

“When Hope is Not Enough”  
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This month’s theme is “Hope.” As some of you will remember, I’ve been using thematic materials from a UU group called “Soul Matters.” Hope seems like a perfect theme for December, I remember thinking. The birth of the Messiah, the return of the light after the winter solstice... Then, one morning, I read Thich Nhat Hanh’s essay on “Hope as an Obstacle.” The title caught my eye immediately, because it goes so counter to the way I usually think of hope, which for me has always been a part of being a person of faith. So, it did create a strong reaction in me.

If we know a little bit about **Thich Nhat Hanh**, however, we can maybe better see the wisdom in his words. Nhat Hanh became a Buddhist monk at the age of 16 in Vietnam. When war began in Vietnam, monks and nuns were confronted with the question of whether to remain with the contemplative life and stay in the monasteries, or to help those around them who were suffering under the bombings and turmoil of war. Thich Nhat Hanh was one of those who chose to do both, and in doing so founded the practice of Engaged Buddhism. His commentary on the function of hope and its limitations challenged me to look more deeply into the idea of hope.

Hope has been a cornerstone of our UU theology since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1885, Unitarian minister **James Freeman Clarke** outlined his “Five Points of the New Theology,” which summarized commonly held Unitarian beliefs of the time: “the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the continuity of human development in all worlds, or, the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.”

With such a boldly-stated belief in the positive power of humankind, how could Unitarians not hold high hopes for the future?

The earliest-known reference to “onward and upward” is probably in a poem written by a New Jersey bishop, **George Washington Doane**, in 1825. In it, Doane uses the image of an eagle flying straight and unwaveringly and a mother saying

to her son, “Boy, may the eagle's flight ever be thine, Onward, and upward, and true to the line.”

The poem became extremely both here and abroad, and the words, “Onward and upward and true to the line” appeared in inspirational speeches and sermons throughout the mid-to late 1800s. In the context of preaching, the poem’s scene would have evoked the well-known Isaiah scripture: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles...” (Is 40:31) So it’s not hard to see how “onward and upward” could have become a catchphrase for preachers wanting to motivate their congregants to press on toward higher things.

Poet and abolitionist **James Russell Lowell** adapted the sentiment of “onward and upward,” to call upon fellow Americans to recognize the evils of slavery and to do the difficult but morally correct thing. In his poem, “The Present Crisis,” written in 1844, he said,

New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth.

In other words, as time passes, our understanding of what is true and right shifts, and we must be prepared to shift our moral response to the current situation. It was true in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it is true now.

With James Freeman Clarke, “onward and upward” took on an easy optimism and sense of inevitability. When he included among his 5 points the popular belief that humankind was destined to progress forever, there was a lot of reason, for white citizens, at least, for great hope for the future. We can understand that if we think for a moment about what was happening with science, medicine and technology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. And believing in the inevitability of the betterment of humanity certainly seems less gloomy than the Calvinist belief in the salvation of the elect, a doctrine that the Unitarians and Universalists of the time were rejecting.

Skipping ahead half a century... The first and second world wars woke America up to the vast human capacity for evil. In the aftermath, America and Europe said, “Never again.” But, as science, medicine and technology continued to leap forward, many middle class and wealthy Americans were lulled once again into

believing in the *politics of inevitability*, a term coined by (white) American author and Holocaust historian **Timothy Snyder**. The politics of inevitability is a worldview that sees the present “simply as a step toward a future we already know,” one of economic expansion, deepening reason and growing prosperity. (Snyder, On Tyranny) It’s a view that assumes a natural movement of history in the direction of greater democracy. Given our current political climate, this view is not only outdated, it’s dangerous. It’s dangerous because it blinds people to the insidious creep of tyranny.

If we reject the hollow hope that the future will automatically be a better version of the present, if we no longer imagine that humanity is destined to progress onward and upward forever... what’s the alternative? Is it despair? No. It’s not despair. If we despair, we lack humility. Why would I say that? Well, it’s a false certainty. It’s saying that we know what the future will bring. We can guess, but, as I’ve heard it said, our imagination is limited; God’s is not.

To believe in hope is to be humble, because it acknowledges that we don’t know what the future will bring. Hope can help us to bear a present difficulty; it can calm our fears; it keeps us from becoming hopelessly cynical; it keeps us from despair, or worse, apathy. Hope is important, because in hope there is possibility. Over the past 12 months I have felt an acute responsibility to offer you hope. Not hope as a panacea, but as an intelligent part of being spiritually balanced. Honestly, I don’t know what faith without hope looks like or feels like.

**Howard Zinn**, author of A People’s History of the United States, wrote:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places...where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

This is key. If we want to be part of the movement toward creating a more just world and toward saving the planet, hope alone will not accomplish much. But

hope that ignites our spirits and sparks us to take action, there's power in that combination.

To paraphrase the late UU minister (of color), **Orlanda Brignola**, we are called to hope and we are called to justice.

You know, in preparing for this service, I read an inspiring article about the respected German Christian theologian, **Jurgen Moltmann**, who back in the 60s developed a theology of Hope, and wrote an influential book by the same name. Moltmann, now in his early 90s, still insists on the power of hope. But I am not sure that he and I, and for that matter, he and most UUs, would agree on the source of hope, the reason for hope. Moltmann's hope lies in "the coming of God" as a force for the transformation of the world. His hope is based on the Christian promise of the future, the coming of God's judgment and kingdom.

We part ways there, because in Unitarian Universalism, we focus on the here and now, not on a distant promise of eternal life. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "Western civilization places so much emphasis on the idea of hope that we sacrifice the present moment." "We use hope to believe something better will happen in the future, that we will arrive at peace or the Kingdom of God." But if we cling too much to our hope for the future, we lose out on our ability to channel our energy and abilities to make a difference in the present moment.

"If you can re-channel those energies into being aware of what is going on in the present moment," says Nhat Hanh, "you will be able to make a breakthrough and discover joy and peace right in the present moment, inside of yourself and all around you."

But Nhat Hanh is not suggesting that we just sit around and bask in spiritual joy. He's not saying that we should forget about hope.

Engaged Buddhism means embodying the peace and compassion we wish to see in the world. And as we act in the world in a spirit of peace and compassion, we nourish and keep hope alive through our works and deeds. In this way, hope is not something that distracts us from the present; it is not an obstacle, but rather hope becomes a catalyst for firing up our spirits and inspiring our engagement

with the world. This is what I mean by hope as an intelligent part of being spiritually balanced.

My UU colleague, **David Pyle**, (a white UU minister), recently preached a sermon for the annual meeting of UU PLAN – Pennsylvania Legislative Advocacy Network. He talked about his encounters with non-UU social activists, and how, over and over again, they comment on how the UUs “are always there.”

Like the steadfast eagle, we fly onward and upward and true to the line. Those other social activists tell us how much they appreciate our presence, because, as Rev. Pyle says, “We bring hope.”

We bring the ability to care about people, the future, and the world. We bring a fierce determination that is rooted in the idea that it is up to us to build the world that we want to live in. A fierce determination that it is our hands that can and will change the world, and a faith that the world can be changed. Our faith is rooted in the here and now... it is rooted in the possibilities within this world.

“Affirmation of Hope” by Dr. Loretta F. Williams, who was director of UU Social Action at the UUA from 1980-1989.

We Unitarian Universalists bring hope in the here and now. Not a wishful hope. Not a hope for some distant future, but a living, breathing hope that is alive in us, right now. The vision of hope is emerging.

May it be so.