

“The Hardest-Won Hope”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Easter Sunday

“We have wintered long enough.”

Never have these oft-used words from Jane Rzepka rung so true.

“We have wintered long enough,” indeed.

Though this certainly wasn’t the hardest of winters, in terms of weather, this winter—now officially and finally past—has been a test of our endurance on so many levels.

If ever there has been a “winter of our discontent,” I suspect, for many of us, this was it.

We, in Toronto, of course, have been in some form of lockdown now for almost five months— to say nothing of the past year, as we’ve watched a virus take its toll on people’s lives and livelihoods.

And just as so many of us were starting to sense the possible winding down of the pandemic— glimpsing the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel— we find ourselves in lockdown again, as we contend now with a third and very worrying wave of cases.

Which means we’re not quite out of the woods.

And which means we must draw on our reserves of patience and fortitude, and all that we know of resilience to get through the coming weeks to what will, hopefully, be the summer for which our hearts so desperately long.

Yet, while we maintain this necessary vigil for the well-being of our neighbours and ourselves,

springtime is beginning to unfold all around us,
keeping its own calendar,
on a schedule dictated solely by the sun and the gentle tilt of the earth.

Admittedly, there's something a bit jarring
in seeing crocuses and snowdrops begin to bloom,
and green shoots slowly emerge from the soil
and from branches that for months have looked all but dead.

Does Mother Nature not know that we're still in a pandemic?

Doesn't she care or understand our predicament?

What are we to make of spring, with all its extravagance, in this strange season?

Would not the drab colours and cold of mud season suit us better in these times?

Claire Lowden, in her new collection of essays, *In the Garden*,
describes how her relationship to nature has changed during the pandemic.

“[This year] I think I mostly noticed nature itself not noticing [us]:
just getting on with the business of burgeoning,
naturally not giving a [flip] that one of its myriad species is sick.”

While such seeming indifference from the natural world
may come across as a bit harsh, I choose to see it another way.

I choose to accept myself as just another part of the wondrous web of creation,
and to see in spring's relentless, riotous unfolding
the very deepest of affirmations: that life goes on.

That life truly goes on,
with or without us,
in sickness and in health,
when we are at our breaking point or when we're riding high.

That always and everywhere,
spring follows winter, and life itself goes on.

And that blessedly, after the longest night,
joy often does come in the morning,

even if it's slow to arrive.

This is a truth we've come to know,
if we've ever had to pick up the pieces of our broken heart and begin again.

If we've ever had to work our way through a loss,
wading in the weight of grief to find our way to the other side.

If we've ever had to overcome the black dog of depression
to make our way back to the light.

The great truth taught by this season and celebrated at Easter
is that life goes on. And on.

And often on our most difficult days,
has the grace to carry us along with it.

This is a lesson I have learned,
time and again, just after someone has died.

I can't count the times I've been gathered with people
in a hospital room around the bed of one they love
who has just breathed their last.

So often, through the tears and waves of deep sadness,
there are also, before long, in that same room,
meaningful and unexpected moments of laughter,
heartfelt chuckles at their loved one's most endearing quirks,
and, in all of it, an unspoken acknowledgement
that the person now gone will somehow live on in those who remain.

It is a moment when those gathered there in grief
begin to learn that the life within them will go on, as well.

At times, people feel unsettled by this experience.
They worry that they're disrespecting the deceased.
Thinking that love can only be shown in such moments by their despair.

But, this Easter morning, the blossoms and buds
serve to remind us that this is not so.

The great cycles that play out in the world around us remind us that there is a season for everything, but that life also and always goes on.

These lessons from the natural world are echoed, I believe, in the springtime stories of the Jewish Passover and the Christian Easter.

The Israelites' move from captivity to freedom speaks to that impulse to breathe in the sweet air of liberation after enduring terrible hardship.

And the resilience of Jesus' first followers in the wake of his death speaks to how an entire community can be resurrected from their devastation, in powerful and lasting ways.

But a bedrock belief that life goes on is not necessarily a given.

