

Hope Springs Up, It Doesn't Trickle Down

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
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Spring is on the way. It arrives officially tomorrow morning at 6:30, when the sun is directly over the equator, giving us the vernal equinox. Day and night are balanced in length, and then for the next three months, days will get longer up to the Summer Solstice.

Spring is a great drama, a great story of resurgent life. Much of it has been happening underground for several weeks now. Cape Cod poet Margie Piercy wrote a poem which is a reading in our hymnal

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground. You cannot tell always by looking what is happening. More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.

Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree. Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.

Yet many of us are struggling with maintaining hope. Some of us feel beaten down by the political drama playing out on the national stage. Some of us have more personal challenges. Some of us have seasonal affective disorder – SAD, that's what it's called and that's what it is.

Whatever the source of our sadness or depression or anxiety -- and most feelings like this have multiple sources -- we can welcome the return of the sun and warmth. Samuel Longfellow was a nineteenth-century Unitarian minister, brother of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and a great hymn writer in his own right. He spoke for a lot of us at this time of year when he wrote, "with joy we claim the growing light," which we just sung. Growing light because it is increasing in daily length and because it is encouraging growth in all the plants and animals that inhabit this planet we call home.

This is a great time to get fresh air and exercise; exercise is the great foe of despair. If you can get those corpuscles moving, the endorphins in your brain go to work attacking those feelings of anxiety and worthlessness and boredom.

Studs Terkel, the great radio interviewer and street corner philosopher, gave us this sermon's title, hope springs up, it doesn't trickle down. Studs was that rare creature, a leftist with a knack for communicating with people from all classes and walks of life. He was concerned with social change and focused his attention on activists, and he knew how important it is for people to keep hope in order to keep on working for a better world. He said "I think it's realistic to have hope. One can be a perverse idealist and say the easiest thing: 'I despair. The world's no good.' That's a perverse idealist. It's practical to hope, because the hope is for us to survive as a human species. That's very realistic."

Hope is realistic. Of course there are hopes we entertain which are unrealistic, and sometimes when those have blown up in our faces, we understand that they were not realistic to begin with. We live in a real world. If I say I am hoping to win the Boston Marathon in my age category in April, I am setting myself up for disappointment, but the fault is on me.

The crocuses beside my door, the daffodils down by the pond, are hope springing up. As

they come from bulbs which have lain dormant in the earth for months, the hope that springs up in our hearts comes from within.

Now let me digress here a moment. I am a reformed member of the international English Grammar Police force and I can't let this sermon go without mentioning this word "hopefully." As an adverb, it means "full of hope," but common usage of the last few decades has it also as an adverb modifying the rest of the sentence, meaning "I hope." Hopefully, we will not need to resolve the question whether the fact that 80% of English speakers now use it this way means it is still wrong. If I say, "hopefully, we will live," you are free to take that as a prayer that we'll survive, or a preacherly recommendation that we live with hope in our hearts. Put away your ticket books, grammar police; there are more important battles to be fought.

Studs Terkel uses the term "trickle down" from a school of economics which says that policies which allow the wealthy to make more money and keep more of it out of the government's hands benefit all of us by trickling down. This theory is still advanced by some in politics, though from what I read it has never actually been proven to work that way. But Studs Terkel is here rejecting it not on political grounds but on philosophical grounds.

And I agree wholeheartedly. You will never get your hope ultimately from any source except your own soul. I cannot give you hope from this pulpit, though I hope that something I say here may lead you to find hope for yourself. Hope doesn't trickle down from the most privileged or the most educated or the wisest or the preachers with the highest pulpits. It springs up from the wells of resilience within each of us.

Friday night Jacqueline and Andrea and I put on another one of the Outermost Contra dances at the Preservation Hall in Wellfleet. The Sunday before, Jacqueline had given a beautiful concert at the newly- renovated Eastham library, and we met some interesting people who had come to hear her play. Two of them came to the Contra Dance Friday, and they both danced and had a great time. There is nothing especially remarkable in this story except for one fact: one of these women was totally blind. She had an assisting dog, who did not dance. As one of the organizers, I feel responsible for the safety of everyone who attends one of our dances. And I just wasn't sure that a blind person could navigate a contra dance, particularly when she had never danced before.

