

## **“Reimagining Hope”**

**Rev. Mary Gear**

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### **Reading**

Today’s reading is an excerpt from Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities by Rebecca Solnit, published in 2016.

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes--you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think that it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It’s the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.

### **Homily**

I’d like to tell you a bit of the backstory behind last Sunday’s worship service. Our guest speaker was Matt Meyer, a musician and worship leader from the Boston area. It was a beautiful and inspiring service-if you weren’t able to attend, you can watch the recording posted on the OUUC website. I recommend it.

Matt is a skilled storyteller and speaker as well as musician, so he said he would offer the story, the homily and the music. Great! I was delighted to be the celebrant for that day and looked forward to creating worship with Matt. But, as we were planning the service, thoughts of past mishaps began to enter my mind: the time in August that Matt Aspin lost power from his location in the Midwest and led worship on his phone, last month when the entire neighborhood where the celebrant lived lost internet access on Sunday morning and so they couldn’t join us, the time last Spring that our speaker disappeared when his computer did automatic updates. We’ve had a few adventures over these past months!

And, so I did what I do when I am worried—I figured out Plan B. The Worship Arts Team and Tech Team as well as the OUUC staff know that I am all about Plan B these days. I asked Chris Parke if she would be the backup celebrant for me, and she graciously said yes. Then, what about back-up for Matt? Music, story and homily! So, that week I created a complete second service as back-up, with me as the speaker and Chris as celebrant. (Chris said yes again.) The file containing the service outline for that day is labeled Oct. 18, 2020. The file containing the back-up service is labeled Oct. 18, 2020-Plan B.

As we gathered and prepared for the Sunday morning service last week, Matt showed up! Yay! I showed up! Yay! Chris showed up! Yay! The Tech Team showed up and was gracious in finding the right script (not Plan B) and we offered the service. No one disappeared and Chris got to relax after a while.

There are many ways that we cope with uncertainty. Those who know me aren't surprised to learn that I cope by trying to create a sense of order and structure, I try to control what I can, and sometimes what I can't.

Writer Steve Petrow recently described his own life journey and listed some ways that we try to cope with uncertainty: we deny it, we fight it, we try to control it. I certainly recognized myself in that list, perhaps you recognize yourself, too.

Petrow tells of his first experience of intense uncertainty, which happened about 30 years ago when he received a cancer diagnosis. In the first phase, the doctor's orders were clear: surgery, chemotherapy, do this, don't do that. In the second phase, he continued treatment and monitoring but wasn't yet cured; he was in-between. The doctor's orders were not as clear cut, the outcome was uncertain, and there was a lot of waiting. He, too, tried to master the uncertainty by creating order; he meticulously planned his daily calendar in 15-minute increments.

Over time Petrow came to understand that uncertainty is a part of life, and so he developed ways to let out the feelings of uncertainty so they would not build up and overflow unexpectedly. His coping tools were sleep, therapy to put his experience into words, breathing exercises, and medication when needed.

In his recent article, Petrow compared his experience of 30 years ago with our current time. In COVID Phase 1, the directions were clear: stay home, wash your hands, wear a mask. As we moved into Phase 2 and Phase 3, there was and is more uncertainty, mixed messages from the state and the feds, conflicting stories in the media,

uncertainty about what to do, especially as certain behavior is defined as political affiliation. We're in between what was and what will be, and uncertainty is everywhere.

Two weeks ago, I spoke about the acronym VUCA, V-U-C-A, which describes a situation that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. We are in VUCA times, and one of the things that is uncertain is how long this time will last. The uncertainty of these times is compounded by not only COVID, but a campaign and election like we've never experienced before. Lots of uncertainty, and with uncertainty comes fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of what might be.

How do we hold on to hope when there is so much uncertainty and fear?

On the other side of fear is hope. Psychologists suggest that both fear and hope are based in the same emotions, the difference is that one leads us away from something and one leads us toward something. Physiologically, our bodies respond to both in the same way: anticipation, excitement and trepidation can cause sweaty palms, increased heart rate and breathing, dilated pupils. One is in response to something we don't want to happen and one in response to something that we do want to happen.

But, even more than the feeling of longing or the response of our bodies, hope is a spiritual practice. Vaclav Havel (vatz-lave havell), playwright, dissident, and former President of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic said that hope:

...is 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. . . . Havel continues: I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are...

When we orient our hearts and spirits toward hope, we don't deny the uncertainty and fear, we acknowledge those feelings and face them. Then we may realize, as Steve Petrow did, that in uncertainty and unpredictability there is hope. When the outcome is unknown, there is possibility, and where there is possibility, there is room for hope.

There is much written about what hope is not: it is not optimism, it is not the certainty that something will turn out well, it is not about predicting the future, it is not a willingness to invest in something headed for success, it is not passively waiting for things to be better. Havel wrote: "Hope is ... the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." Writer Margaret Wheatley has reframed this to state that hope means discerning the work that is right to do, doing meaningful work that supports people and relationships without knowing the outcome. In the spaciousness of uncertainty, we can choose to act.

Hope isn't just an orientation of the heart and spirit, it is the action that comes from that orientation. As Rebecca Solnit wrote, "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act."

We show our spiritual orientation toward hope when we act in a way that is grounded in our values and principles. When we vote based on our values, and encourage others to do so. When we wear a mask to protect others. When we develop spiritual practices to help us navigate the uncertainty. When we work for justice. When we make a pledge in support of the mission of this community. When we hold on to hope and help inspire it in others. We might even say that we create hope when we put our "Faith in Action."

Unitarian Universalist theology asserts that hope doesn't lie in another time or place; we make no promises about a future life somewhere else. Hope is not passively waiting for heaven, for life after death, or for things to get better. Hope is an active orientation of the spirit that guides our actions for a better world for everyone; this world, right here and right now.

Holding on to hope in the midst of fear and uncertainty also requires grace for ourselves and for others. We won't get it right all the time and we struggle. I am grateful for the Tech Team and the Worship Arts Team and the staff who nod and help me prepare for the things we can control, including Plan B, and who offer their presence as I wrestle with and let go of what I can't control. They and you offer me a sense of community when I am worried, and help me remember that we are not alone.

Each Sunday morning, we light a chalice, the symbol of our faith tradition. A symbol that was created as a beacon of hope in a time of uncertainty. We light a chalice to begin meetings and classes and other gatherings. We light a chalice to help remind us of hope and to inspire us to right action and right relationship.

The spark of light within each of us doesn't have to illuminate the whole world. If we each do something, do what we can, perhaps not ever knowing the outcome, the sparks join together to create a beacon, maybe even a beacon of hope.

What we do matters. We prepare. We show up. We light a chalice. We roll with what comes. Grounded in the belief that the work of community and for justice is meaningful, transformational, work worth doing.

We lit our chalice today with these words: In the midst of it all, we wrap ourselves in the warm light of a familiar flame, a reminder of the strength that emerges when we come together in community.

In this time of uncertainty, may the light of our chalice guide our way.

As we move into a time of silence I invite you to consider what helps you find hope in times of uncertainty?