

“In a Strange Land”
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We live in interesting times, tumultuous times, times when fear threatens to fill our souls and psyches at the expense of love, and cynicism threatens to be a more realistic mindset than hope.

*Come sing a song with me, come sing a song with me,
come, sing a song with me, that I might know your mind.
And I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find...*

In these times of high uncertainty in our nation, our communities, our neighborhoods, our families, and yes, in this congregation, hope can be hard to find. I have to be relentless to keep it awake inside myself and to sometimes say aloud that I'm not alone. I take heart from the prophetic words and deeds of women and men who have lived in equally harrowing times. One such person who feeds my soul is the late historian, playwright, activist, and professor Howard Zinn.

I recall briefly meeting Howard Zinn and his wife, Roslyn, when I was a minister on the South Shore of Boston. Sometimes on my own and sometimes with my husband Dan I would head in from the seaside town of Scituate to the Boston Common for vigils and demonstrations. The Zinns were always there. One chilly night, there were no more than a dozen of us gathered most likely to resist our nation's ongoing engagement in Iraq. There they were, this silver-haired couple, bundled up and present. I wondered, but never asked either of them, where they found the hope that allows any of us to keep speaking out and to pray with our feet.

What keeps you going? What keeps me going, when we find ourselves amid a social climate of high anxiety fueled by fear? We're tempted to grasp at pat solutions, rigid rhetoric, quick fixes, and a dubious inheritance from our Unitarian past in Ralph Waldo Emerson's reverence for self-reliance.

“In this awful world where the efforts of caring people often pale in comparison to what is done by those who have power, how do I manage to stay involved and seemingly happy?”

asked Howard Zinn twelve years ago amid the escalation of U.S. involvement in Iraq, the heightening of terrorism as a word calculated to make any red-blooded American flinch, a raging homophobia that mightily resisted the then unimaginable inclusive marriage laws. We were amid so much that gave us cause to disengage and lose heart, let alone experience some modicum of joy in life. While the stage set is different in 2016, Zinn's response to his own question in 2004 feeds me as much now as it did then. Let me whet your appetite with a few samples of what he called “The Optimism of Uncertainty”:

“I am totally confident not that the world will get better, but that we should not give up the game before all the cards have been played....”

“What leaps out from the history of the past hundred years is its utter unpredictability...” Who would have predicted the bizarre shifts of World War II--the Nazi-Soviet pact... and the German Army rolling through Russia, apparently invincible, causing colossal casualties, being turned back at the gates of Leningrad, on the western edge of Moscow, in the streets of Stalingrad, followed by the defeat of the German army, with Hitler huddled in his Berlin bunker, waiting to die?

And then the postwar world, taking a shape no one could have drawn in advance...”

“The United States...waged a full-scale war in Indochina, conducting the most brutal bombardment of a tiny peninsula in world history, and yet was forced to withdraw. In the headlines every day we see other instances of the failure of the presumably powerful over the presumably powerless...”

There may be a few of us here this morning who lived through World War II and the Korean War and the War in Vietnam. The war in Iraq is not really over, along with the ongoing “non-war wars” waged in Afghanistan and by proxy elsewhere. Was there, is there, light at the end of these tunnels? I believe that some light—even a flicker—is needed to know that you’re even in a tunnel.

Zinn continued:

“Looking at this catalogue of huge surprises, it's clear that the struggle for justice should never be abandoned because of the apparent overwhelming power of those who have the guns and the money and who seem invincible in their determination to hold on to it. That apparent power has, again and again, proved vulnerable to human qualities less measurable than bombs and dollars...”

We speak of “hope against hope”. We sing of times “when hope is hard to find”. Which comes first, succumbing to fear or losing hope? How to light a candle in “a dark night of the soul”? Whether we’re talking about the Zeitgeist—the spirit of the times—of our world or our nation or ourselves up close and intimate, when all feels hopeless, we also feel homeless. We’re in a strange land. We’re not comfortable in our own skin. We opt for fearful vigilance over mindful grace. Consider Zinn’s words not just for our body politic, but for the passageways of our most personal journeys.

“To be hopeful in bad times,” he concludes, “is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places--and there are so many--where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

The optimism of uncertainty? Some of us here are cancer survivors. It was eight years ago last week that I was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer. How I recall that drive home from Boston to Scituate on the South Shore. I had gone into the city by myself, not knowing that I would return with a high intensity conversation in my heart. Had I lived long enough? It was a rich life, a full life, a life of family and children and friends and I had even done a few good things for other people. How much time did I have left? Of course all of us are vulnerable to that grand bargain we make at birth. The miracle of life comes with an endpoint of complete mystery. We call it death. Yet cancer is no longer a death sentence. Those voices inside me bounced back and forth. Was there light at the end of this tunnel? What tunnel? As for my own acquaintance with family and friends who had beat cancer or otherwise—a personal history of sorts—it was mixed.

