

# Is Hope Simply Wishful Thinking?

December 7, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

**Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:**

We are here,

*on a sunny morning after days of autumn rain,*

to worship, to experience hope and insight

*within the embrace of chosen community,*

that asks of us honesty, courage, and growth.

**And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.**

**Singing #1000 Morning Has Come**

**Ingathering** a story (with large drawings)

by Pedro Pablo Sacristan

Once upon a time, in a far away ocean, there was an island that had two sides. Down the middle of the island was a huge wall. No one knew who built the wall, but it was very old, very high and very steep, and it literally cut the island in half. On one side of the island, there were many beautiful birds, fruit trees, flowers, and lots of food. Good fresh rivers, too.

The Mokoko people, however, lived on the *other* side of the island of two sides. There were trees, but there were few of them, and they were small. The flowers were dry. And there were lots of wild animals, some of whom seemed to think that the Mokoko probably tasted pretty good. The Mokoko, sadly, had always lived there, with no way to cross to the other side. Their life was hard and difficult: they were hungry, afraid of the growling beasts, and felt defeated.

But the Mokoko told stories around the fire at night. One story they told was about some of their ancestors jumping over the wall with help of a pole. But for many years, not a single tree had grown with wood strong enough to make such a pole, so few Mokoko believed this was possible. They had gotten used to their difficult life. They gave up hope, and just went hungry much of the time. "It's just a stupid story, that's all."

But wouldn't you know it, one day, near the cliff, a tree that had been growing for years had gotten so large that there was suddenly the possibility of cutting two branches off to make poles. The feeling of expectation was enormous, and there was no doubt among the tribe as to whom they would choose to use the poles: the great chief and the great priest.

But when the two of them were given their opportunity to make the jump, they felt so afraid that they didn't want to do it. They said: "The pole could break." / "Maybe it's not long enough!" / "It

just won't work, that's all." So they talked themselves out of it. But since they knew some people might look down on them for not having courage to jump, they decided to invent some old stories about how every single jump made before failed. And they told so many of these stories, for so long, there was no Mokoko who did not know how foolish you would have to be to even attempt the jump. So the poles just sat there, free to use. But nobody did.

But one day, Naru and Ariki, who were nine years old, realized they wanted a different life. They were tired of being hungry, tired of growling beasts, and tired of that big wall getting in their way. One day, they decided to take up the poles. Nobody stopped them, but everyone *did* try to discourage them: "It's not going to work. You'll hurt yourself. It can't be done. No one else ever really did it."

Ariki said Naru: "*Perhaps the jump will go badly*, and perhaps not. But staying forever hungry on this side of the wall isn't any better, is it?" "You're right, Ariki. We can't wait. Let's pole-jump tomorrow."

And next day, Naru and Ariki did jump. They made it to the good side of the island. They were afraid all the way, taking up the pole, jumping, flying through the air. But when they landed safely on the other side of the island, they hugged each other. *That wasn't so bad, was it?* they said to each other.

And as they ran away to discover their new life, behind them, on the other side of the wall, they could hear, "Aw, it was just luck." "Well... maybe tomorrow." "What a terrible jump!"

And Naru and Ariki understood why so few people took the leap: because on the difficult side of the island you only ever heard the hopeless voices of people without dreams, people who gave up, people who, therefore, would never jump ...

## **Greeting**

### **Conversation from the Heart** Patricia Boughton

All of us have a story about what brings and keeps us at First UU. Time and again, I am grateful for all the dedication that people contribute to build this community. It has helped me in countless ways over the years.

This fall, I was a juror on a murder case. It was a tragic situation, there were middle school and high-school-age children involved, and friends making bad choices. An event happened in just a few seconds that irrevocably changed so many futures. As I listened to these heartbreaking testimonies, day after day, and watched children brought into the courtroom in shackles, I asked myself "why?" so many times. All the harder, was not being able to talk about it for the few weeks while the trial occurred. I also had to consider that, at the end, I might have to write my name on a piece of paper, along with 11 other people, convicting a 16-year-old of murder. What helped me get through the event was knowing that I had First UU to come back to.

During jury deliberations, even though half of my fellow jurors were in tears, I realized it was not the venue for the type of philosophical questions I was asking myself. Why were these bad choices made, what made the children feel there were not different opportunities for them, what could I or the community do to help prevent these types of situations?

However, what helped me do my job as a juror was knowing I had a place to not only continue the discussion on social justice, but where it was encouraged, and others had been having it for a long time, and acting on it. Where being surrounded by their dedication continually inspired me to give more of myself. This church helps me strive to be a better person – to focus on what I know in my heart is important while it is all too easy to get distracted, or just focus on things in my own, or my family's, lives. It also encourages me when I get discouraged and feel like my contributions are just a few drops in a vast ocean.

