

What does it mean to be a people of *Hope*?



The Difference Between Hope and Optimism

Are Unitarian Universalists a hopeful people? Theologically we affirm an optimistic view of humanity and its capacity for good and UU theists affirm an optimistic and loving expression of the divine. The familiar joke about the difference between Unitarians and Universalists is that “Unitarians think people are too good to go to hell, while Universalists believe God is too good to send people to hell.” Either way, that is optimism.

At the same time, Unitarian Universalists are known for our critique of the ways society falls short of our capacity for goodness. When it comes to issues of justice and oppression, we are bold in our truth telling – willing to look at reality and challenge the world as it is. Despite our optimistic theology, when it comes to climate change, we can even be apocalyptic in our analysis. Indeed, “despair for the world” as Wendell Berry writes, is something I myself face on a far too frequent basis. Given this, are we a people of hope?

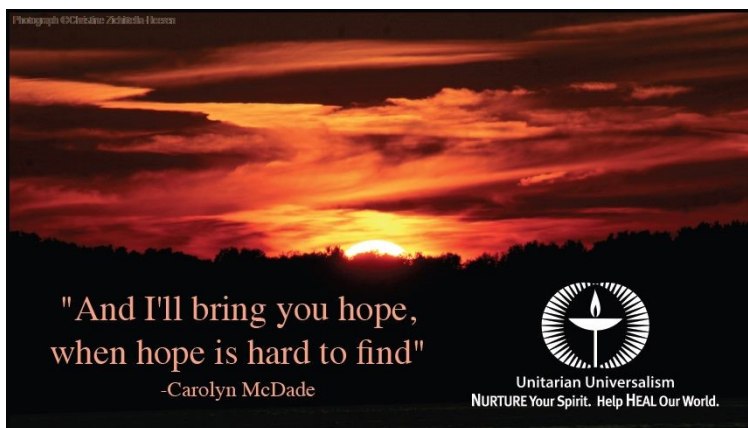
In a meeting of the Vision Task Force, we reflected on the importance of joy and hope in our spiritual community, but right alongside this we named the need to be courageous in recognizing and naming truth. There is something powerful in being able to hold this duality – the pain and heartbreak of suffering and injustice, alongside the possibility for goodness, the potential of humanity and the beauty of creation. This duality is where real hope lives.

Hope is not the same as optimism. Unitarian Universalist minister Bruce Marshall writes, “Optimism is an attitude of expectation that a particular result will occur--that a person will recover from an illness, that we will achieve a specific goal....Hope is less specific. It’s an attitude that looks for possibility in whatever life deals us. Hope does not anticipate a particular outcome, but keeps before us the possibility that something useful will come from this. Hope is more resilient, more enduring, more helpful. Hope advises us to look squarely at the realities that confront us while remaining aware of the possibilities.”

This definition of hope is important because without embracing the duality, we run the risk of losing ourselves to either denial or despair. Denial can be a form of optimism in its stubborn refusal to acknowledge the reality of what is. We fail to see honestly the situation before us. And despair arises when we see clearly the struggles or obstacles, but have lost the capacity to see the possibility for change or learning.

The deep lesson here is that hope isn’t about looking on the bright side. In fact, to build the kind of enduring hope that leads to resilience and health, we have to confront despair, we have to learn to be with the reality or situation that life has given us. This is painful, but hope is not the absence of pain. As author Brené Brown writes, “When you numb your pain you also numb your joy.” The same is true for hope. If we are not able to confront the reality of our lives in our toughest moments, if we cannot sit with our grief, our despair, then we diminish our ability to develop the kind of hope that helps us see beauty and love even in the midst of mortality, the kind of hope that provides courage and persistence even in the face of overwhelming odds, the kind of hope that comes to us as light and joy, even if only in moments, in the midst of pain and struggle. It is in this duality that we truly become a people of hope.

Rev. Susan



"And I'll bring you hope,
when hope is hard to find"

-Carolyn McDade



Image by Christine Zichittella-Heeren via UUMediaWorks.tumblr.com

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Living the Theme: Hope

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience the theme and what you learned from the practice.

1 Take on a “can’t.”

To begin, take a few days to a week to think of the things in your life that you’ve placed a big fat “CAN’T” beside. Some examples:

- "I will never see eye to eye with my sister."
- "I couldn't possibly leave this job to start my own business"
- "I will never have close friends like..."
- "I will never really make a difference, so why bother?"
- "UU's will always be a small select faith, why even consider that we could change the world?"

As you do this, try to find one “can’t” that a small piece of you second-guesses. In other words, as you go through the list, listen carefully for a faint inner voice that says, “Why not?” or “Are you sure?”