From where did I draw my energy to act, to move through the surgeries and treatments that allowed me to say this morning, “So far, so good?” Surely Dan, surely my children and their partners, and my extended family and friends, and the amazing medical caregivers at Boston’s Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital, and the good fortune to have excellent health insurance. I could call it “health coverage privilege.” And in this season of choices, I opt for those choices that draw us closer to health coverage that is not a privilege, but a right. It’s political; it’s personal; it’s spiritual.

The bedrock of my spiritual sustenance is the understanding that all life is connected. God, or as I prefer to say, “Godness”, breathes through all of us. Call it Spirit of Life. Call it Love. We’re woven. And we’re textured. I’m not part of some grand puree. Yet I’m singular. We aspire to loving community, and we each matter mightily.

Yesterday Dan and I discovered that the young adult son of a dear friend was being taken off life support. He had been in a coma in an Intensive Care Unit for the past few weeks. His mother and brother and girlfriend and a host of friends never stopped hoping, never stopped praying—until his doctors proclaimed irreversible brain damage. “Oh, my God,” I felt, as the tears rolled. “It’s awful,” we heard from a family member. “It’s awful,” he repeated, “and yet 50 lives are being saved because of his death, thanks to organ sharing.” I turned to Dan and said, “Okay, 51 lives, but if there were a choice—which there wasn’t—HIS life matters more than all those other lives when you’re his mother or his brother or his friend.”

What happens to hope when we crash on the side of the tunnel? In the tunnels of history global and personal, there are countless examples of making it through into the light of day. AND there are countless examples of crashing inside what we don’t even recognize as a tunnel. How to negotiate being in such a strange land, when hope is all we have? How to negotiate being in such strange lands when we grieve for one or millions who have not survived these dark nights of the soul or these dark eras of history?

Does our hope become hopelessness? Do we succumb to despair? Where is the hope in grief, in hurt beyond description? Glib explanations don’t cut it. In the words of a colleague presiding at a memorial service for a 15-year-old girl hit by a car at an intersection with a malfunctioning traffic light, “Death sucks!” Yes, “Death sucks!” And grief hurts. Hopes and prayers for loved ones, hopes and prayers for the well-being of this nation, hopes and prayers for inclusive love, for the well-being of each and all don’t always come to fruition. How then to open our hearts to a new day?

Easter is perhaps the most perilous holiday for us Unitarian Universalists. Reason, which we all but place as an icon on the altar; rationality, which we presumptuously claim as some denominational birthright; and science, which we readily confuse with certainty, become like tombs, blocking the way to any possible resurrection of openness to what can yet be.

The words of the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. described hope as “a state of mind independent of the state of the world.”

“If faith puts us on the road, hope is what keeps us there. It enables us to keep a steady eye on remote ends. It makes us persistent when we can’t be optimistic, faithful when results elude us. For like nothing else in the world, hope arouses a passion for the possible”

and, I might add, a passion for the seemingly impossible.

Bill was yet another of my heroes, from his racial justice and anti-war activism stemming from the 1960s into the decades of his ministry in which justice was as spiritual a construct as prayer. That he preached my ordination sermon 17 years ago is a blessing that breathes through my ministry every day.

His words on hope were written ten years after he lost his 24-year-old son, Alex, when Alex’s car skidded amid a fierce storm and flew off a dock into Boston Harbor. Father and son adored each other. Bill’s grief was deep and raw. Ten days later, he delivered a “Eulogy for Alex” at New York City’s Riverside Church, where he was Senior Minister. In this beyond difficult sermon, he recounted his fury over a well-meaning woman, who had come to the family home to deliver consolation in the form of food, and had mumbled that she “just didn’t understand the will of God.” Coffin responded viscerally. “I’ll say you don’t, lady!” He continued in his eulogy:

“For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels....

My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.”

This is a God I can believe in. I can as easily substitute Love. “Love’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.” In loving community, what can we offer one another when one among us is heartbroken? How can we be with one another when our nation is suffering what Rev. Dr. William Barber, prime mover of the Moral Monday movement and the politics of fusion, calls “a heart problem”? What can we do? How can we be?

Perhaps the greatest gift we can give in these treacherous life passages is our simple and profound presence. Such presence breathes compassion without words, solidarity without pity.

Through my own dark nights of the soul, it is this presence for which I am most grateful, this being *with* over being *for* that unleashes hope and lays the ground for a new day.

As we move through our variable and inevitable dark nights of the soul, may we be present with one another and through this beloved company gather the strength to move through the eye of the storms waging in our larger world.

May it be so and Amen.

Sources

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