

December Theme: Hope
Finding the Heartbeat of Hope
Sunday, December 4, 2011, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Reflection Cultivating Hope *Mary Martin, Worship Associate*
As I started to think about hope, this month's worship theme, and tried to define it, the words *optimism* and *wishing* came to mind. But I finally decided that hope is neither of these two things.

One dictionary gives a definition for the word "*wishing*" as "wanting something that cannot or probably will not happen," which I think is different from hope. And *optimism* is a generalized belief in good outcomes when you are already pretty sure that things will turn out OK. *Hope*, in contrast to optimism or wishing, is maintaining a positive outlook when you're not at all sure that things will turn out all right in the end. When someone asked Nelson Mandela if when he was in prison he had been optimistic that his day would ever come, he replied "I never was optimistic, but I never lost hope."

Maintaining hope in the face of reality, such as Mandela did during his imprisonment, without succumbing to wishing can be a pretty tricky balance. It can be very difficult when you're in an uncertain situation with a really bad outcome hanging over your head as an imminent possibility.

I speak from two particular situations in my own life:

The first was when my soldier son was deployed to a Forward Operating Base south of Baghdad, and, between his emails and the nightly news, we heard in real time about the horrors of war.

The second situation involves my husband, Gene, who was diagnosed almost a year ago with a particularly pernicious form of cancer, mesothelioma, which, statistically speaking, generally has a horrible prognosis.

Each of these two circumstances has been a learning experience about how to cultivate and maintain hope when, as one of our hymns puts it, “hope is hard to find.” But I do believe that it can be done!

So I’m going to share with you the seven pieces of advice I give myself every day that have helped me cultivate hope during difficult times:

1. **Don’t use yourself up with worry.** Wallowing in anxiety and fear wears you down. So, I have chosen not to scour the Internet about my husband’s illness because knowing all the dire possibilities makes me feel worse and does nothing to help. I don’t see this as denial, but rather as a conscious choice to minimize worry.
2. **Live in the moment.** Truly, all any of us has is this present minute. Worrying about the future or fretting about the past ruins what’s happening right now.
3. **Accentuate the positive.** In a recent Sunday service, a Buddhist lama talked about deleting negative people from one’s life. I try to delete negative thoughts. We keep a sign in our kitchen that says, “We do not have the luxury of a negative thought.”

4. **Do things that genuinely refresh you.** I'm not talking about activities like eating a whole quart of ice cream or playing hours of video games. I try to focus on things that are recharging, such as maintaining my spiritual practices, getting outdoors as much as possible, and trying to do things that make a positive difference in the world.
5. **Cultivate gratitude.** I try to make a point every day of noticing the things for which I'm thankful.
6. **If you do lose hope, find someone who can hold it for you.** Talking with a wise friend or getting professional counseling can help restore hope.
7. **Stay grounded in a mindset of being held by something larger than yourself.** In 12-step circles, this is called a Higher Power. Some people call their Higher Power "God" and others think of it as something else, such as nature or a supportive group.

Using these seven bits of advice I'm able to keep myself on the side of hope much of the time. But when it seems to be ebbing, I find that the Serenity Prayer is an excellent, short-hand reminder of all of the above, re-charging my hope: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Sermon

The Heartbeat of Hope: *Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*Love Always Wins ... *Really?*

It's funny, that song we just sang, "Come, Sing a Song with Me,"¹ swings along, so I've always heard it in a cheerful way: I've imagined walks in picturesquely mist-filled forests—not in a steady cold rain with no shelter to be had; I've imagined shared dreams—but never nightmares; I've pictured friends holding hands and swinging their arms in rhythm to the song they're sharing—rather than wailing. The tune of the hymn lifts the heart, which is a good thing; it makes it seem *possible* for a rose to appear, as though in a fairy tale—a perfect rose ... "in the wintertime."

But where will that rose actually come from?

The song asks something extraordinary of us. It asks those of us with hope to enter deeply into relationship with those who are in pain, to bring the rose—which is really our listening and our presence and our love. It asks us to *walk with them*.

And it asks those of us who are in pain to open our hearts to another, to be honest with ourselves about the roots of our pain and to share what's on our mind. It asks us to be willing to *try* singing, and dreaming, and walking, even in the rain, so that we can receive the rose this person is offering us.

It asks us, in hope or in pain, to *walk with each other*—and to be willing to be changed, each of us, by the experience.

The most powerful video from the Occupy movement that I have seen shows hundreds of students at the University of California Davis, sitting in silence in the dark, watching UC Davis Chancellor Linda Katehi walk to her car.² The day before, campus police had pepper-sprayed students engaged in nonviolent protest. Videos of that attack went viral, and students, professors, and others have cried out for the chancellor's resignation.

