

HOPING AGAINST HOPE

The Classical Virtues Today, V

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist

Sunday, February 4, 2007

John A. Buehrens, Minister

Responsive Reading

Reinhold Niebuhr

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;

Therefore we are saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense
in any immediate context of history;

Therefore we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;

Therefore we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint
of our friend or foe as from our own;

*Therefore we are saved by the final form of love
which is forgiveness.*

An Arrangement of Scriptural Verses Concerning Hope

John and Maria Cristina

“Where now is my hope?” [Job 17:15]

“The hypocrite’s hope shall perish.” [Job 8:3]

“Let me not be ashamed of my hope.” [Ps. 119:116]

“Return. . . O you prisoners of hope.” [Zech. 9:12]

“Hoping against hope, he yet believed. . . [Rom. 4:18, 22]
and his faith was ‘reckoned to him as righteousness.’”

Some Modern Insights Concerning Hope

John and Maria Cristina

The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for.
And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire from a distance,
But live right in it, under its roof.

[Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*]

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.

[T.S. Eliot, “East Coker”]

Hope is not a feeling; it is something you do. [Katherine Paterson]

[If it is a feeling,] Hope is the feeling we have

that the feeling we have is not permanent. [Mignon McLaughlin]

Hope does not necessarily have to take an object [Gail Godwin]

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It 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. I don't think you can explain it as a mere derivative of something here, of some movement, or of some favorable signs in the world. I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are, though of course I can't -- unlike Christians, for instance -- say anything concrete about the transcendental. An individual may affirm or deny that his hope is so rooted, but this does nothing to change my conviction (which is more than a conviction; it's an inner experience) that the most convinced materialist and atheist may have more of this genuine, transcendently rooted inner hope... than ten metaphysicians together.

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.

[interview published in *Disturbing the Peace*, 1989]

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The opposite of hope often seems to be what is known traditionally as “Murphy’s Law”:
“Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong, and always at the worst possible moment.”

Years ago I formulated the corollary to this law for the practitioner of parish ministry:
“The chances of a prominent parishioner expiring are in direct proportion to the distance
of the trip planned by the parson, and the proximity of his (or her) departure.”

I wanted to thank all of you for proving recently, when Gwen and I went off to Mexico,
that this rule, like most, is full of exceptions! But I vividly remember the occasion that
caused me to formulate and phrase it in the first-place. Gwen and I had planned our first
trip overseas together. Our children were finally old enough. She had gone ahead of me.
I’d just handed our girls off to the folks who’d be taking care of them when the call came.
The oldest member of my congregation, then in Dallas, had suddenly expired.

Carl Brannin, may he rest in peace, had been a founder of the ACLU in Texas. He had
run for governor as the candidate of what Ralph Yarborough called ‘the kamikaze wing’
of Texas progressivism. And, at 96, God knows, he had had many chances leave this life.
But he chose that one. So I went back to Dallas, where I did Carl’s memorial service --
along with our mutual friend, Molly Ivins, who in dying this week -- at only 62, dang it! -
- prompts this memory.

Molly once did a piece on the old McNeil/Lehrer news report, on public television,
occasioned by the renovation, rather like our current steeple renovation here in Needham,
of the statue of “Justice” on top of the dome of the Texas state capitol down in Austin.
Well, let’s just say that, when taken down, the image of Justice in Texas proved to be
about as ugly as sin! And then, when they had done their best to pretty her up, there was a
disconcerting effort to put Justice back on top of the rod on top of the dome she sat upon.

Prompting more dirty jokes in that building, said Molly on national TV, than any event since the death of Nelson Rockefeller! Eventually, it required calling in a helicopter borrowed from the Mississippi National Guard. A great embarrassment, since, from a Texas point of view, the chief purpose of Mississippi is to make Texas look good!

This led her off into an extended reflection on public “ort” in Texas, much of it put up before striking “erl,” and involving statues in front of court houses: depicting, in Salinas, the spinach capital of the Texas, a statue of Popeye, complete with his big can of spinach; or along the Gulf Coast, various court houses with big statues of shrimp in front of them; but especially the cattle category of public ort in Texas – in front of buildings, or on top. Or the cowboy category, like the Texas cemetery where Jesus is depicted facing East, with the wind comin’ up from West jest enuf to lift the hem from his robe and show us the spurs on his cowboy boots! Or the image of Jesus Molly saw at a weddin’ reception, all done out in tuny fish, with l’il pimentos in his hands, where the wounds had been. She’d really wanted to show us that one, she said, “but, it’s done been et.”

I loved Molly Ivins. She once said of a Texas politician – and not the one she later called “The Shrub” – “if his IQ dips much lower, we’re gonna hafta water him twice a day.” One year she changed her annual Texas Observer rating for the ten dumbest members of “the lege” – the legislature in Austin – to reflect the fact that lots of members never even opened their mouths in public, so you couldn’t really tell how really dumb actually were. So she started a separate category, “the five largest pieces of furniture.”

Critics called her a cynic. But she wasn’t one, though she admitted that it’s often hard to argue against cynics, because “cynics sound so much smarter than optimists, since they have so much more evidence on their side.” No . . . Molly was NOT a cynic. And if there’s ever a statue of Hope placed atop a public building in our land, it should be modeled on her. “I still believe in Hope,” she wrote, despite the politicians, “mostly because there’s no such place as Crossed Fingers, Arkansas.”