So I asked her to dance the first dance with me, and did my best to guide her where she needed to be and to give her verbal cues as to what was coming at her next. I was trying to make sure she had a good time and stayed safe, but wasn't sure whether I was being overprotective or under. But one look at her face gave me to understand that she was having the time of her life. Soon everyone else on the dance floor had taken her on as a project, even the other beginners, looking out for her and helping her get where she needed to be.

The people on that dance floor, in other words, took our special dancer and made themselves a community for the course of two hours. We had a purpose. Of course we always have a purpose to have a good time, and we usually do end up having a good time, but here we also had a purpose of helping her have a good time and get through it safely, and by cracky, we succeeded at that, too.

It showed what we can accomplish, in any group, when we put our minds and hearts into it and work together. The dancers on Friday night are my latest reason for hope. I bet you can think of something like that which has happened to you to give you hope.

Hope is the thing with feathers, says Emily Dickinson, that perches in the soul. Now this is a bit at odds with Studs Terkel's contention that hope springs up. Crocuses spring up, they have leaves and petals. Birds have feathers and they generally flit down rather than springing up. So what we have is dueling metaphors. Metaphors be with you. Hope is where you find it, it could be in the rising spring moon and the metaphors are not the moon but fingers pointing at the moon. Both metaphors ultimately locate the source of hope within each of us, not outside.

Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is a prediction that things will get better. Hope is the will that things get better. It's good to be optimistic if the circumstances are such that you can see things getting better. But you don't have control over all the circumstances.

You have control over your view of the circumstances, but if you ignore the alarms for too long, if you retreat into a cloud of unreality in order to maintain your optimism, you are setting yourself up for a rude shock when reality intrudes itself back into your fantasies.

Many of you will remember the serenity prayer. It is associated with Twelve Step programs like AA, but they didn't write it. The Serenity Prayer was written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and it expresses profound truths about the fact that only some things in our life are under our control: Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can change, and the wisdom to know the difference.

There are a lot of drawbacks to being older, but there are a few benefits, and one of them is a certain perspective. I think I have learned in my 68 years on this planet some truths which may strike some as profound, others as banal. In every life there are the choices you make, and the choices produce consequences, some of them expected and some of them unexpected. And beyond the unexpected consequences of the choices you made there are a lot of things that just happen to you which have nothing to do with choices you made.

If I tell Jacqueline about something going on with my body, she will immediately try to interrogate me to ascertain its cause. It's always something I ate or some thing I did or didn't do. I try to tell her that some things just happen for no reason, but she doesn't want to hear that.

But the serenity prayer doesn't speak to the whole course of history, it speaks to right now. Today, this hour, there are some things you can't change. Some of the things you can't change are the things that happened to you regardless of anything you did or didn't do, and some of them may be things that other people did and some of them may be from the things you did voluntarily, the choices you made. For the most part, those categories don't matter anymore; what matters is whether you can change the way things are now. If you can, and if the way things are now is wrong in some sense, unhealthy, unjust, dangerous, then you must summon the will to change.

That will to change is part of hope. It is believing that a different fate or a different lifestyle or a different set of beliefs is possible.

But here's the radical, the counterintuitive thing I want to say about hope this morning. I think there is also hope in accepting the things we cannot change. We think of hope as the desire for something different. But can hope also be an acceptance of things as they are?

The spring is springing, the season of rebirth and renewal of the earth and in the Christian world of the resurrection of the savior and the good news that love has triumphed over death. We can reject the Christian gloss if we choose, but we can do nothing to stop the progress of the spring. The days will get longer, crocuses and daffodils and bleeding hearts will pop up, things

with feathers will flit down to our feeders. We accept this, we cannot change it. In fact, we can embrace it and delight in it. And we can find hope in it. If what we are hopeless about is the current political scene, we can understand it as an ephemeral thing, like the lifespan of a Mayfly. The real, permanent drama is the one happening in your backyard, not the one playing out on the pages of the newspaper and the megabytes of the internet.

