course of this dark season—find ways to celebrate within the great mixing and blending of midwinter traditions: [...] Yule, Hanukkah—[which begins on Tuesday evening]—and Christmas, when we hear what is for many the familiar and **profoundly hopeful story of an ancient near-eastern family**, forced to travel and in search of shelter in which the woman can give birth; when we hear an angel’s night-time proclamation to huddling shepherds, a message of peace and good will to all; when we hear the parallel story of three wise men journeying, reading the heavens, consulting the old king, seeking a new king, bearing gifts and following a star, searching, longing, yearning through the long, dark night—hopeful—deeply hopeful—that some new and better age is dawning.

**The message seems so simple: we light lights as symbols of hope in the dark season.** Yet I feel a tension with this equation. I feel a nagging, a tug, a pull. Something doesn’t sit quite right with me. I am a hopeful person [...] Unitarian Universalism is a profoundly hopeful religion and Unitarian Universalists are profoundly hopeful people. I believe this. We certainly light lights in the dark season. **So what is this tension I feel?**

The fact is I have little patience for simple dualisms, especially for simple definitions of good and evil. [...] I have little patience for that way-too-simple theological equation used far too frequently as a justification for violence and war: “light equals good, dark equals evil.” I don’t accept this equation. I feel compelled to subvert it. **Darkness is not evil any more than light is good.** I welcome the dark season, just as I welcome the light season. I embrace darkness and find spiritual resources in it, just as I embrace light and find spiritual resources in it. Both dark and light offer blessings; both dark and light yield problems and present challenges. I am not moved by the tired symbolism of light overcoming dark. Instead, I want balance. I want wholeness. **I want [the varying] shades of grey.** I want breadth and depth. I want honesty and realism about human nature and all that resides in the

human heart. I want each of us to learn to accept the fullness of ourselves: our gifts and our deficits; our strengths and our weaknesses; our wisdom and our foolishness; our darkness and our light. I am convinced we never occupy only one side or the other of any dualism; rather, through the course of our lives, and in any one moment, we move back and forth along continua: dark to light and back again and again and again; passive to active; soft to hard; earth to sky; male to female; head to heart; moist to dry, body to spirit; asleep to awake; sacred to profane; creative to destructive; living to dying. **We each contain within ourselves some version of the whole.** Self-destruction, unnecessary and unreasonable violence, oppression, exploitation, evil: these things happen—or become more likely to happen—when we lose our balance, when we get stuck at one end of the continuum, when we become fragmented and divided within ourselves. But as the Rev. Nancy Shaffer said in our reading this morning, “the horizon doesn’t split.” Well, ideally, neither should we.

So when I meditate on hope—our theme for December—when I meditate on what it means to be hopeful—I confess **I am challenged by the pervasiveness** in this season of that symbolism of light overcoming dark to which every hopeful message seems to be attached. Of course, it is very tempting as a pastor to take the path of least resistance in this season and proclaim the message that **as we kindle lights against the darkness, so we kindle hope in our hearts.** It is an easy message—the ‘stock-in-trade’ message for so many clergy in this season—the message so many people expect to hear in this season. Light overcoming dark. But therein lies this tension I experience: I want to feel hopeful, but I don’t want to be split—one side or the other. I don’t want to demonize the dark or lionize the light. **I want to search for the spiritual blessings in both and I want to engage the spiritual challenges in both.** I don’t want to be divided within myself or against the world. I don’t want hope to emerge at the expense of wholeness. I am hopeful, but not for anything that requires the waging of some cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. I want to be very careful, in speaking about hope, not to re-inscribe these pernicious false dualisms because, in the end, I believe they diminish our humanity. I believe they diminish Nature—the earth. I believe they diminish any worthwhile concept of divinity. **How might we talk about hope in this season without resorting to light overcoming darkness?**

We typically describe hope as a positive orientation toward the future. Hopeful people possess some sense or instinct—they hold onto some trust, confidence or faith—they offer some prayer that a difficult, challenging, painful or tragic portion of their lives, or the life of their community, the life of their nation, or life on earth—some portion of life will be better in the future than it is today, even if there is no good reason to believe things will get better. [...] Sister Joan Chittister, a liberal Catholic theologian and member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, ... says

**“hope is what sits by a window and waits for one more dawn, despite the fact that there isn’t an ounce of proof in tonight’s [bleak] sky that it can possibly come.”**

When she puts it this way, it almost sounds like hope is a form of naiveté or, at best, ungrounded optimism. But I’m not talking about naiveté or ungrounded optimism. I’m talking about a positive orientation toward the future that, despite even the direst of circumstances, is deeply rooted, sustainable and realistic. Where does such a positive orientation come from? Where is it rooted? How does it trust even in the absence of anything trustworthy? **Where do we find the will, the nerve, the inspiration, the audacity to be hopeful?**