But she also knew that Americans, as de Tocqueville observed over 150 years ago, tend to be hopeful to a fault. And to place their hope in all the wrong places – in politicians, material success, and/or easy answers. As too many of us do, throughout all our lives. And yet, even toward the end, what is most important, is what we have truly hoped for.

Molly may have seen, before she died, the column in *Harper's* this month by a soulmate, Barbara Ehrenreich, which begins: "I hate hope. It was hammered into me constantly a few years ago when I was being treated for breast cancer. Think positively! Don't lose hope! Wear your pink ribbon with pride! . . . The facility where I received my follow-up care was [even] called the Hope Center. Hope? What about a cure! At anti-war rallies and labor rallies over the years I have dutifully joined Jesse Jackson in chanting "Keep hope alive!" – all the while crossing my fingers and thinking, "[Screw] hope! Keep us alive!"

You know what I discovered in searching through the Bible for passages about hope? That Jesus never once preached about it; that the word never once appears in the gospels! Perhaps because he was too busy emphasizing the here and now, and the conviction that what we most deeply yearn for – justice and peace, the Kingdom of God, heaven itself – is already here. It's among us, whenever and wherever we show by our actions that true religion isn't about pie in sky by and by, but loving the very the Ground of our Being with all our heart, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Molly knew that.

Hope is a virtue only when it's rightly directed. In the classical tradition, Hope is defined as the spiritual virtue which inclines human hearts to desire the kingdom of heaven -- which if you are non-traditional, you might do well to identify with what John Lennon wrote about in his song, "Imagine." But since we humans have what Springsteen called 'hungry hearts,' we want what we want. And we easily become what Zechariah called 'prisoners' of our own misdirected hopes -- personal, political, and, yes, even religious.

Believe me, there are ways in which I -- like you, like Molly -- tremble for the future of our country, of democracy, and even of our planet. I'm no pie-eyed optimist, and have little use for people who are.

Why, just last week I found myself watching a TV documentary called *Friends of God*, about American evangelicals. Increasingly, I find, that the fundamentalist version of the ‘good news’ is no less ‘bad news’ for the human future is bin Laden’s religion. Teaching thousands of young people that to be Christian means that you can’t believe in evolution! It included footage of Ted Haggard, the now disgraced evangelical leader who paid a male prostitute for sex and drugs, talking about his hopes for taking over America for a right-wing version of ‘family values.’ While I was reminded of the biblical verse saying, “the hypocrite’s hope shall perish.” Or at least -- I hope so!

But it won’t be easy. This week another friend, Chris Hedges, former war correspondent and religion reporter for the *New York Times*, in a column reminded me that 25 years ago our mutual teacher, the late James Luther Adams, warned us that when we were his age – he was then near 80 – we’d be struggling against ‘Christian fascists’ for control of our American democracy. Jim wasn’t speaking lightly. He’d been in Germany in the 1930s. And I don’t think I’m being paranoid. As Molly would say, “Being slightly paranoid is like being slightly pregnant; it only tends to get worse.” As she knew, the human need for hope is easily manipulated. Take the hope now being held out for our “success” in Iraq. Molly would say, “The first rule of holes: when you’re in one, stop digging!”

In her last column she wrote, “We are the people who run this country. We are the deciders. And every single day, every one of us needs to step outside and take some action to help stop this war. Raise hell. Think of something to make the ridiculous look ridiculous. Make our troops know we're for them and trying to get them out of there.”

“If you assume that there is no hope,” says Naom Chomsky, “you guarantee that there will be no hope.” Real hope starts in the harshness of reality. Everywhere else, we may accept cheap substitutes. But without a real and living hope, we can’t stand much reality. So it’s circular: power over out there; spiritual power with inside and among us all here. So we also have a responsibility to keep one another’s hopes alive. Molly also knew that. Yet she wouldn’t offer it on the cheap, nor dishonestly. Nor should we.

The late President Gerald Ford, conservative Republican though he was, once said, when affirmative action was under attack, that the government has a responsibility to provide, not only for the common defense, but also for the common hope, especially among its citizens who have the least reason to hope. Perhaps because he knew that hopelessness and humiliation are the chief sources of despair and violence in the world we will leave to our own children to inherit.

Recently I read Barack Obama's book, *The Audacity of Hope*, based on a phrase he heard from his own minister one Sunday, about having the audacity to believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that what we have in common is greater than what divides us; the gall to believe that despite cynical politicians, we the people, are still "the deciders"; the hope for a transcendent hope that survives even the death of many of our finite hopes. That's the kind we need to stand for.

He's not my candidate. No one is. But what I want us to stand for is hope against hope. Not in desperation, but in transcendence. Until the day breaks, and the shadows flee, and we have justice and peace at last. And I invite you to join me, not in some conventional, sectarian, religious hope, but in that profoundly shared human hope. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 346

Come, Sing a Song with Me

C. McDade

Benediction

When our lives are over, may it be said of us:
"They lived in truth, and not in illusion;
They lived in hope, and not in despair;
They lived in love, and not in hatred."
As we now extinguish the flame in our chalice,
Be ye lamps unto yourselves -- and for others.
Om. Shanti. Shalom. Salaam. Go in peace. Amen.