

**HOPE IS AN ACTION.**  
**January 1, 2011**  
**Frank W. Carpenter, D.Min.**

**READING:** Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in Dark Times*.

**SENTENCE FOR MEDITATION:** Rumi, 'There is a meadow out there beyond good and evil. I will meet you there.'

**SERMON:**

2012!

2012?! Where's the hope?

2011 ends. Where's the hope?

The USoA is out of Iraq, but not Afghanistan. Where's the hope?

Is there a light at the end of the tunnel?

Is it a tunnel, or just another hole getting deeper and deeper? In the Eurozone?

I'm not the best person to prognosticate on a New Year.

I am not the most optimistic person around. Talking about hope takes an effort on my part. On a good day, I call myself a realist, not a cynic, not a pessimist.

Long ago, when I was in seminary, Meadville, I led a worship service. All students were expected to conduct evening worship in Hull Chapel of Chicago's First Unitarian Church several times a year. This particular evening a number of denominational leaders were in town from Boston.

I don't remember too much of what I said or did that evening. I do remember that I had hung an American flag upside down in the front of the Chapel, over the altar. This was at the height of the Vietnam War and protest. At that time I hung the flag as a sign of my fears that our country had lost its way morally in Vietnam. Today if I were to hang a flag upside down in the front it would be because of corruption. I fear we have become corrupt, with government supporting banks taking money away from small home owners through foreclosures and students through their loans.

Anyway, back to my worship service at Meadville. As I said, I don't remember much about it. I do remember that afterward Dana McLean Greeley came up to me. In his day Dana was our leading light, especially in Boston as the first

President of the new Unitarian Universalist Association. Dana was a proper Bostonian. At the back of Meadville chapel, in his great booming voice, he challenged me, "*Where's the hope? Where's the hope?*"

"Where's the hope?"

I was a bit stunned. Granted the sermon pointed to America's moral failings, and I guess I must have left it at that. But my resolution of the conundrum was not in the sermon, but in the last part of the ritual that evening. One of my friends was having his birthday that day. And so I celebrated his birthday as the end of the service.

Where's the hope? In part, we get by with a little help from our friends!

Where's the hope?

Hope, Solnit argues in our reading, is "not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks in the present, the surprises." And then she says, "hope is an act of defiance." An act of defiance!

Hope is an action. Maybe it is celebrating a friend's birthday. Maybe it's confronting the preacher about what positive message you might possibly get from all that hog wash. Maybe it is joining your fellows in protest.

Hope is an action.

Where's the hope?

Hope. Hope is personal. You may be worried about your health, waiting for a lab report back from your MD. You might know someone who is in your prayers today for they are in that abyss of despair that sucks us down.

Hope is cultural, social. You see people in your neighborhood facing foreclosure and a decline in the buying power of your income. At the same time our culture fails us, an inability of our cultural stories to tell us what to do, where the hope is. Apocalypse now, for you?

Hope is social; hope is personal. A personal story.

Early last June my wife Jacquie was on her lunch walk, going down Reading and was crossing Liberty, where 471 comes into Cincinnati. Walking into the intersection with the lights her way, she was run down. The driver was ticked off that she had gotten into his path and tried to pull her off the road. Fortunately the driver behind him came up and protected my wife. Two legs broken. What is called a bilateral tib-fib plateau.

After 14 hours in the ER; two days in the hospital, she spent 6 weeks in a nursing home. For the first several weeks she could not move her legs at all. Her fears of what was happening were urgent for me as I feared her negativity might undermine her healthy attitude. Those were days without hope, the future looking endlessly long, the tunnel curved a bit at best, little light if any at all.

I learned what it means to be a primary care taker. When she came home, I had to do just about everything, get meals (not a good idea), empty the commode, push her up and down the ramp. Occasionally I asked myself why I was doing all this, why was I sacrificing my time? I could give no good answer. It was just what I had to do. And if I ran away, the only alternative, I could not live with myself.

Hope is an action. And all I could do was what needed to be done next.

Hope is personal.

Hope is also social, cultural; perhaps I should say religious.

Having spent 4 years in college and too many years to count in seminary, I could go on at length with a comparative world religions take on hope. Jesus' gospel of a New World Acoming, the visions of Jewish prophets. And then of course the apocalyptic dreams of the present day, dreams of Christians and Muslims and Jews that our world is not going to end with a whimper, but with one super big bang somewhere east of Eden. Endless speculations: but not now. I take just two examples: Buddhism and 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarianism.

Buddhism. Buddhism begins with a statement of the need for hope. Well, that's not exactly the way Buddha put it. We find this about Buddhism First Noble Truth in the Omniscient Wikipedia:

The first Noble truth is The Nature of [Suffering](#) (or unhappiness/unsatisfactoriness or [Dukkha](#)): "This is the noble truth of suffering: [birth](#) is suffering, [aging](#) is suffering, [illness](#) is suffering, [death](#) is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the [five aggregates](#) subject to [clinging](#) are suffering."<sup>[5][6]</sup>

"Where's the hope?"

Buddhism responds this suffering, Dukka, we bring on ourselves through our craving, through our constant attempts to attach ourselves to everything. To stop suffering, we need, the third Noble truth reports, to stop craving, stop attaching ourselves to things. And how do we do that? The fourth Noble truth tells us, through the eightfold path of right living.

