

Future Imperfect

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.
Eleanor Roosevelt

Reading

From *The Place Beyond Fear and Hope* (in Shambala Sun) by Margaret Wheatley

Many of us have worked hard for many years to create a better world.
We have worked for a world where more people would be free from suffering—
the physical suffering of poverty, disease, and loss,
and the emotional suffering of ignorance, misperception, and invisibility.
In this time of rekindling hope,
we must also acknowledge that suffering everywhere,
both material and spiritual, has increased.

For me and most of my colleagues,
life these days is a roller coaster ride between hope and fear,
oscillating wildly between what's possible and what is.
Like all roller coasters, this one is both exhilarating and terrifying,
often simultaneously.
We are fully engaged in being part of the solution,
and then we plunge into despair at the enormity of the challenges
and the fear that our efforts will fail.

And yet, such a wild ride between hope and fear is unavoidable.
Fear is the necessary consequence of feeling hopeful again.
Contrary to our belief that hope and fear are opposites where one trumps the
other, they are a single package,
bundled together as `intimate, eternal partners.
Hope never enters a room without fear at its side.
If I hope to accomplish something, I'm also afraid I'll fail.
You can't have one without the other.

Those of us raised in Western culture were never taught that fear is the price of hope. ...

Sermon Future Imperfect

On the wall of my study at home I have stuck up a small yellow piece of paper. It lists the steps towards ministry. It begins with registering for the seminary, continues through achieving aspirant status, taking a psychological assessment test, and so on and on and on...

I give myself a gold star for each goal achieved. There are now more stars than not on the list. But some of the stars have been a long time coming.

So above the list, I placed a picture of a doorway, a gateway through to the future. It's a watercolour of a stone doorway, through which you can see hills and sky. It is a portrait of what is left of Strata Florida, a twelfth century abbey in Wales. My aunt lives in the village down the street, and on a visit we wandered down to the ruins, all tumbled grey walls and soft green grass. One magnificent arched door into the church, carefully carved stone, still stands. Inviting people to walk under the open sky into history. This gateway reminds me that my journey doesn't end in a destination, but in a new phase of my life, rooted in the past, open to the future. Not so long from now, I will at last be at the great stone arch of ministry, and step through.

The list reminds me of the work that needs to be done. The gateway reminds me of my goal. I am truly filled with hope for Unitarian ministry in this time and place. For all the possibilities available to my ministry. And I am also a little freaked out. I am fearful of not helping create a vibrant spiritual community. I am fearful of not reaching the people who are seeking us. I am fearful of messing up.

As Margaret Wheatley wrote in the reading:

“Hope never enters a room without fear at its side.
If I hope to accomplish something, I'm also afraid I'll fail.
You can't have one without the other.”

So how do I keep the fear from overwhelming the hope?

In Buddhism, there is a saying:

“Hope and fear chase each other's tails”.

I know this to be true. A few nights ago I took my dog to a local school yard to play. My cat came with us....

A rabbit who was peacefully enjoying a twilight dinner caught the cat's attention and began to run.

My cat began to run.

This caught the dog's attention.

He began to run.

The rabbit's fear. The cat's hope. Her fear. The dog's hope.

All chasing each other's tails.

Fortunately, the rabbit ran the fastest.

Buddhist thought argues that because hope and fear are endlessly intertwined, we need to let go of both of these states.

If we are present in the moment, freed of transient emotions that block us, then we can see clearly and act rightly,
without expectation of success, or fear of failure.

This is a good model of being, living beyond hope and fear,
in a very healthy kind of hope free, existing in the now, calm way.

At the same time, though, I don't want to give up on hope.

As Unitarians, I'm not sure this philosophy quite fits.

I think we agree with the need to live in the here and now,
to be oriented to the present, living by our principles.

But do we always need to do it with serenity?

I see Unitarian Universalism as a religion which celebrates the earth, the body,
the messy passions of exuberant, abundant life.

While the calm waters of serenity are needed, so too are fiery passions of action.

I struggle with some Christian concepts of fear as well.
 Some strands argue that fear can only be vanquished by faith,
 if you have enough faith, fear will melt away. Fear in this case is considered evil,
 a negative emotion that only harms.

Faith or trust, whether in God or humanity,
 clearly does guard against fear, keeping us oriented to hope.
 But fear is part of the messiness of life. It isn't evil or morally wrong,
 it's just another pesky human emotion.

If fear is the price I pay to live with hope into the future, I am willing to pay it.

Fear that is unmanaged is harmful. Too much fear and we end up in despair.
 Frozen, we end up curled up in bed with a bag of doritos for dinner, watching
 bad television.
 But fear in its proper proportion, is normal, even healthy.

After all, if I can speak for the rabbit, it's alive not because it was hoping for a
 quiet night, but because it was afraid it wouldn't be.
 Fear made the rabbit cautious, made it alert, made it pay attention.
 Fear reminds us that what we hope for requires risk.