But on this evening, the evening of the walk, the silence is broken only by the click-click-click of the chancellor's shoes on the pavement. Camera strobes light the path that the students have cleared. Campus minister Rev. Kristin Stoneking offers that most profound of ministerial practices and the gift we were just talking about: she "walks with" the chancellor. Chancellor Katehi moves slowly, her hands thrust into her coat pockets as though she is cold. She turns her head from side to side, taking in the faces of the students. The students' eyes meet hers, their gaze quiet and steady. It seems to take forever, that walk, those two and a half minutes of silent mutual witness. Each time I watch it, I hold my breath.

¹ Carolyn McDade, "Come, Sing a Song with Me," # 346 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

² Watch the video of Chancellor Katehi walking to her car at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8775ZmNGFY8>.

Some commentators have called this event Chancellor Katehi's "walk of shame." She is, after all, the chancellor, ultimately responsible for the actions of the campus police on her watch. So they call this witnessing her "walk of shame." But I think they are missing its true meaning. The students wanted face-to-face contact; they wanted "to see and be seen by the chancellor," as Rev. Stoneking describes later. The chancellor agreed. During that walk, students and chancellor become human beings again in each other's eyes, not symbols or "sides" or even "enemies." That walk of mutual witness embodies the power of hope—hope for understanding, hope for change, hope for redemption and reconciliation.

"Why did I walk the Chancellor to her car?" Rev. Stoneking blogs, responding to the folks who are angry that she did. "Because I believe in the humanity of all persons. Because I believe that people should be assisted when they are afraid. Because I believe that in showing compassion we embrace a nonviolent way of life that emanates to those whom we refuse to see as enemies and in turn leads to the change that we all seek."³

Hope springs from such compassion. Hope for the "change that we all seek." But this hope takes the kind of discipline the students demonstrated with their silent, steady, peaceful witness.

Unitarian Universalism is a religion of hope. Hope *in* this world and *of* this world. But it is not a glib or easy hope; it takes discipline and practice.

My clergy study group, the Sparks for Growth, spent two days last week talking about the "core truths of Unitarian Universalism." My friend the Rev. Chris Bell said, "We UUs have a positive view of evolution. That's one of our core truths. We believe that things can, and will, and should get better."

"Really?" I said. "Isn't that just *too optimistic*? Look at the persistence of violence, war, oppression, poverty, hunger, homelessness, the destruction of the planet, and plain old meanness."

Chris said a lot of really convincing things in response, but the *most* convincing thing he said was "Hey, I believe that *I* can and will and should get better. I believe that *I* can change. If I believe it for myself, I need to believe it for the whole crew."

He's got a point. I certainly hope, and I believe, that I can change, that I am changing for the better, despite all my failings. Not to believe it of my brothers and sisters? That would be disrespectful—this capacity for change is not dependent on our circumstances—it would totally not a Universalist point of view!

So yes, we Unitarian Universalists believe that we are all, *all* of us, "part of an unfolding process," as another friend, the Rev. Kathy Huff, said in our conversation about core UU truths. And within this unfolding process, we have the

³ Read the whole of Rev. Kristin Stoneking's blog, "Why I walked Chancellor Katehi out of Surge II" (Surge II is a UC Davis administrative building), at <http://cahouse.org/Weblog/?p=160>.

freedom to choose the direction in which we will change, individually and collectively, based on the best capacities of our conscience and reason and intuition and curiosity and imagination. We can turn ourselves, change ourselves, in the direction of the good, of the life-giving. We believe in redemption in this world, which we can choose, with the help of companions and the lure of the divine. Because isn't God, really, a *direction*—not an entity but the pull toward the good that makes us want to be more loving? Isn't God really the hunger for wholeness that makes us want to create justice? This lure, this freedom to turn in that direction—that's the gift that is already ours, as we said in our Advent reading. There's hope in that!

But it's not an easy hope; it takes discipline and practice. As my friend Kathy says, "we're not all up to the task. [Because] we are [all] fallible." Our own Rev. Geoff said, "We are imperfect in our imperfectability." Kathy goes on, "We Unitarian Universalists believe that we are not born sinners, but we do sin"—which simply means that over and over again we turn away from that direction toward the good. We lie to ourselves or to others. We think we can, or that we have to, do it alone. We numb ourselves out, we fall asleep at the wheel, we let ourselves veer off course. And so we harm ourselves or our loved ones or the planet, we harm strangers or groups we label as "others."

It was a sin for those policemen to pepper-spray the nonviolent students at UC Davis. But the students—and the chancellor—renewed the *hope* for redemption when they turned to meet each other face to face.

The hope at the heart of Unitarian Universalism is that we can change. We can choose to meet ourselves face to face, and to meet each other face to face, with honesty and compassion about our failings, with a commitment to nonviolence, and with faith in our capacity for redemption and reconciliation. We too can choose to walk a strobe-lit path through the evening's dark.

Where in your own life can the discipline of hope open the portal to life-giving choices and second chances? And whom do you want, whom do you *need* to walk with you? Because these folks here! We've all got a rose, and a song of love, even in the wintertime.