Then commit yourself to taking this “can’t” on. Make a promise to yourself that you will do what it takes, for as long as it takes, to *prove it wrong*. Have you always told yourself that you could never jump out of a plane? Prove yourself wrong by signing up for skydiving this weekend. Afraid of heights? Get on the web and find your local indoor rock climbing gym. Always been quiet about your political opinions? Speak out or witness in a way that lands you in jail! Never been athletic? Go buy hiking shoes and work your way up to climbing one of the mountains in Phoenix. Dreamt of being a rock star as a teen but have a horrible voice? Have your friends take you to Karaoke bar and make you get on stage. Be imaginative! Pick something that you think will make you look at life differently—like it is all of a sudden wide-open, your playground, an amazing place where so much is possible.

2 Give Someone Else Hope

I once heard Maya Angelou tell a story on the radio about a day when she was feeling particularly sad. She was feeling just awful when a stranger walked by and gave her a big smile. And that smile changed her perspective. It turned her day and her feeling around.

One definition of hope is the ability to see beauty and possibility even in the midst of pain – it is those moments of seeing something beautiful or feeling that hint of possibility that keeps us strong and hopeful in the midst of trials. So, help give someone else hope by sharing a big smile with a stranger, especially one who looks sad or carrying a great burden. If you have a friend who you know is having a challenging time, send them a beautiful card and let them know the beauty reminded you of the them. Sometime this month, try to offer a gesture of kindness, joy or beauty to another person as a way of sharing hope with others. You don’t need to find out if it worked, the deeper reflection question is how did the act make you feel – what did you learn?

3 Find Hope in the Midst of What Is

A profound spiritual discipline is learning to accept what is without denial or despair. If you find yourself in a difficult, sad or very challenging situation, ask yourself, if you are only feeling despair and hopelessness in the situation, or are you too quickly looking on the bright side, thinking all will just be okay, without acknowledging the reality? How might you look at the situation more clearly and then ask yourself, “How can I approach this with hope?” Knowing all may not work out as you’d expect, are there ways you can find strength, connection, or wisdom in the situation. Can you find possibility for good things and change even if it is not the change or outcome you might want?

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Questions to Live With

Simply look over these questions and find one that “hooks” you. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your group prepared to share the journey.

1. Have you ever had a **powerful experience of hope** in the middle of a very difficult time?

2. **Do you feel a sense of hope for yourself?** Your family? Your community? The world?

3. **What gives you hope?** Are there things you do or places you like go that give you hope, the instill in you a feeling of hope? What or where are they?

4. **Where is hope alive for you?**

5. When was a time when you were **not hopeful**?

6. Have you ever felt inspired by **someone else’s hopeful attitude**?

7. What is your most powerful experience of **something good coming out of a situation that seemed hopeless**?

8. **Who is the most hopeful person you know?**

9. Have you ever hoped something would happen, and when it did, it was **not what you expected**? Was it better? Was it worse?

10. Some common symbols of hope are a rainbow, stars, light, the sun, a baby, feathers, spring, flowers, and birds, such as a dove, raven, or nightingale. (See quotes and poems later in this packet for examples of this imagery.) What do these symbols have in common? **Do you have a symbol that speaks to you of hope?**



Image Credit: Rev. Sean Dennison via UUMediaWorks.tumblr.com

11. In times of crisis, some individuals seem to give up hoping for a positive outcome while others do not. **Which type are you?**

12. UU Minister Bruce Marshall says, “Optimism is an attitude of expectation that a particular result will occur--that a person will recover from an illness, that we will achieve a specific goal....Hope is less specific. It’s an attitude that looks for possibility in whatever life deals us.

Hope does not anticipate a particular outcome. Hope advises us to look squarely at the realities that confront us while remaining aware of the possibilities.” Have you experienced hope in this way in your life, as opposed to optimism?

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Wise Words

Hope: the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best

something good that you want to happen in the future, or a confident feeling about what will happen in the future.

I used to follow the Buddhist idea that one should give up all hope for change in order to completely accept the present moment. And maybe internally, that still has value. But now I find hope to be a very transformative thing, the thing that separates world-changers from well-meaning but ineffective liberals- the belief that things really can be better, less horrible, than they've ever been before, ever, in all of history. Because if that's not true, then why bother?

Worship Associate

The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.

George Washington Burnap

I read about someone recently who, whenever someone is really pessimistic, feeling that they'll never succeed or that things will never improve, etc., just answers, "We'll see." It's only a tiny bit of hope- "we'll see"- but it's enough to keep people going.

Worship Associate

To me, hope starts with imagining a realistic, worthwhile goal, and then beginning to work in that direction. This will probably involve many different hands and hearts, and much long-term patience. The hoped for outcome will have its own timing, and may happen in someone else's lifetime. But, I believe, if the hope is worthy, and we don't give up, it's time will come.