I think hope has two sources. **First**, it comes from our capacity to **accept ourselves** as fully who we are, complete with our failings and frailties. **Second**, it comes from our **willingness to struggle** with life’s challenges despite our failings and frailties. Cornel West once wrote, “To be human, at the most profound level, is to encounter honestly the inescapable circumstances that constrain us”—that is, to accept ourselves with our failing and our frailties - “yet muster the courage to struggle compassionately for our own unique individualities and for more democratic and free societies.” **To accept ourselves and to struggle. These are the roots of hope.**

Acceptance. Listen to this passage from Philip Simmons, the New Hampshire-based writer, teacher and former contributor to the Unitarian Universalist World magazine who died of Lou Gehrig’s disease a [several] years ago. Simmons said:

“we all bear the burdens of the flesh. And all of us at certain times in our lives, in the face of failure, loss, illness, and finally, our certain ends, find ourselves asking: Why get up this morning? And, given what I’m facing, what work is there for me to do in this world that can possibly make a difference?”

He’s describing **hopelessness**. He’s describing despair. His answer to these “why get up this morning” questions—the point at which he becomes hopeful—has nothing to do with light overcoming dark. It has nothing to do with the arrival of a new and better age. It has nothing to do with waiting for things beyond himself to get better at some future time. He knows he is dying and there is nothing he can do to prevent it. His answer, in fact, has much more to do with the present moment than with the future. He says, “Lately I’ve come to feel quite strongly that answering these questions begins with acceptance. Not resignation, not passivity but profound and thorough acceptance of our place in the natural order.... **It is out of our acceptance of all that we are, including and especially that we are creatures that will one day die, that we are called to our highest human duties.**”

Acceptance of all that we are: light and dark; passive and active; soft and hard; earth and sky; male and female; head and heart; moist and dry; body and spirit; asleep and awake; sacred and profane; creative and destructive; living and dying. **We each contain within ourselves some version of the whole.** Not all of it is pretty. Not all of it is pleasant. Our whole self includes our foolishness, our pettiness, our anguish, our anxiety. Cornel West talks about our suffering and shuddering, our bad habits and cruel viewpoints, and the gradual demise of our earthly and temporal bodies. This is part of 'all that we are.' **And instead of pushing it away, instead of self-denial, instead of inner fragmentation and division, instead of waging war on some misunderstood notion of darkness, let us learn to be tender and compassionate and forgiving with ourselves and thereby learn to be whole.** And grounded in wholeness, let us craft a positive orientation towards the future. The horizon does not split and, ideally, neither should we. Hope springs from wholeness.

**Struggle. Along with this process of self-acceptance, this knitting together of a whole self, hope also arises out of determined struggle.** [...] struggle produces hope—struggle with despair, struggle with loss and grief, struggle with illness, struggle with pain [...] struggle with social injustice and oppression. [...] Joan Chittister says:

“It is not struggle that defeats us, it is our **failure to struggle** that depletes the human spirit.”

Struggle teaches us. Struggle shapes us, transforms us, grows us, deepens us, fortifies us, gives us new insights, helps us re-frame difficult situations, draws out our creativity. Chittister suggests that through struggle we turn isolation into independence, fear into courage, exhaustion into endurance and on and on. **Our capacity and willingness to struggle, even against crushing odds, generates hope.**

True, there may be that overwhelming impulse to not get up [in the] morning. There may be no known cure for the disease. There may be no way to save the house, the marriage, the job. There may be no way to save your life. **There may be no balm for the deep grief in your heart.** There may be no end to the violence in the streets and the violence in human hearts. There may be no salve for your anger and your rage at the crimes your nation has committed in your name. There may be no reason to expect the dawn given the bleakness of the sky. You may think the arc of the horizon *should* split. You may think the ocean should dry to sand because all the tears it held, you have used up. Yet, though it can be so hard to believe, so hard to mobilize yourself, as long as there is a willingness to struggle, **as long as there is a willingness to take the next step, whatever it may be, there is hope.** “The ocean is not dried, nor the clouds gone, though you have cried them both, multiplied and more. You rub your eyes that grains still ripen, plums turn blue, [and] still the moon increases.”

**Acceptance and struggle—the sources of hope.** Still the moon increases. Nancy Shaffer says: “The world is fashioned in this way: moments become other moments; steps lead somewhere; all things breathe, even without remembering. One day, after a very long time, without rubbing your eyes you see the arc of the horizon still an arc; the ocean, full. And you are not betrayed, but glad.”

Friends, we arrive in the dark season. It is my prayer that each of you shall find some measure of balance in the coming weeks, some measure of wholeness, some measure of willingness to struggle, some measure of hope.

Amen and Blessed Be.

**Source:**

<http://uuse.org/still-the-moon-increases-a-meditation-on-hope-in-the-dark-season/#.Wi0VJ0qnGUm>