

“Fire It Up”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Fire Communion

My colleague, Victoria Safford,
says that the work of being a minister
is to arrive in the pulpit, each Sunday,
with a “punctual and articulate hopefulness.”

The job of the preacher, she says,
is to speak truthfully and to speak hopefully.

To hold truth and hope together.
On schedule. Week after week.

While I wholeheartedly agree with her about this sacred duty,
I agree even more when she points out
that this is an almost impossible task.

After all, there are days.
And there are weeks.
And then months and entire years.
When hope is very hard to find.

And, yet, that is the work—
to balance speaking the truth with an enduring word of hope.

That is the task to which I set my heart through ordination
and in accepting the call to serve in ministry among you.

It is work that I truly love.
Even when it feels impossible.

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Here at the threshold of this new year,
it may feel that the weight of the hard truths coming our way

can't be realistically balanced by our hopes for the future.

But that, Dearly Beloved, is the work.

In the face of even the hardest facts,
the real work is to seek out hope.
To scan the horizon for signs of promise.
For hints of progress.
To invest ourselves in finding the sources of light, and of life.

To relentlessly remember that there is more to the story.
To know in our bones that we are co-authors of the story of the world,
and that the end has yet to be written.

While this work of speaking truth and speaking hope is work
that Lynn and I have both gladly taken on,
I am here to tell you today
that this work does not belong solely to us, as your ministers.

It is work that belongs to each and every one of us.
To each and every one of you.

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There is so much that is deeply worrying
about the state of our world in this moment.

There is so much that is broken and in need of repair.

So much that is hurting and in need of healing.

So much that is uncertain and in need of faith—
so much in desperate need of an active and abiding hope
that will help to bring a better world into being.

This is the work to which we,
together and as individuals,
are called.

Now, to be clear, I'm not talking about an idle, anemic hope
that is the stuff of simple, shallow desire.

The hope to which we are called must be deeply rooted
in our living into the best of our humanity.

In my opinion, no one speaks to this more persuasively, right now, than Rebecca Solnit.

Take in her extended reflection on the meaning and power of hope¹:

Causes and effects assume history marches forward,
but history is not an army.

It is a crab scuttling sideways,
a drip of soft water wearing away stone,
an earthquake breaking centuries of tension.

Sometimes one person inspires a movement,
or her words do decades later;
sometimes a few passionate people change the world;

sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do;

sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage
or the same ideal and change comes upon us
like a change of weather.

All that these transformations have in common
is that they begin in the imagination, in hope.

To hope is to gamble.

It's to bet on the future,
on your desires, on the possibility
that an open heart and uncertainty
are better than gloom and safety.

To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear,

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope In the Dark*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2016, 3-4.

for to live is to risk.

I say all this to you because hope is not like a lottery ticket
you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky.

I say this because hope is an ax
you break down doors with in an emergency;

because hope should show you out the door,

because it will take everything you have
to steer the future away from endless war,

from the annihilation of the earth's treasures

and the grinding down of the poor and marginal.

Hope just means another world might be possible,
not promised, not guaranteed.

Hope calls for action;
[and] action is impossible without hope.

We, as a congregation, are called to be a community of hope.

A place where we can hold truth and hope together,
even when it is hard, and, arguably, because it is hard.

For this is something that no one person can do alone.

We need one another in this great endeavour.

We need others who can witness
to the hope they've found along life's way,
when we forget,
or when we can no longer seem to find it for ourselves.

Together, we can hold each other
in the times of our frustration and despair,
those times when we struggle with cynicism and anxiety,

because there will always be those among us who are,
in any given moment, the bearers and bringers of our hope.

In a resilient community,
in one able to weather the hard truths before us,
this is a role that must rotate through our ranks,
with each of us in our turn
doing what we can to keep the fires of hope burning.

This will be all-the-more important as we journey together
through a time of significant transition as a congregation,
as we make the move from this home to another,
with a possible interim stop along the way.

We can do this.

Together.

And we can grow stronger in the process.

When I look as far as I can into an uncertain future
and imagine what the world will need in years to come,
I keep returning to the belief that the world will need
more communities like this—
more communities like what we are striving to become.

A place where we are reminded again and again
of our purpose and our promise.

A place where we experience the interconnected web of life
in relationships we learn to nurture
through acceptance, compassion, and understanding.

A place where we come to be renewed
when our light grows dim.

A place where we come to help others
that their light might shine.

Such a place does not depend on a geographical location.

For such a place lives in the hearts of all who make it so.

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May we strive on to be such a people.

A people of courageous, loving hope.