Small Group Facilitator

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.

Desmond Tutu

There is a saying in Tibetan, "Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength."

No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful experience is, if we lose our hope, that's our real disaster.

The Dalai Lama

The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.

Barbara Kingsolver, Animal Dreams

The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope.

Barack Obama

Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Hope is not a dream, but a way of making dreams a reality.

L. J. Suenens

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Wise Words

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.

Emily Dickinson

There is nothing more powerful in all the world than an idea
whose time has come.

Victor Hugo

Nothing is so full of victory as patience.

Chinese Proverb

The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to
pleasure, but from hope to hope.

Samuel Johnson

“Morning Poem”

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 —

“I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”

~ Adrienne Rich

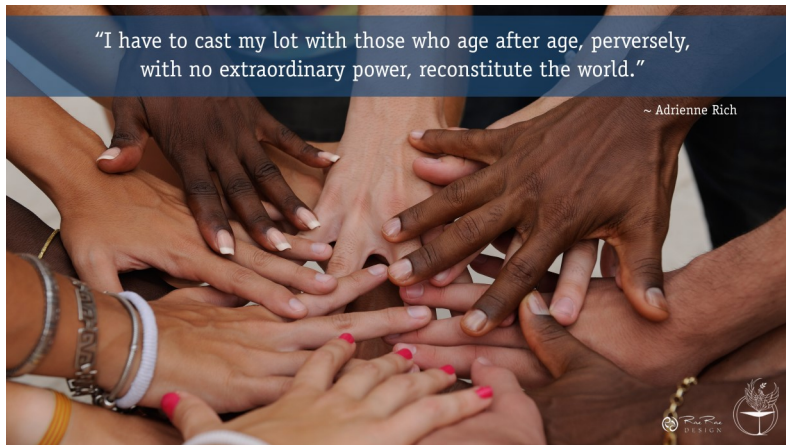


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Hope is like a road in the country: there was never a road, but when
many people walk on it, the road comes into existence.

Lin Yutang

(cont.)

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Wise Words

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.

Mary Oliver

“Dreams”

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Langston Hughes

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;
therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete
sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be
saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;
therefore we must be saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our
friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be
saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

Reinhold Niebuhr

“The Legacy of Caring”

Despair is my private pain
Born from what I have failed to say
failed to do
failed to overcome.

Be still my inner self
let me rise to you
let me reach down into your pain
and soothe you.

I turn to you

to renew my life

I turn to the world

the streets of the city

the worn tapestries of

brokerage firms

crack dealers

private estates

personal things in the bag lady's cart

rage and pain in the faces that turn from me
afraid of their own inner worlds.

This common world I love anew

as the life blood of generations

who refused to surrender their humanity

in an inhumane world

courses through my veins.

From within this world

my despair is transformed to hope

and I begin anew

the legacy of caring.

Thandeka

People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot
see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a
time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all
directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like
that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is
too much work to do.

Dorothy Day

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Wise Words

“Look to This Day”

Look to this day:
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendour of achievement
Are but experiences of time.

For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
And today well-lived, makes
Yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day;
Such is the salutation to the ever-new dawn!

Kalidasa

The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope.

Pierre Teilhard De Chardin

I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

We don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Howard Zinn

We have no idea what tomorrow will bring, but today is overflowing with potential.

Allan Lokos

I am only one,
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something;
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

Edward Everett Hale

Dead my old fine hopes
And dry my dreaming but still ...
Iris, blue each spring.

Shushiki, Japanese Haiku

We should not moor a ship with an anchor, or our life with one hope.

Epictetus

Hope is the deep orientation of the human soul that can be held at the darkest times.

Vaclav Havel

The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.

Wendell Berry

It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

Eleanor Roosevelt

Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.

Dale Carnegie

It is difficult to say what is impossible, for the dream of yesterday is the hope of today and the reality of tomorrow.

Robert H. Goddard

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Recommended Resources

Books:

Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela by Nelson Mandela (Adults)

The Horse Whisperer by Nicholas Evans (Young Adults)

Kids' Random Acts of Kindness by Rosalynn Carter (Children)

Articles:

President Obama: "I Still Believe in a Politics of Hope"
<http://tinyurl.com/nine-years-later>

J.R.R. Tolkien and the Discipline of Hope
<http://tinyurl.com/tolkien-hope>

Videos and Music:

"I Will Rise Up" by Lyle Lovett
<http://tinyurl.com/lovet-rise-up>

"Women of Hope" by Morley
https://www.ted.com/talks/morley_sings_women_of_hope

"The Mountaintop" by Patti Griffin
<http://tinyurl.com/griffin-mountaintop>



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