


Order of Service
Two Faces of Hope

January 3, 2010



Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

Entering a new year together

We gather in hope for the well-being of each person.

We gather in hope to be ever-closer to family.

We gather in hope for the growing strength of this
Evergreen community.

And we gather in hope for the health and happiness

Of our brothers and sisters all over the planet.

In the name of hope

We join in worship once again.

Meditation and Prayer

Hope is of the heart.

Hope is in the heart.

It matters less what words we say in our head

About what we wish for in this world.

Hope is a language of feelings

That dwell in the inmost places of our soul.

For a moment simply feel your heart,

Literally feeling or hearing that rhythmic beating

In the middle of your chest.

Notice what's there.

Some love, perhaps?

Maybe some sadness or grief?

Some forgiveness?

Some hope?

May we transform our lives

And the lives of those we love

With the power of hope.

Readings

"Give Us the Spirit of the Child," by Sara Moores Campbell
#664

Give us the spirit of the child.

Give us the child who lives within:

The child who trusts, the child who imagines,

The child who sings,

The child who receives without reservation,

the child who gives without judgment.

Give us a child's eyes,

That we may receive the beauty and freshness of this day

Like a sunrise;

Give us a child's ears,

That we may hear the music of mythical times;

Give us a child's heart,

That we may be filled with wonder and delight;

Give us a child's faith,

That we may be cured of our cynicism;

Give us the spirit of the child,

Who is not afraid to need;

Who is not afraid to love.

“Beginners,” by Denise Levertov #648

But we have only begun to love the earth.
We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.
How could we tire of hope?—so much is in bud.
How can desire fail?—we have only begun
 To imagine justice and mercy,
 Only begun to envision how it might be
 To live as siblings with beast and flower,
 Not as oppressors.
 Surely our river cannot already
 be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?
Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent?
 Not yet, not yet—there is too much broken
 That must be mended,
 Too much hurt that we have done to each other
 That cannot yet be forgiven.
We have only begun to know the power that is in us
If we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture.
 So much is in bud.

Interlude ``White Cliffs of Dover`` Kirby Schwennsen



Sermon

Two Faces of Hope Rev. Bruce Davis (1731)

It was on the evening of the Blue Moon during the season of Christmas in the year 2009 that my mother took her last breath. Earlier in the day her heart began to fail, perhaps from a silent heart attack, who knows. Through the day her breathing became more labored. She worked at her breathing for several hours, because lifelong she's been a worker, until at the end, she just let go. Her work was done. We know now that she is at Peace.

I had *hopes* for my mother. When her dementia became more pronounced a couple of years ago, I hoped for three things. I hoped that she would be comfortable until the end. I hoped that when the end came that it would come quickly. And I hoped that I would find ways of connecting to her deeply in spite of the cognitive decline.

My hopes for her have been realized. She was comfortable, the end came quickly, and I did find ways to be close to her, even at the very end. Even as she lay lifeless in her bed, warm still to the touch, I held my arm around her shoulders as I had done so often during these last few years. Just being together.

But others had hopes for my mom that were not realized. My father, who was with her for seventy-three years, had hoped that she might just keep on living--perhaps indefinitely? What will his life be now? He is seventy-three-years used to having her around. And yet hoping that she would not die was a hope against hope, because death comes to us all.

Mary Oliver's counsel rings so true:

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.

We are mortal creatures. We can hope for a certain quality of life until the last breath for ourselves and our loved ones, but hope is in vain when it attempts to contradict the inevitable flow of the river of Life into the sea of death. We refer to this as a “hope against hope,” when we get our hopes up for something that cannot happen. This is the other face of hope, taking us down a pathway to sure despair.

And yet, we don’t know what can and cannot happen. Holding on to hope opens the door of unimagined possibilities. Just so, taking hope away from someone may close possibilities for them.

In my medical work I learned about the power of hope in healing, but I learned it the hard way. As a young physician I ‘d been taught to be straight with my patients about the truth of their condition, yet always in a context of compassionate support. What I learned is how powerful hope can be to keep someone moving forward on a path of healing, even when their death is the inevitable outcome. I also learned how easy it is, with the intention of truth-telling, to dash that hope.

An elderly couple had come to my office for the first time. She was short of breath, and a chest x-ray showed moderate congestive heart failure. “The good news,” I told them, “is that your condition is very treatable. Soon, you will be breathing much more easily and you will be better able to be active. But the bad news is that, on average, people only live two or three years with this condition.” I saw them in the office for a check-back a week later. Indeed her condition had improved greatly. It was then I learned a lesson about hope.

“When you told us she only had two or three years to live,” her wise husband said, “you took away our hope for the future. We have so much to live for. Your prognosis of such a limited time caused us to feel hopeless about the years ahead. You are a good doctor, but you must not take away people’s hope in the

name of truth telling.” Turns out she lived for many years. The *truth* of my statistics had done more harm than good. More recently I’ve found this Buddhist saying: “Tell the truth that does no harm.”

