

“HOPE IS DEAD: LONG LIVE HOPE!”

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INTRODUCTION

Invite responses to the word, hope.

Yep, the 2008 presidential race is heating up, and, man, are the candidates a study in diversity! Some ten months away from the actual election, Mitt wants to talk religion. Edwards wants to talk poverty. Rudy's talking immigration. McCain's talking about water board torturing. Ron Paul talks a Will Rogers-meets-Ross Perot populism. Dodd and Biden talk so as to sound like political twins separated at birth. Huckabee's talking about quarantining folks with AIDS. Thompson's barely talking. Oh, and my fellow Ohioan, Kucinich, won't *stop* talking!

But we're not talking about political diversity alone, here. Throw in an Obama and a Richardson and a Hillary and you're looking at a field of candidates that resembles something approaching the face of America in the twenty-first century. Indeed, whatever you think of the individual candidates who want to be your next president, you can at least celebrate the fact that serious contenders now come in female, black and brown. It's encouraging. It's uplifting. It's enough to make a body feel downright...well, downright *hopeful*.

So why, in this, the season of hope, preach a sermon calling for the death of hope?

JESUS AND THE GRINCH REVISITED

Shared experience often makes for strong bonds. Just ask soldiers or battered women or recovering alcoholics. Me, I enjoy talking with other people who grew up poor, but have, in adulthood, made it out of poverty. They know there's nothing quaint or nostalgic about being poor in the world's richest nation. Especially if you're a child.

But, I confess that I sometimes take the bait when someone tries to “out poor” me with wildly exaggerated tales of childhood woes. Tell me you walked ten miles to school, and I'll tell you that I walked fifteen. You say you had to walk uphill both ways, and I'll tell you that I did it barefoot in the snow with a toe fungus. Try to impress me by telling me that you grew up in a house trailer, and I'll say that I grew up in a one-room tarpaper shack with a two-story, one-hole outhouse. And you say your family was too poor to pay the light bill? That's nothing. My family was so poor we couldn't even pay attention!

But not everybody in America slips the shackles of poverty. And that reality is never more exposed than in the twin extremes of crisis and Christmas. As to the

former, witness the way in which Hurricane Katrina laid bare the suffering of so many people of color in New Orleans. And Christmas... well, Christmas can be the annual, unintentional but-oh-so-dehumanizing message that this is supposed to be the season of giving and receiving. And real, *immediate* poverty – not the kind one can joke about on the other side – affords little of either.

As I've noted in my previous three Christmas services with you, the story of the birth of Jesus as literal truth is polluted beyond credibility in the modern era. (Stars don't hover in place, rich princes don't travel to attend the birth of homeless children and virgin women don't give birth to children, much less gods.) But the birth narrative is nonetheless instructive as a poor family is given gifts befitting only the rich, evidencing for us the Book of Luke's bias toward women, poor people and lepers and even Jesus' outrageous remarks in the Beatitudes.

But the biblical account, be it too burdened down with the beliefs of an ancient world, has nevertheless influenced the West with its bias for the poor. Read Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Witness the story I read this morning, Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Match Girl*. And, strange as it might sound, consider what has become the most popular Christmas story that *doesn't* begin with, "Twas the night before Christmas", Theodore Seuss Geisel's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Change gears with me here, as we move from Jesus to the Grinch.

After doing some research on both Dr. Seuss and the background for *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, it would be misleading if we were to analyze that 1957 children's story as though it were Orwell's *1984* or *Animal Farm*; to borrow from another doctor, this time a fellow named Freud, sometimes a story is just a story. But permit me just one observation, something that has to do with the kind of hope I'm convinced must die if love, justice and peace are to mean anything, anymore.

Okay, remember that that nasty old Grinch gets a wonderful, awful idea – the one about dressing himself in Santa's clothes and Max (his dog) as a reindeer, then burglarizing the whole town of Who-ville on Christmas Eve. Recall that he's so morally bankrupt as to lie like a narcoleptic bloodhound when young Cindy-Lou Who catches him stuffing the Christmas tree up the chimney. So callously calculating is the Grinch that he even gets Cindy-Lou a drink of water before casing the rest of the town and making off with every trifling thing to do with Christmas: presents, ribbons, wrappings, tags, tinsel and trimmings.

His diabolical deed done, The Grinch and poor Max climb Mt. Crumpit, just to hear the Whos in Who-ville cry and wail as they realize they've been the victims of a serial breaking and entering. But what sound do they hear? Good Lord, it's the sound of *singing*, not crying, not wailing!

To borrow yet another phrase, this time one of the two signature phrases used by that icon of all things conservative, Paul Harvey, you know the rest of the story. The Grinch does his community service in the form of returning the whole heist. His heart goes soft. He has Christmas dinner with the residents of Who-ville, even taking it upon himself to carve the roast beast.

Several years ago, I worked with a youth group to use *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* as the basis for a play. While I'm certainly no expert about working with young folk, I know something about looking for meaning in stories. As we wrangled over how to make various transitions and scene changes, I asked them to adapt the story to include subtle, but effective moral observations:

- How come the Grinch used his considerable powers for evil, not good? Difficult childhood? Running with the wrong crowd? Sociopathology?
- Is it ever right to lie? Is it ever right to lie to *children*?
- Was it enough that the Grinch returned what he had stolen? Should he have been punished?
- And, for real, what does it mean to sit at table with your enemy?

