



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Holding On to Hope”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness. Desmond Tutu

[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. Vaclav Havel

Your opponents would love you to believe that it's hopeless, that you have no power, that there's no reason to act, that you can't win. Hope is a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away. Rebecca Solnit

Holding on to hope when everything is dark is the greatest test of faith. Yasmin Mogahed

Sermon:

As Amber mentioned, the anthem's words (Mark A. Miller, “I Believe”) probably originated with a few similar lines scratched on the wall of a basement in Cologne, Germany, by an unknown Jew hiding from the Nazis during World War II. Discrepancies exist concerning the poem's exact words, the order of the verses, and even in what city they were found. Even so, the meaning remains—it's a message of hope during a time of great despair.

*I believe in the sun even when it is not shining;
I believe in love even when I don't feel it;
I believe in God even when God is silent.*

Hitler and his regime were attempting Jewish genocide. Before Hitler's defeat, the majority of Jews living in lands occupied by the Nazis did not survive. Just as in the time of the Maccabees over two thousand years ago, during the Holocaust the Jewish people simply wanted to live their lives in peace and freely practice their religion. Fortunately, the Jews who survived Hitler emerged from basements, attics, and concentration camps to live in freedom once again.

Whatever our religion, observing Hanukkah helps us link the heroisms of the past to our present. Hanukkah's ritual celebration of freedom from oppression, and all that tries to conquer or enslave, is worth remembering. In our own time of despair, the words scratched on a cellar wall remind us to hold onto hope.

For me, despair comes easier than hope these days. I press the arc of justice towards greater love and freedom, but I feel like others press against me, bending the arc the opposite way. I believe civil rights are being lost, voting rights are being challenged, mass shootings are occurring too frequently, nuclear war threatens, climate change seems unstoppable, ethnic purity closes borders, religious animosity rages, and politicians isolate our country from an ever-shrinking and connected world.

Feel free to disagree with my gloom and doom assessment of the present moment. But because I feel the sun is not shining, that love is in short supply, and that God or goodness are absent, I need Hanukkah. I need to remember Victory in Europe. I need to remember we've been through this before. I need to remember that when freedom is crushed, resistance rises. But without hope, without the ability and will to imagine a different way of being, and without acting to make our hopes real, despair and darkness prevail.

This past month I've seen a lot of resistance. For many women and some men, life has included times when the freedom to live peacefully and without harm was challenged or forcibly taken away. From gang rape to brief pats on a butt, all demean, all hurt. Even holding a hand in greeting a little longer than necessary, invading personal space, or not accepting someone's persistent refusal to date, all constitute harassment capable of creating a toxic environment.

Sexual harassment may seem frivolous in comparison to the Holocaust, but both share the taking away of one's freedom to live freely and peacefully. Both are perpetrated by people who use physical, economic, or emotional power over another. Both oppress.

The brave women who spoke out against Harvey Weinstein's (allegedly) criminal behavior opened the door for more truth-tellers. Silence was no longer an option. As their stories were heard and accepted, the abused became hopeful. As abusers were fired or resigned, hope grew. Finally, women spoke up for their right not to be objectified, not to be treated as fair game for someone's predatory amusement. I hope this moment represents a new cultural revolution, a new victory for the sexually oppressed. I hope those who consider harassment acceptable behavior realize their actions will have consequences.

Here at UUFA we are not immune to the possibility of sexual harassment. Congregations frequently serve as places for romance. We have couples in this congregation who met here. We have people who express interest in another or try dating. Sometimes that interest is not welcome. Sometimes those relationships break up. Even when romance is not a factor, simply being with others creates the possibility for harassment.

I regularly encourage you to make meaningful connections with like-minded people here, so these challenges should be no surprise. But I also encourage you to follow Unitarian Universalism's First Principle which affirms that you respect everyone's worth and dignity. Objectification violates that principle. No means no. And, as our Seventh Principle affirms, how you and I behave individually impacts the whole community. Therefore we are all responsible for maintaining the safety of our community and the need for it to be a true sanctuary.