Such a belief can easily be challenged by the hard facts of everyday life, filling us with deep doubts about where life is headed when the future before us seems at best to be a blur.

This is where faith and hope come in— terms I see being fairly close in meaning when defined as our deepest truth or confidence in something.

Choose whichever word works best for you, or feel free to simply replace faith or hope with the words trust or confidence, if helpful.

(After all, translating theological words is a vital skill to develop as Unitarians!)

By whatever name you call it, I commend to you as a spiritual practice the development of this capacity to trust— to hold on to faith, or hope, or deep confidence— that you might in every circumstance, come what may, be able to lean into the abiding truth that life goes on.

Václav Havel, the playwright and human rights activist who led the resistance against repression in his native Czechoslovakia, and who, after being in and out of prison, went on to become President of the Czech Republic,

lived out his final years with lung cancer.

This reflection of his on the meaning of hope is worth taking in:

Hope [he said] is a state of mind, not a state of the world.
Either we have hope within us or we don't.
Hope is not a prognostication—it's an orientation of the spirit.
You can't delegate that to anyone else....

Hope is definitely NOT the same as optimism.
It's not the conviction that something will turn out well,
but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live
and to continually try new things,
even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.

I hear in his description of hope something of the faith of the crocus
in the poem by Lynn Unger that Lynn read earlier —
the feeling that something makes sense, no matter how it turns out.

Living in the violence of Spring
Living in a time
where shells are cracking
and shapes alter
Who can afford to risk
forgetting the danger
forgetting the moment
the crocus bulb breaks ground
Never knowing whether
snow or sun or ice
awaits in warm or jagged welcome

There are no choices here
No careful path or
reasoned way

No holding in reserve for
some more settled,
more propitious time

But only the unconsidered
faith of the crocus
whose saffron petals echo
or demand the sun

We cannot always control the conditions in which we live.

And sometimes, when circumstances are at their worst,
we simply have to hold to what we most deeply trust to be true.

In the book *Good to Great*, there is a chapter titled,
“Confront the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith)”.

The chapter introduces the term the “Stockdale Paradox,”
named for a man who, during the Vietnam War,
was held at the “Hanoi Hilton” for eight years.

This is how Admiral Stockdale’s conversation with the writer Jim Collins unfolded:

“I never lost faith in the end of the story,”
Stockdale said, when I asked him.

“I never doubted not only that I would get out,
but also that I would prevail in the end
and turn the experience into the defining event of my life,
which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

I didn’t say anything for many minutes,
and we continued the slow walk toward the faculty club,
Stockdale limping and arc-swinging his stiff leg
that had never fully recovered from repeated torture.
Finally, after about a hundred metres of silence, I asked,
“Who didn’t make it out?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The optimists.”

“The optimists? I don’t understand,” I said, now completely confused,
given what he’d said a hundred metres earlier.

“The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said,
‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’”

And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go.
Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.'
And Easter would come, and Easter would go.
And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again.
And they died of a broken heart."

Another long pause, and more walking.
Then he turned to me and said,
"This is a very important lesson.
You must never confuse *faith that you will prevail in the end*—
which you can never afford to lose—
with the discipline to confront
the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

Hear that again:

"You must never confuse *faith that you will prevail in the end*—
which you can never afford to lose—
with the discipline to confront
the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

This is what I would call hard-won hope—the hardest-won hope:

The "certainty that something [can make] sense,
regardless of how it turns out."

The deep trust that you will somehow persevere,
even while staring down the harshest realities in front of you.

And the gut-level acceptance that life goes on,
even if not in the ways you dreamed or hoped or planned.

The trick is to ride the wave.

To take your place in the flow of life,
being at peace no matter what comes your way,
because you have practised being at peace.

This Easter morning, let us celebrate the unfailing renewal of life—
and our place in the unfolding story of this season:

that life goes on, and we with it.

In springtime's exuberance,
with its riot of colours still to come,
let us be on the lookout for all that is in bud—
those tiny harbingers of hope that call us to wonder
at all that is still to come alive in us.

For we have wintered long enough.

Amen.