As Unitarians I believe we are called to learn
 how to acknowledge and live with the difficult emotions.
 To embrace the dark with the light.

We need to learn how to manage our fear. To defrost, we need warmth. The
 warmth of human connection to remind us we are not alone.
 Then we begin to move forward and live more fully.
 And if we can learn to bear witness to those in fear, in pain.
 If we can listen as they speak, we too will live more fully.

It is not surprising that many of us live with fear
 given how the news highlights danger and damage.
 The economy. The environment. War. Poverty. Injustice.

In the 1990s, activist and author Frances Moore Lappe, established the American
 News Service, with the intention to distribute the good news of eco-solutions and
 citizen democracy to mainstream news outlets. It folded after five years. The

news media doesn't survive on positive news.
But while we have created news corporations that thrive on trauma, ordinary humans survive on good news.
We need hope for the future.

When I worry too much about the future, I look to the past.
I grew up in the seventies, proudly wearing red overalls from the amazing treasure trove that was the Sears catalogue.

We had a single dial up phone stuck on the kitchen wall.
All the kids in the neighbourhood hung out together outside, playing endless hide and seek, only coming home when dark fell.
Nostalgia suggests this was a much a better place to be.
Clear skies, kids outdoors, elders respected, and Gold Mine nugget gum was only a quarter.

But teachers also told girls that they were stupid at math.
My gay neighbours kept up a public fiction of just being roommates, and still some people on my street refused to talk to them.
Gasoline was filled with lead.
The past is imperfect.

In the seventies I grew up thinking nuclear holocaust was a likely future. My parents and their parents lived in the terrible shadows of the two world wars.
The past is imperfect.

So is the present. This keeps my fear in proportion.
Humanity is always living in times of dangerous transition.
And while I know that the environmental degradation we face now is unlike any other, and that being vegetarian and wearing birkenstocks is not enough, I find my way to hope.

I have faith. In people and the planet.

People are remarkably resilient. And imaginative. And creative.
And so is the earth. Messy life will go on living. It will go on missing many excellent species, many indigenous cultures. Much will be lost.
But life will go on limping into the future.
Scarred and still gorgeous.

Vaclev Havel, the Czech poet and president, once said that
 “Hope is a dimension of the soul ...
 an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart.
 It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored
 somewhere beyond its horizons. ...
 Hope, in this deep and powerful sense...
 [is] an ability to work for something because it is good...
 It is not the conviction that something will turn out well,
 but the certainty that something makes sense,
 regardless of how it turns out.”

Hope in people helps imperfect me move forward into the imperfect future.
 Hope is the trust that we place in what is most real and most important. It is
 about living our Unitarian principles, living our values - living the way we want
 the world to be - right now. It is hard work. It is good work. It is worth the risk.
 Our successes may be few. Our failures may be many.
 That is okay.

There is a story about the Dalai Lama where he is speaking with some people
 depressed about the state of the world. “Do not despair,” he said. “Your work
 will bear fruit in 700 years or so.”

It is okay to not know how it will all turn out. This is why hope trumps its loyal
 sidekick fear. Because we don’t know what impact we have.
 A small pebble can create large ripples when tossed into the pond.
 But it can’t see them.

We do what we can because we can. Not because we are the best, or the greatest,
 or most important or most successful, but because we are engaged. Dancing in
 the chaotic dance of life.

Unitarian writer Doug Muder says that “Hope cares for the eggs without
 counting the chickens that might come from them.
 Hope plants as wisely as it can, knowing that the rains and the harvest are
 uncertain. Hope is—right here and right now,
 whatever may happen in the future—a better way to live.”
 (Muder *“Winter Hope”* in *UU World*)

Hope is a better way to live. Right here. Right now.

On the yellow lined paper stuck on my green study wall,
four things are left on my list:
internship, my application package for my final interview,
the interview in September with the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston,
and ordination. Today, after the picnic, I will go home and put a gold star beside
the internship.

Then I will look at the image of Strata Florida's magnificent west doorway and
see myself a couple of steps closer. And I will still be freaked out. But hope will
peek around the corner.

I know the twelfth century Welsh monks did not build a church doorway to last
so that a Canadian woman seeking Unitarian ministry could find in its ancient
ruined self a sense of hope.

But how cool is it that it does?

How cool is it that the grassy stony remains of their abbey
brings people to it to think on history, be touched by god, be awed by time, to
draw delicate portraits, and to dream big dreams within its solid yet broken
frame?

We don't know what the future will bring. It's a dark and inscrutable place. We
don't know what the outcomes of our work, our lives will be. And that's what
makes it wonderful. Because it means so many things are possible.

My heart holds the image of us going forward, through endless archways, with
that package deal of two for one, hope and fear together.

But we are together too. And in sticking together,
hope grows bigger than fear. Always.
Always.