During the case, I realized that some of the youth involved in the tragedy, attended the local middle school that some of our youth attend. While the school is just a short distance from here, it serves neighborhoods that sometimes seem worlds apart. During the trial, it was distressing to think about the accessibility of guns to teens in these neighborhoods, and hear a young witness say, "In my neighborhood, when you hear a gun shot, you don't ask questions, you just run."

I think about how hard it must be for these middle school kids that one day you are in art class with someone and then a few days later you hear they are in jail. Not only does our church support social justice programs that help people, the compassion and caring of our ministers, RE Director, and other staff and programs, provide support for our members and children to help restore them so they can do this important work. In addition, we educate our children to be community-focused, and to feel empowered that they can make a difference in this world.

**Affirming**     *(please rise; antiphonal)*

**Hope has a cost. Hope is not comfortable or easy. Hope requires personal risk.**

*I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.*

**Hope is not about the right attitude. Hope is not about peace of mind. Hope is action. Hope demands for others what we demand for ourselves.**

*Chris Hedges "Hope Speech" 2010,  
Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird 1960*

**Singing #1060 As We Sing of Hope and Joy**     *vs 3 and 4*

**Communing**

"A date that will live in infamy, Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>,"  
said President Roosevelt

after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.  
Today, I see days of infamy multiplying,  
as men with guns shoot,  
and men with hands choke;  
and yes, outrage speaks too,  
in a Die-In at Easton,  
or a protest at the Statehouse;  
but neither of these speak quite as fast as  
the person who preaches at the Holiday table:  
"I'm not a racist, but..."  
Rain falls, chills. Sunlight blesses.  
Trees go up, brightly lit. Wreathes circle.  
Amazon.com floats across a million  
computer screens, parking lots fill.  
Cookies to seniors, meals to Faith Mission,  
favorite stories retold to children.  
And beyond both the frenzy and the delights:  
new days of infamy;  
many days; a broken system – both a misuse, and a distrust of authority.

Love, may I not forget to breathe,  
even when the days of infamy  
collide with days of light and delight,  
even when days of infamy collide  
with days of a thousand holiday plans,  
even when days of infamy collided  
with ten thousand candle-flames.  
Breathe quietly, assuredly, you remind me,  
breathe in, breath out...  
like the trilling bird of hope,  
perched in my soul.  
Hope perched in my soul. You are not a wish. But a plan.  
You urge me keep on breathing,  
to keep on going forward,  
to keep on making  
a path where there is no path,  
that I might help others to dispel  
the misery of the world.  
Silence, bless me, bless us all, on our way.

*the great silence*

Rain falls, chills. Sunlight blesses.  
Trees go up. Wreathes circle.  
And travels and preparations begin  
for family constellations, and friends

arriving on our doorsteps, or us on theirs.

So now may we bring to mind the faces that this season in particular will bring into our lives, whether we love them dearly, or chafe against them; whether they are far away and beyond an embrace, or whether we bear their cherished memory through the holidays. May we give utterance to the names of the faces we see, quietly inside, or softly spoken, that our time here may be set into our lives.

*naming*

Rain falls, sunlight blesses, and in this season,  
choirs mark the holidays by songs of unsurpassed beauty.

### **Anthems**

9:15 AM **Hope** (*text adapted from Hope is the Thing with Feathers, by Emily Dickinson*)

#### **11 AM The Vow of Shantideva**

Text:       *For as long as space endures,  
                  and for as long as living beings  
                  remain, until then, may I, too, abide  
                  to dispel the misery of the world.  
                  Om Mane Padme Hum*

**The First Reading** *is from the late Howard Zinn, a man whose take on history, and whose support of Martin Luther King, and whose call to withdraw from Vietnam was considered so controversial by groups in the US government that he was labeled a high security risk, and thus subject to immediate arrest should the USA enter a state of emergency. This is from his 2006 book "A Power Governments Cannot Suppress."*

To be hopeful in bad times 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. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now, as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

**The Second Reading** *this morning also comes from an outspoken and controversial author, Arundathi Roy. Her novel "The God of Small Things" won accolades worldwide. But she does not confine her activism to writing – she is also very visionary and political, filled with fiery hope and strong critiques of worldwide government-sponsored oppression.*

“Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our

joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe.

The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling – their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability.

Remember this: We be many and they be few. They need us more than we need them. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

## **Preaching**

As of 12:30 PM today (if my studied estimate is anywhere near correct), I will have completed 1,568 sermons in the course of my ministry.

