

Radical Hope

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

First Parish in Needham

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Any serious consideration of climate change and the human prospect is necessarily a meditation on hope.

The great Unitarian preacher and abolitionist Theodore Parker once asked: what is transient in Christianity, and what is permanent?

We must ask: what is transient in human life on earth, and what is permanent?

What is transient?

The snows of Kilimanjaro. Glaciers in Glacier National Park. Vermont maple syrup. Cape Cod. Boston. Polar bears in the wild. Tropical diseases confined to the tropics. Ancient forests. Cheap gasoline. Shopping malls. Stable food supply. Stable government. And much, much more yet beyond our comprehension.

What is permanent?

Love.

Love and its attendants, faith and hope.

A meditation on hope.

The rise in the earth's temperature is accelerating, and with it the ferocity of the weather.

Warmer air holds more water vapor, and the extra moisture leads to heavier storms in some areas, while warming causes drought in others. Last year, the United States experienced unprecedented extremes in temperature and precipitation across the country. Texas was hit by record drought. Tormented by a heat wave, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona suffered billion-dollar wildfires. Meanwhile, seven northeastern states had their wettest years on record. Along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, melting snow and heavy rains triggered flooding that caused billions of dollars of damage.

Globally, the impact of climate change is even more dire.

East Africa and Northern Europe are both gripped by record drought. Last year, Thailand's worst floods in a half century claimed 730 lives. Arctic ice this year is close to its all-time minimum. As arctic sea ice melts, darker water is exposed, absorbing more sunlight, which melts more ice—a self-reinforcing feedback loop. As warming continues, higher sea levels from melting ice and the expansion of warmer water will displace entire populations as low-lying coastlands and islands are inundated. Heat waves and droughts will decimate harvests, while shrinking mountain glaciers imperil the water supply of hundreds of millions of people.

Heard enough? Congress hasn't.

Or rather, they've heard too much from the oil, gas, and coal industries who ply them with campaign contributions and manipulate public opinion with slick advertising campaigns. Of the 32 million dollars the U.S. Chamber of Commerce spent on the 2010 elections, 94% went to climate deniers.

Legislation addressing climate change is dead in the water. President Obama's last State of the Union speech didn't even mention it. While he deserves credit for ruling last week against the Keystone XL pipeline, at least for now, his administration is still calling for massively expanding coal mining.

Do the American people care? Not according to the polls.

When Americans are asked what issues are important, the environment comes in dead last. When they're asked which environmental problems worry them most, global warming comes in dead last—while nearly half say the whole thing is exaggerated by the media.

A meditation on hope.

I confess I've had an ambivalent relationship with hope. Buddhist teachers I admire caution that hope can distract us from the reality of the present moment, both its dangers and its joys, by keeping us fixated on an imagined better future. Given the threats we face, is hope just pie in the sky?

But I have to tell you, I have been converted. I come before you a born-again apostle of hope.

Martin Luther King Jr. was an apostle of hope. "Everything that is done in the world," Dr. King told us, "is done by hope."

Van Jones is an apostle of hope. Recalling Dr. King's assassination, the green jobs activist proclaimed, "We are not going to let the hope die again on our watch."

Nick Vujicic is an apostle of hope.

Nick is a 27-year-old Australian born with no arms and no legs. "I am not constrained by my circumstances," Nick insists. "[M]ost of the hardships we face provide us with opportunities to discover who we are meant to be and what we can share of our gifts to benefit others."

I'd never heard of Nick Vujicic when I saw a photograph of this smiling, good-looking young guy on the cover of a book in a bookstore. As I looked more carefully at the picture, I realized he had no arms or legs—just a partial foot protruding from his torso, allowing him to stand.

The book was titled *Life without Limits: Inspiration for a Ridiculously Good Life*. I bought it on the spot.

Nick has an indomitable spirit and an incredibly upbeat personality. He travels the world bringing his inspiring story to audiences large and small, young and old, rich and poor, of every color and culture.

His message is incredibly effective because nearly everyone responds the way I did: you know, whatever complaints I have, this guy has gotta have it worse. But not only does he persevere, he triumphs.

"Hope is a catalyst," Nick says. "It can . . . move obstacles that seem immovable. When you keep pushing, refusing to give up, you create momentum. Hope creates opportunities you never would have anticipated. Helpful people are drawn to you. Doors open. Paths are cleared. . . . Defeat happens only to those who refuse to try again."

Confronting obstacles I can barely imagine, Nick has met them and overcome them by hope.

But daunting though life without arms or legs must be, climate change poses challenges of a different order entirely. It threatens ecological, agricultural, economic, and social collapse on an unprecedented scale. What kind of hope can companion us through the perilous decades to come?