Even in desperate circumstances hope can help us to endure. I’m remembering as a young mountain guide being lost on top of Mt. Rainier, responsible for a fourteen-year-old boy and his minister father. We had managed to stay alive in a howling ice storm for several hours. I felt the draw to hopelessness, as I could also read the hopelessness in my exhausted clients, but I just kept on keeping on. Finally, the fog lifted, and the route down the glacier was clear. Hope had allowed us to endure to the point where action could save the day.

There’s a Buddhist story from Tibet, about a family trapped by a harsh winter in their hut, high in the Himalayas. Food was scarce, until it finally ran out completely. Surreptitiously, the father filled two bags with ashes and hung them from the rafters. “These bags are full of barley. If we get too hungry we can always turn to them.” Knowing that food was there, the children and the mother were able to stay alive. The father, however, who knew that the bags were full of ash, could not sustain hope, and he died of hunger.

I find that hope is most real and most helpful when it invites our participation. By participating in what we hope for we are the ones who help to realize that hope. There’s an old expression, “God helps those who help themselves.” Yes, when we commit ourselves to hope we begin to act in ways that confirm that hope. There is a book by a UU minister, Tom Owen-Tolle that attempts to describe the hopefulness of the UU spirit: *Free-Thinking Mystics, with Hands*. There is a saying attributed to the Hopi nation, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

With my mom I had three distinct hopes. Yes, many times I expressed that longing into the Mystery through my thoughts and prayers, but I participated in other more active ways, as well. Not only did I hope for her comfort, I could actively add to her comfort both directly, when I was with her, and indirectly in my advocacy for her living situation. Not only did I hope for a rapid passing in the end, I was also able to support it by helping my father and my siblings understand that intensive medical care at the end tends to cause more suffering. And of course it

was easy to continue the loving connection I'd hoped for because we found that we didn't need her intellect or even her language to share loving presence.

And yet, I didn't control the outcome of these three aspects of my hope for my mother. Each of them happened in surprising ways that I could not have anticipated. They unfolded moment to moment in their own ways.

There's a fourth hope I've harbored during these last few years. I first sensed this hope with the passing of my grandmother many years ago. Sometimes bidden, sometimes unbidden, my Grandmother is still with me in my thoughts and dreams. Her presence is with me in loving support. I hope that I can find this on-going connection with my mother, even now after her time of passing.

In the hours following her passing, as she rested in final peace beneath a quilt the family made for her many years ago, her presence seemed to broaden. It was as if, letting go of her body, her presence expanded to filled the room, and grow outward into the spaces that she loved in this world. These words from David Ignatow:

Earth is your mother as you were mine, my earth, □
my sustenance, my comfort and my strength □
and now without you I turn to your mother
□and seek from her that I may meet you again
□in rock and stone: whisper to the stone,
□I love you; whisper to the rock, I found you; □
whisper to the earth, Mother, I have found my mother □
and I am safe and always have been.

We talked the other day about yearning. This hope for ongoing presence of my mother is fulfilled by the hope itself. The hope itself is the first taste, the first possibility of that presence. The longing takes the first step of fulfilling itself. If I look to those places she loved, her garden, the beach on Port Gamble Bay, her chair by the window, there in spirit she also is, and always will be. I will not spend a day in nature without the sense that she is joined in that beauty in some intrinsic and mysterious way.

We all harbor hopes about our earth. Yet, Mary Oliver’s wise words apply even to the life of our species in this rich biosphere. If humanity itself is mortal, and of course it is, then it will have an ending. Could we have we entered the era for the passing of humankind?

In our hope for the future we protest, remembering Denise Levertov’s words:

Not yet, not yet—there is too much broken
That must be mended,
Too much hurt that we have done to each other
That cannot yet be forgiven.
We have only begun to know the power that is in us
If we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture.
So much is in bud.

And so we hope for healing of the planet and a renewed future for the family of man. What kind of hope shall this be? Shall it be that “hope against hope” where we put forth our wishes and then withdraw in fear and despair? This is that other face of hope that finally leads to hopelessness. The alternative is a hope that lives in participation. With participation comes inspiration and ever-renewing hope.

My mother never gave in to despair. She loved this earth. Now more than ever she’s part and particle of that soil she tilled lifelong. When I turn the compost into the spring garden this year, she will be there.

I close with a memorial moment for my Mom, using the words of Wendell Berry:

“She Goes Free of the Earth,”

She goes free of the earth.
The sun of her last day sets

clear in the sweetness of her liberty.

The earth recovers from her dying,
the hallow of her life remaining
in all her death leaves.

Radiance knows her. Grown lighter
than breath, she is set free
in our remembering. Grown lighter

than vision, she goes dark
into the life of the hill
that holds her peace.

She's hidden among all that is,
and cannot be lost.

May it be so.