Buddhist hope seems to be in the acceptance of the way things are. Buddhism finds hope differently than Christianity. Buddhist hope lies in letting go, ending attachments. Christian hope lies in love, in attaching ourselves to things – to the right things, of course. But yet, hope, if I may call it that in Buddhism, is an action: right action, treating others with respect.

Of course, many of us when we think about Christianity's vision of the future we think of various notions of the end of the world. Apocalypticism, millennialism. The world is coming to end and Chief Justice Jesus will judge the quick and the dead. Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and *believe* in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Because of the corruptions of the Church, men and women sought another future. They remade the future, calling it '**PROGRESS.**' James Freeman Clarke was an early Unitarian preacher in Louisville. Upon returning to Boston, he came up with what became known as 'the five points of Unitarian belief.' His Five Points were printed by the old AUA and found in churches much as today we find the 7 Principles posted. Clarke's Fifth point is "... **the Progress of Mankind onward and upward forever.**" Therein lay the hope of UU's in the last century. Progress onward and upward for ever!! And this called for action. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's hymn, # 288 in our hymnal; reads,

All are Architects of fate,  
working in these walls of time,  
some with massive deed and great,  
some with ornaments of rhyme."

What then is progress? The accumulation of scientific papers? The increase of ethical insight? The expansion of justice? The end of poverty?

What is progress? Where's the hope? Isn't progress the American Dream? That you can build a nest egg, that your children will be better off than you are?

Progress then is about the accumulation of wealth. The accumulation of wealth is what capitalism is all about. Do you have an expectation that your nest egg will get bigger and bigger? Do you hope that your children will be better off than you? Hope lies in action.

99% of the globe's people are having serious doubts about their nest eggs getting bigger and bigger.

"Another World Is Possible"

"Another World Is Possible," is the motto of the World Social Forum which since 2001 has been an annual meeting of civil society organizations, first held in

[Brazil](#), which offers a self-conscious effort to develop an alternative future. Another world is possible. Where is hope beckoning us, where in the unknown lies our next great hope?

Perhaps that sounds a bit radical. But, look at the back of a dollar bill, if you have one. There on the back of the great seal of our nation you can read, **OVUS ordo seclorum**, [Latin](#) for "New Order of the Ages"

Hope! Our nation began in hope: a new age now begins.

And now? We hear that a new world is possible.

Where's the hope? Where is our hope to be found? In our reading Solnit repeats a theme of Henry David Thoreau's, "I believe in the forest, and the meadow, and the night in which the corn grows." Our hope lies in the essential unknowability of the world, she says.

And Margaret Mead tells us that "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world, indeed it's the only thing that ever has." (# 561).

And what is that all about? **Where's the hope?** In small groups?

Our hope lies in entering the unknown with a group of friends, telling our stories to one another, listening and responding to the resonances of these stories. Through action, joining with others, talking, sharing, and dancing (Solstice) we find hope.

Rev. Dittmar shares with us her interest in Peter Block's work with small groups. Block is especially adamant about convening conversations in small-group settings. The small group is "the unit of transformation," he says, "because it creates a sense of intimacy." He goes on,

All change begins with a small group, for the small group is the unit of change. ... The small group is the structure that allows every voice to be heard.<sup>1</sup>

But what happens if you cannot find the words to speak? If violence has rendered you silent?

In 2006, Alice Walker, working with Women for Women International, visited Rwanda and the eastern Congo to witness the aftermath of the genocide in Kigali. Invited by Code Pink, Walker traveled to Palestine/Israel to view the devastation on the Gaza Strip.

In her **OVERCOMING SPEECHLESSNESS** Walker bears witness to the depravity and cruelty. She recounts the stories of the individuals who shared their tales of suffering and courage. Part of what has happened to human beings over the last century, she believes, is that we have been rendered speechless by barbaric behavior that devalues human life. We have no words to describe what we witness. Self-imposed silence has slowed our response to the plight of those who most need us, often women and children, but also men of conscience who resist evil but are outnumbered by those around them who have fallen victim to a belief in weapons, male or ethnic dominance, and greed.

She writes:

The women and I and everyone with us from CODEPINK went across the hall to a big common room where music was turned up full volume. At first I sat exchanging smiles and murmurs with an ancient grandmother who was knitting booties, and who gave me two pairs for my own grandchildren. Sitting didn't last. Without preamble I was pulled to my feet by several women at once, and the dance was on. Sorrow, loss, pain suffering, all pounded into the floor for over an hour. Sweat flowing, wails and tears around the room. And then, the rising that always comes from such dancing; the sense of joy, unity, solidarity, and gratitude to be in the best place one could be on earth, with sisters who have experienced the full measure of disaster and have the heart to rise above it. The feeling of love was immense. The ecstasy, sublime, I was conscious of exchanging and receiving Spirit in the dance.<sup>ii</sup>

Where is the hope? Dancing!

Where is the hope this New Year? In speaking your truth.

Hope is an action.

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<sup>i</sup> **Civic Engagement and the Restoration of Community**

<sup>ii</sup> **OVERCOMING SPEECHLESSNESS**, page 59.