If you feel violated in some way, and you've tried unsuccessfully to speak your truth directly to the person you believe responsible, and the violation or discomfort continues, don't be

silent. Don't slip away from the Fellowship because that's easier. Speak to me, Rev. Don Randall, or to a member of the Board. We won't triangulate, but we will attempt a mediation and an opportunity for your concerns to be heard. This doesn't guarantee the other person will accept your characterization of their behavior. It doesn't mean we'll take one side or the other unless the behavior escalates. None of us want to be sexual harassment police, but we value this community too much to let toxic behavior go unchecked.

“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

This quote is misattributed to pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer of the German Confessing Church, a Protestant group that rose in opposition to Hitler's effort to unify all Protestants into one pro-Nazi religion. Most likely the quote belongs to Bonhoeffer's friend, Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller, a Christian foe of Hitler's, imprisoned for seven years in a Nazi concentration camp. Niemöller is best known for the following passage on permanent display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

By their silence while Nazi's persecuted, imprisoned, and murdered millions of people, Niemöller accused German Protestant leaders in particular of being complicit.

(www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392#) Different versions of his quotation exist, some referencing Communists, Christians, and others. I could rewrite this today, inserting African-Americans, Muslims, and Undocumented Immigrants.

Niemöller survived the Nazis, Bonhoeffer did not. Also arrested for speaking out against Hitler, from 1943 to 1945 he was confined to a series of Gestapo prisons. His conditions were better than in the death camps, though he was sent to a camp. Bonhoeffer was able to have his fiancée visit him and he could exchange or smuggle out letters to friends and colleagues. In a December letter, Bonhoeffer revealed his homesickness and torment, though he hoped to be released by Christmas. He compared his imprisonment to Advent. He wrote, “We simply have to wait and wait. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.” (per Timothy George in “Bonhoeffer in Advent” <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/12/bonhoeffer-in-advent>)

For Bonhoeffer, that ‘something greater to come’ meant his faith in God's return. Christmas was a reminder to him that God had come before and would again. It may also have

included a hope that Hitler would be defeated and the ‘something greater’ was freedom. And, it may have included his faith that, if he died in prison, he would experience a heavenly afterlife. Sadly, in April 1945, just two weeks before US soldiers liberated Flossenbürg concentration camp, he was executed there.

A contemporary Christian pastor writes of Advent, “...it is an invitation to strengthen the disciplines that refuse to allow the world as we presently experience it to define and determine all that is and can be./... We must be free to test the limits we’ve inherited. We must allow our hopes to extend beyond what the powers-that-be tell us is possible, or right, boundaries that are not to be questioned and certainly not to be challenged./... Advent is about HOPE. Hope resides in the HEART, where none can steal its hold over us. Hope is the OXYGEN that feeds the fire of our desire for freedom. That fire propels us to reach for more, and to expect more.”

Hanukkah and Advent are both about hope and freedom. You and I have the freedom to hope and to act for something better than we currently have. Something greater can come. It has been proved in the past and we will prove it again in the present. Whatever imprisons you or leads you to despair, remember there are people, you and me among them, who refuse to stay silent, who refuse to remain in despair, and who will act to bring about the hoped for future.

We do not all need to bear arms, we do not all need to walk the picket line, we do not all need to be activists in that manner. But I do believe, we who gather in community to live out our shared UU values, must and do support those on the front lines. We comfort, we feed, we inspire, and we hope alongside them. At times we even respectfully disagree how best to bring about the beloved community. In all of that, we learn and grow.

This season, whether you celebrate Hanukkah, Christmas, Solstice, Kwanzaa, or something else, remember the darkness of despair does not last. Light returns. And we can be lights that brighten the world.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. What candles of hope do you need to light? What do you find most difficult about waiting for whatever you are hoping for?
2. How do you feel about this particular moment in time or history? Do you despair or hold hope that the world will become more peaceful and just? Share what contributes to those feelings.
3. What lies imprisoned within you that should be released? Reflect on what you’re holding in.