

Hope is a Heartspun Word
Sunday, December 12, 2021
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

Reading: [Hope Is A Tattered Flag by Carl Sandburg - Hope Is A Tattered Flag Poem \(poemhunter.com\)](#)

“Soft as the voice of an angel, breathes a lesson unheard, Hope with a gentle persuasion whispers her comforting word. Wait till the darkness is over, wait till the tempest is done, Hope for the sunshine tomorrow, after the shower is gone. Whispering hope, oh, how welcome thy voice. Making my heart in its sorrow rejoice.” Septimus Winner “There shall be showers of blessing Precious reviving again Over the hills and the valleys Sound of abundance of rain Showers of blessing Showers of blessing we need. Mercy drops 'round us are falling But for the showers we plead,” Major Daniel Webster Whittle. “And ye, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way. with painful steps and slow, look now! for glad and golden hours. come swiftly on the wing. O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!,” Edmund H. Sears. I grew up with hymns of hope. But I also grew up with some who thought the only hope for the world was for Christ to return. They had no hope at all for the world or humanity to have any power at all to right itself. Personally, I have a need to find more hope in humanity than that.

But, it is very easy to be cynical. I like Sandburg’s poem I read for our Whistlestop this morning, but I could be very cynical about the various things he lists. Hope is a tattered flag. I expect when he wrote that he was thinking of a flag that still flew having survived a battle, but today I see people apparently purposefully flying tattered flags. I am not sure why. I tried to look up a reason. One suggestion was that it was a protest against the current government seen by some as illegitimate with the wrong person in the presidential office. That doesn’t sound hopeful. The Salvation Army singing God loves us, BUT “Jacob Meister, board chair of the Chicago-based LGBTQ advocacy group the Civil Rights Agenda, (says) the organization needs to align its values with the work of its shelters...“The Salvation Army speaks out of both sides of its mouth,” Meister said. “They’ll deliver services to LGBTQ folks, but on the other side, they are very actively, as a religious organization, opposing marriage rights and a lot of other rights. Transgender issues have been one, particularly, that they have had problems with.”

“LGBTQ youth are disproportionately vulnerable to homelessness. A 2017 report by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that LGBTQ young adults were 120 percent more likely to experience homelessness than straight, cisgender people in the same age range. The high rates of homelessness among LGBTQ youth are often due to homophobia in their families or in their communities. ‘It helps perpetuate discrimination, particularly among youth, particularly among the trans population. It is particularly insidious,’ Meister added. ‘With youth in the transgender population, we already have a very high suicide rate, and the doctrine that they espouse helps contribute to that,’” [The Salvation Army’s anti-LGBTQ controversies, explained - Vox](#). So, does God love us all or not? Oh, I can be very cynical and world-weary.

But just where will this cynicism and world-weariness get me? Let me quote Stephen Colbert, “Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the furthest thing from it. Because cynics don’t learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness: a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us. Cynics always say ‘no.’ But saying ‘yes’ begins things. Saying ‘yes’ is how things grow,” [Stephen Colbert - Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it... \(brainyquote.com\)](#). Like the ten-cent crocus bulb blooming in a used-car salesroom.

Sandburg himself puts together images of hope with images that might lead to despondency, if not, despair. The evening star inviolate over the coal mines. The blue hills beyond the smoke of the steel works. The ten-cent crocus bulb blooming in a used-car salesroom. The birds who go on singing to their mates in peace, war, peace. Hands of strong men groping for handholds.

Women, men, nonbinary people, we all have the capacity for strength within us, but far too much of our lives is spent groping for handholds. We can give up or we can grope for the next handhold. What keeps us going, finding that next handhold, is hope and love.

I have a number of notebooks full of clippings I have saved over the years filed under various topics. One set of those readings is filed under the title; Love/Hope. I obviously think hope and love are related. I do not know if hope comes from love or love from hope, but I do know they thrive together. In my notebooks in that section is the Sandburg poem read earlier. There is also the poem by Susan Griffin, "Love Should Grow Up Like a Wild Iris in the Fields."

"Love should grow up like a wild iris in the fields
unexpected, after a terrible storm, opening a purple
mouth to the rain, with not a thought to the future,
ignorant of the grass and the graveyard of leaves
around, forgetting its own beginning.
Love should grow like a wild iris
but does not.