To answer that question, I turn to yet another apostle of hope: Aleek-chea-ahoosh, the last great chief of the Crow nation, also known as Plenty Coups, who led his people as white conquest turned their world upside down.

In the 1850s, when he was a boy, the Crow were a powerful tribe of nomadic hunters. Shortly before he died in 1932, Plenty Coups recalled: “[W]hen the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere.”

Under Plenty Coups’s leadership, the Crow allied themselves with the United States against the Crow’s traditional enemies, the Cheyenne and Sioux. When the wars ended, Plenty Coups took up farming and urged his people to do the same. He encouraged young Crow to educate themselves in the white schools and to be open to the white religion. Rather than following the suicidal path of armed resistance or the millennial escapism of the Ghost Dance, Plenty Coups preserved his people, their best land, and the essence of who they were in the face of catastrophic change.

Where some might understandably see in Plenty Coups’s strategy a craven collaboration, philosopher Jonathan Lear sees there the most profound courage.

Lear suggests that in their most desperate hour perhaps what the Crow needed most was not another war chief to fall in glorious battle, but a new Crow poet—“a creative maker of meaningful space . . . of a new field of possibilities”—“who could take up the Crow past and . . . project into the future vibrant new ways for the Crow to live and to be.” Given the devastation they endured, “either they had to give up the idea that there was any longer a courageous way to live, or they had to alter their conception of what courage was.”

When Plenty Coups was a young boy, he went on a vision quest. In a dream, he saw the passing of the buffalo. He saw himself as an old man. In a terrible storm the Four Winds made war against the forest and knocked down all the trees save one. Then a voice said, “Listen, Plenty Coups. In that tree is the lodge of the Chickadee. He is least in strength but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee-person is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears He gains successes and avoids failure by learning how others succeeded or failed”

When Plenty Coups returned to his people and told them of his dream, the elders agreed that its message was that they should think for themselves, listen and learn from the experiences of others, and thereby escape destruction. The dream did not say exactly what would befall the Crow or what they should do. It told them to listen, to think, and to adapt.

Inspired by this dream, Plenty Coups embraced what Lear calls “radical hope”—a commitment to “a goodness that transcend[s] one’s current understanding of the good . . . [a commitment] to the bare idea *that something good will emerge*. . . . It is basically the hope for *revival*: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible. . . . The hope is held in the face of the recognition that, given the abyss, one cannot really know what survival means.”

Climate change is a certainty with profound consequences both predictable and unpredictable. Stopping it is impossible. Responding to it is inescapable. Radical hope offers a faithful, courageous, and creative way to respond.

We did not choose this calling. We would not choose it. That’s why it’s called a calling and not a choice.

Moses, Paul, Mohammed—scripture is filled with stories of people just going about their lives when God calls them to a very different purpose.

We are called not so much to save the earth—though defending it is crucial—as to save our souls as the earth changes despite our best efforts.

It is as if we were passengers on the great ship *Titanic* on its maiden crossing of the North Atlantic. Suddenly the huge vessel shudders. Gradually with agonizing slowness we come to realize first that the ship has been struck, then that it has been breached, then (can it be possible?) that it's in trouble, and finally that it is inexorably sinking.

At each stage we might feel shock, disbelief, and outrage. How could this be happening? How could those in charge have been so reckless? Will I get a refund for my ticket?

But eventually some of us cross the threshold from shock, disbelief, and outrage into an acceptance of our circumstance. Not an acceptance that it is acceptable or just or fair, but an acceptance that *it is*.

And then, if we are wise enough and brave enough, we turn from complaint to commitment: How do I live my life for the rest of my life? To what purpose am I faithful? How courageously and creatively can I respond to this catastrophe? How can I serve? How can I sacrifice?

And in that turning, there is a moment when we find ourselves standing on the tilting deck lashed by wind and spray and gripped by a wild, extravagant, even fearless joy.

It is sometimes complained of Unitarian Universalists that we celebrate Easter while ignoring Good Friday—that we want the sweetness and light without the suffering and darkness. Whether that charge is true or not, it will no longer be possible.

Good Friday is coming. Good Friday is upon us.

But Easter, too, is coming. Easter, too, will come.

“Life without meaning,” says Nick Vujicic, “has no hope. Life without hope has no faith. If you find a way to contribute, you will find your meaning, and hope and faith will naturally follow and accompany you into your future.”

Against our will but with our faith, we are called into a future beyond our dreams, beyond our nightmares, beyond our comprehension. We are called to devotion and sacrifice and imagination.

We are called to radical hope.

Amen and Blessed Be.