Theodore Parker, the great Unitarian Transcendentalist minister of the mid-nineteenth century, famously said

“Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

That is a statement both of hope and of optimism. Optimism because it predicts the convergence of history and justice. And hope because it implicitly wills that convergence. But it doesn't say we can control the arc. Dr. King and others have used this quote to imply that we can bend the arc, and certainly anything we can do to encourage history and justice to converge we need to do. But if it is something we cannot change, the serenity prayer counsels that we accept that fact.

Where, oh where, is the wisdom to know the difference?

A couple of years ago, from this pulpit, Gene Pickett gave us the gift of his reflections after an extraordinary career in ministry, not only as president of the UUA, but a decade earlier as a UU minister in Atlanta at crucial crossroads in the Civil Rights Movement. He was there at Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, he was there marching at Selma, he saw the passage of the Civil Rights act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Acts of 1965. He spent a lot of his time and energies trying to bend the arc of the universe towards justice.

Yet he said in that talk that one of his favorite images for what he was doing in ministry was the myth of Sisyphus. Think about that for a minute. Of course, Sisyphus is known to contemporary thinkers because of a famous essay by the French Existentialist Albert Camus, which was just entering American consciousness as Gene was doing his ministry in Atlanta. Camus says that Sisyphus knows that his labors are ultimately in vain. It is his fate to continually push a large stone up a hill and then watch it roll back down to the bottom. And it is in the effort to roll the stone up the hill, not to keep it up there or to go on to another stone, that Sisyphus finds the meaning of his life, and Camus concludes by saying that in this, Sisyphus is truly happy.

Happy, ok, but is Sisyphus hopeful? If hope depends on accomplishing some sort of permanent change, he can't be hopeful. But maybe hope is simply in being allowed to do meaningful activity.

Look, I've confessed a fact about myself before and I'll confess it here again: I'm a dopeless hope fiend. I hang on to hope despite what evidence my eyes may behold of human cruelty, crassness, betrayal and ignorance. And I'm able to keep hope alive for myself by a little trick, which I'm glad to share with you: when I see those bad things, I go looking for the good somewhere else. I go looking for something like a couple of dozen contra dancers taking responsibility for a new blind dancer to have a good time safely. Or a group of retirees showing up at Habitat week after week to swing hammers and build homes so people of modest means

can afford to live in our Cape Cod communities.

Spring is all around us and so is hope. Hope is the thing with feathers. Maybe you can find hope in this message Pope Francis tweeted yesterday: "I invite you not to build walls but bridges, to conquer evil with good, offense with forgiveness, to live in peace with everyone."

Or maybe it's in these lines of the poem I read earlier, with which I'll conclude these reflections:

Come, let us give occasion
to faith. These rituals
of sage and sweetgrass
are more necessary
than fodder. We forget
the taste of the holy,
those starchy roots
dissolving to sweetness
on the tongue, forget
that we are spinning,

dancing like angels
on a pin. In these
new days given us
however many, however
few, let us stitch ourselves
in time with time,
plant our desires
in the dark moon
of our dark hours
and rise with our savior
in the spring.
Whether or not we believe we are
miraculous, akin.
Amen.

Readings for Hope Springs

Opening:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
BY EMILY DICKINSON
"Hope" is the 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 chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

VERNAL, EQUINOX: TWO POEMS FOR THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING
Susan de Fietas

Vernal

When the moon shifts its subtle weight
and you leave at last what you love
to hate, the friends you thought ill of,
forsaken, will open their hands
like petals in your sun.

The vultures will swing lazily
about your neighborhood,
and whether it is love
or roadkill
you will not be able to say.

The name of the world
is self and not self.
The name of the world is written
in the light on the waves
of the wind.

Release the shadows of morning.
For spring will not take you
from behind without warning.
Spring will take you swimming in snowmelt
and warm that hard thing frozen
in your womb. When last did you
look up, when last did you notice
that watchful eye,
some new thing
circling?

Equinox

Resurrection is not a matter of faith,
though also, of course,
it is. Winter's hand at last
releases the egg,
balanced on end,
and day comes swaying past,
balancing night
upon its head.

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to faith. These rituals
of sage and sweetgrass
are more necessary
than fodder. We forget
the taste of the holy,
those starchy roots
dissolving to sweetness
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that we are spinning,
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