"Love more often is to be found in kitchens at the dinner hour,
tired out and hungry, lingers over tables in houses where
the walls record movements, while the cook is probably angry,
and the ingredients of the meal are budgeted, while
a child cries feed me now and her mother not quite
hysterical says over and over, wait just a bit, just a bit,
love should grow up in the fields like a wild iris
but never does
really startle anyone, was to be expected, was to be
predicted, is almost absurd, goes on from day to day, not quite
blindly, gets taken to the cleaners every fall, sings old
songs over and over, and falls on the same piece of rug that
never gets tacked down, gives up, wants to hide, is not
brave, knows too much, is not like an
iris growing wild but more like
staring into space
in the street
not quite sure
which door it was, annoyed about the sidewalk being
slippery, trying all the doors, thinking
if love wished the world to be well, it would be well.

"Love should
grow up like a wild iris, but doesn't, it comes from
the midst of everything else, sees like the iris
of an eye, when the light is right,
feels in blindness and when there is nothing else is

tender, blinks, and opens
face up to the skies.”

As I read that poem, I thought hope must come from love, that it is love that enables us to notice birds singing in peace, war, peace, that love is what gives us the ability to see the evening star above the coal mines. But then I thought again that perhaps it is hope that enables us to love when we are angry, and we are the cook with budgeted ingredients preparing a meal for a hungry child or we keep tripping over that same piece of carpet that we never tack down. Hope and love are twins. They are born together, and together they can overcome cynicism, despondency, world-weariness and despair.

Pema Chodron, an American Tibetan Buddhist nun says, “There is a story of a woman running away from tigers. She runs and runs and the tigers are getting closer and closer. When she comes to the edge of a cliff, she sees some vines there, so she climbs down and holds on to the vines. Looking down, she sees that there are tigers below her as well. She then notices that a mouse is gnawing away at the vine to which she is clinging. She also sees a beautiful little bunch of strawberries close to her, growing out of a clump of grass. She looks up and she looks down. She looks at the mouse. Then she just takes a strawberry, puts it in her mouth, and enjoys it thoroughly. Tigers above, tigers below.” Chodron says, “This is actually the predicament that we are always in, in terms of our birth and death. Each moment is just what it is. It might be the only moment of our life; it might be the only strawberry we’ll ever eat. We could get depressed about it, or we could finally appreciate it and delight in the preciousness of every single moment of our life.”

The Buddhist story reminded me of a quote by Anne Frank, the young Jewish diarist killed in the Holocaust. She wrote, “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.”

Despite Sandburg’s including of the “horseshoe over the door, the luckpiece in the pocket” I think hope is more than wishful thinking. It is eating the strawberry with enjoyment even in dire circumstances. It is being able to write, “and yet,” even after one acknowledges that one will be destroyed. It is not waiting for the Messiah or some God to save us from ourselves. I believe it is only those of us who have known love, love given us by another human being that can have such hope. . Love and hope are twins. They are born together, and together they can overcome cynicism, despondency, world-weariness and despair. The American writer Willa Cather wrote, “Where there is a great love there are always miracles. Miracles rest not so much upon faces or voices. Or healing power coming to us from afar off, but in our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is about us always.”

I end with an old story. A monastery had fallen on hard times. It was once part of a great order which, as a result of religious persecution lost all its branches. It was decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the mother house: the Abbot and four others, all of whom were over seventy. Clearly it was a dying order.

Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage to see if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. “I know how it is” he said, “the spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the old Rabbi and the old Abbot wept together, and spoke quietly of deep things.

The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. "It has been wonderful being with you," said the Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?" "No, I am sorry," the Rabbi responded, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the other monks heard the Rabbi's words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. "The Messiah is one of us? One of us, here, at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Of course – it must be the Abbot, who has been our leader for so long. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is undoubtedly a holy man. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod – he's so crotchety. But then Elrod is very wise. Surely, he could not have meant Brother Phillip – he's too passive. But then, magically, he's always there when you need him. Of course he didn't mean me – yet supposing he did?"

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, people occasionally came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths, most of which led to the dilapidated chapel. They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks, permeating the atmosphere. They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends. Some of the younger men who came to visit began to engage in conversation with the monks. After a while, one asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years, the monastery became once again a thriving order, and – thanks to the Rabbi's gift – a vibrant community of hope and love. [The Messiah in Disguise: A Story - Spiritual Reminders by Bill Johnson \(billjohnsononline.com\)](http://billjohnsononline.com). Hope is heartspun word. If each of our hearts spin hope we may aid in the healing and transformation of ourselves and of the world.