Many of my newer colleagues, knowing of my longevity, the very length of my experience, reach out to me these days to ask questions about how I approach my sermons on Sunday.

More specifically, they ask what it means to preach Sunday after Sunday after Sunday – for almost 40 years. "What do you preach about after a decade? After two decades? Haven't you run out of things to say yet?"

"Well," I usually say to them, "I used to wonder about that, too, when I was a freshly minted minister. I used to say to myself in August, 'I have 40 sermons to prepare by the end of the year? OMG, how can I – or anyone, for that matter – do that?'"

But I *did* get through my first year. And my second. And all the next decades, only rarely repeating a sermon, and even then, never exactly, and never in the same place.

"But let me be clear," I tell my newer colleagues, "as time goes on, you will find that the world itself will almost *dictate* your themes for you, even if you, like me, employ general themes for monthly use at the beginning in September each year. I promise you, on any given week, no matter what your monthly theme is, the world will offer you a war, a famine, a flood, a shooting, a choking, a disaster, or some unbelievable injustice. And, that same world will offer you reports of a remarkably kind act, an astonishing self-sacrifice, a beautiful sunny late autumn day, a truce, a declaration of rights, or an astonishing work of art: painting, music, film or dance. Just pay attention to what is going on around you, wrestle with it publicly, and find a way to give people some hope. But most importantly," I always conclude, "just live your lives. Cook your supper, wash the dishes, take a walk with a friend, hold hands with your spouse, marvel at the wisdom of children, or just grab a cup of coffee in the morning down at your local café. If you do that, your sermons *will write themselves*. At least, that's what works for me after all these years," I conclude.

So by now, having heard me say, "Just go grab a cup of coffee in the morning down at the local café," some of you are probably expecting that I am going to mention a conversation I had at my own coffee house, One Line Coffee, on High St. in the Short North. And you're right of course. Because this fall, as some of you surely noticed, half of my Sunday sermons began with a report

of a simple conversation in that amazing place.

So Friday before last, I was sitting there, drinking a rich Costa Rican brew, and starting to fret about what approach I might take for this very sermon. *Hope*, after all, is a vast topic, and all by itself, rather vague. I wasn't sure what I even meant back in August when I wrote my sermon title down on the schedule. Then this regular there named Drew says "Hi" to me, and we end up talking about his dance contest on Saturday night. The next day, in fact. "What kind of dance? A contest you say?" "Come see, if you're free," he says. "It'll be fun. Come around 7 PM. The event will go to midnight."

I wasn't sure I could make it, since I had plans, but, at the last minute, plans were canceled, because my friend got the cold now going around, and so I went. The event was held nearby, actually, in the studio right above Half-Price Books up at Graceland.

I paid 10 bucks, and went through an entrance office to enter a small back room without windows. In it were two ten-by-twenty square ft. dance floors, one made of wood, one of a substance I didn't recognize. The wood floor served as the contest floor, with five seats for the judges along one side. The other one was for practice – and just plain fun, it turned out. People simply danced there for joy, as well as for practice. All night, even, sometimes, when the actual contest was going on at the other dance-floor. The whole room was small. There were no chairs. Everyone, both contestants, and audience, stood, sometimes leaning against the wall.

I didn't understand the jargon being used, the various dance "styles" people were talking about. Most of the jargon, in fact. Nor the exact rules of the contest. Dancers in pairs stood at opposite ends of the narrow side of the rectangular wooden dance floors. One by one, to the music, not chosen by them, apparently, but simply played by the DJ, the dancers entered the floor-space – one dancer at a time, alternating by pair – and danced.

What kind of dancing? Good question. Break-dancing is the word that comes to mind first, but it was more than that. I saw dance steps so fluid that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers would have *both* been envious. I saw leaps and head stands and somersaults using excellent gymnastic strength and balance. I witnessed spontaneous steps and moves of such creativity and surprise I could not believe they were all improvising, not following a pre-determined choreography. Breakdancing, I hear, was developed originally as a way of competing, or addressing, conflicts, without violence. Everyone last Saturday night danced, with grins on their faces, *at* each other. At the end of their set, they sometimes even used their hands to say something like "So there! Come back at me, baby, if you dare."

But let me tell you what else I saw. I saw eight-year-old boys and girls dancing. I saw men and women in their teens and twenties and thirties and even 40s dancing. I saw women and children and men all competing with, and against, each other – often with great big smiles on their faces the whole time. I saw everyone hugging each other, and walking arm-in-arm, even if the judge had favored one over the other. I saw people who were slender as straws, or as heavyset as a bag of cement. I saw very tall dancers, and I saw dancers closer to the ground. I saw people of every ethnicity and color you can imagine, and some you cannot imagine, in perfect demographic representation of the world (not Columbus, mind you, but the world!) Or, to use more specific



words, I saw people with clear roots in Asia, both east and south, as well as South East; in Latin America, both Central and South; in the Middle East, especially Iran; in Africa, north and south; in Europe, north and south; even in Polynesia. And, I saw wondrous mixtures of these ethnic origins forging beautiful features and skin-colors never before seen in the human palette till now.

The contest went on for hours, and I was both amazed and happy throughout it all.

And, I also felt something, for the first hour, I could not put my hands on, or name in any easy way.

But suddenly, it became clear to me what I was feeling.

I was feeling the actual *experience of hope*.

I was inside a state of hope.

I was submerged in hope,

I was baptized in a pool of hope,

I was aflame with hope,

I was alive with hope.

Not hope as some high-falootin' "cardinal virtue," or comforting theological expression about what is to come, but hope glowing in my own flesh, at that present moment.

I saw the "world to come," as I had best always imagined it, but look! as something *already here*, not at some Utopian time in the future. In the *Gospel of Thomas* there is an interesting dialogue between the teacher Jesus and his students. They ask their teacher, "When is the realm of God (or if you prefer 'the Era of Love and Justice for all') finally going to arrive?" Jesus answers: "Well, *it's already spread across the whole earth right now* – you're just not seeing it."

I know I don't usually see it because I am caught up in the negative sad stories: shootings, chokings, etc.

And, I don't usually see it because I realized that, for most of my life, I had most often used the word "hope" as a simple substitute word for "wish." "I hope everything goes well during your surgery. I hope you get your wallet back. I hope your son returns home in time to drive you to the airport." Or even: "I wish for peace on earth." Wishing good for others. Fine. Nothing wrong with that. But it's really just mostly a common courtesy, that's all. Not very powerful.

But what I experienced Saturday was not a common courtesy, but something very powerful, exultantly strong, joyful, transcendent and more profound, more deep, than the world of shootings, chokings and war I mentioned at the beginning. Like Howard Zinn, I have always pointed out that beside the horrible events which throw themselves at us every single day, we are also joyfully ambushed by good things as well: acts of love and compassion, stories of forgiveness and community support, like the lovely one told by Patricia Boughton this morning.

My sermons over these last 37 years, as I see them, have always been sincere attempts to respond to *both* of these realities, the shockingly painful and the astonishingly beautiful. In



Howard Zinn's words: *To be hopeful in bad times is not ... 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. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.*

Exactly. At the dance contest above Half Price Books, I was witnessing a victory. Not of one dance team over another, but a victory for humanity. It was already present. It was not some other time. I was there! To it, I testify.

Arundathi Roy says the same thing with even greater power. "Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it," she writes, "to deprive it of oxygen (wow! now there is a metaphor) — with our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness — and our ability to tell our *own* stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe. The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling: their version of history...their notion of inevitability."

There you have it. The notion of inevitability is the precise opposite of hope. Its antonym. Like both the political and religious leaders on the difficult side of the island in this morning's story, inevitability is established by "their version of history," which supports only negatives: "It's not going to work. You'll hurt yourself. It can't be done. No one else ever really did it. This is the way it has always been."

But at the dance studio last Saturday night, I was in the midst of the positive, not the negative. I was hearing and seeing and feeling a different story. In that room of many colors, many styles, and a great deal of welcome and joy, I was seeing with my own eyes the "realm of love and justice for all" — "the realm of God," in the words of the Gospel of Thomas, *already spread upon the earth*. It was not some hope for what's to come, but hope already here.

"And so when you decide to preach a sermon, maybe about hope, for example," I tell my younger colleagues, "just live your life, and let yourself be open to what is right there in front of you, and I promise you, the sermon you want to give will simply jump up onto the pulpit, and deliver itself. At best, throughout all your career, you'll just be the servant of the sermon that comes to you as a gift. And you will live in gratitude all your days."

**Offering** To give of our livelihoods during the morning offering is to form a circle with the world that gave us our lives, and this religious community which nurtures our spirit and our vision, and calls us to our mission. We, therefore, now make that circle, and give and receive the morning offering.

## **Returning: New Member Ceremony** *(insert)*

### **Blessing**

David Gill, a member here, told me about a quote that he has hanging on the wall of his home. The great Chinese writer Lin Yutang used to often quote the great epigramist Lu Xun, who back in the 1920's wrote this:

*“Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence.”*

Exactly what I was trying to say this morning, so: Go in peace, to make a road where none was before. Amen.