There was some sound thinking going on in the heads of those very bright and talented kids. And then there was the great debate over what happened down in Who-ville once everybody discovered they'd been ripped off. Did they get angry? Did they accuse one another? Did they call the sheriff? Did they talk about making Who-ville into a gated community? And, what moved them to sing? To have Christmas without all the trappings that make Christmas Christmas? To, as one young woman put it *overcome*?

These things were talked out and shaped into spoken lines for the cast. Although I can't recall the exact words from the final script, I do remember that a town meeting was inserted to decide how the Whos would respond. One Who suggested they pray for their things to be returned. Another thought they should not just pray, but also cross their fingers and make a wish. And one particularly optimistic Who said that they should think positive thoughts – just hope and believe that their good karma would restore all that they had lost.

And then someone asked all the Whos, young and old, big and small, to think about what it was that all the Christmas stuff represented to them.

"Family", said one young mother. "Peace", said one of the teachers in town. "Memories", spoke an elder. "Giving", added one of the children. And so it went until Cindy-Lou's grandmother said, "Music. Music is what makes Christmas Christmas!"

And so it was that the whole town of Who-ville (in the form of some two dozen Unitarian Universalist adolescents) came to be standing in a huge circle, holding hands and singing into the make-believe crisp Christmas air.

WHY HOPE MUST DIE

It's a provocative article, the one that appeared in the May-June issue of *Orion Magazine* and the fall issue of *The Center Post*, the quarterly paper published by Rowe Camp & Conference Center, a UU retreat in Massachusetts. Written by Derrick Jensen and titled, "Beyond Hope, There is Life Itself", it smacks of the same spirit that went into the pivotal scene I just described – the one that reached beyond hoping to doing.

Jensen begins by telling us about the deep sense of defeat he sees in so many of his environmentalist friends. Reflecting on all that negativity, he goes on to suggest that the lack of hope he shares with his friends might just become the impetus to turn things around. He writes:

Frankly, I don't have much hope. But that's a good thing. Hope keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing the destruction of the Earth.

There is the false hope that somehow the system may inexplicably change. Or technology will save us. Or the Great Mother. Or beings from Alpha Centauri. Or Jesus Christ. Or Santa Claus. All of these false hopes lead to inaction, or at least to ineffectiveness.

Jensen continues:

One reason my mother stayed with my abusive father was that there were no battered women's shelters in the 50's and 60's, but another was her false hope that he would change. False hopes blind us to real possibilities.

Does anyone really believe that Weyerhaeuser is going to stop deforesting because we ask nicely? Does anyone really believe that Monsanto will stop Monsantoining because we ask nicely? If only we get a Democrat in the White House, everything will be okay. If only we pass this or that legislation, things will be okay. Nonsense. Things will not be okay. They are not okay, and they're getting worse. Rapidly.

Let me interrupt Mr. Jensen. When the modifier, false, is put in front of hope, it's not that difficult to understand what's being said here: crossing your fingers won't get it done. But when the author prods us to look more deeply at how we *think* about hope, the plot thickens:

But it isn't only false hopes that keep us enchanted. It is hope itself. Hope, we are told, is our beacon in the dark. It is our light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It is our protection against despair (which must be avoided at all costs). How do we continue if we do not have hope?

I told you that the plot about hope would thicken. I could break out, right here – right at this point in the sermon – and start listing the differences between what Jensen’s calling hope, false or otherwise. That would certainly be the typical progression for a sermon preached by and to Unitarian Universalists. But I don’t want to go there, at least not yet, because we’re talking about something fairly weighty: one of the fundamental ways that we *think about change*, and therefore, one of the ways we create, and respond to, our version of “reality”.

Jensen next reminds us about the story of Pandora and how she opened the sealed box that she was forbidden to touch. Curious as she was, she opened the box, letting loose all manner of sorrows and troubles and plagues. By the time she was able to close the box, only hope remained within. The moral of the story, as is usually applied, is that we can meet all manner of hardship so long as we still have hope. *But does anyone dare ask why hope was placed in the box alongside sorrow and plague in the first place? We think about sorrow, not just feel it. Troubles? What would life be if all we did was experience troubles and never reflect on why we’re troubled and what to do about it? Sure, we need hope, but not the kind that keeps us drinking the Kool-Aid that tells us to wait. To hold on. To put-off.*

Back to Jensen’s article:

...The more I understand hope, the more I realize it deserved to be in the box with sorrow, mischief and plagues; it serves the needs of those in power as surely as the idea of a distant heaven; hope is nothing more than a secular way of keeping us in line.

Hope is, in fact, a curse. I say this not only because of the lovely Buddhist saying, “Hope and fear chase each other’s tails”, [but also] because hope leads us away from the present, away from where we are right now and toward some imaginary future state. I say all this because of what hope is.

Talk about your Grinches! Surely Derrick Jensen is twisting the concept of hope to mean something other than you and I mean when we want nothing more weak or sinister than to be positive, to be optimistic. C’mon, what’s wrong about being positive and optimistic?

Before we pick up more of the author’s slam on hope, remember that I didn’t choose this topic to address how we do or don’t feel hopeful in the face of life’s hardships, *but how we think about hardship itself.* Back to the article:

All of us yammer on more or less endlessly about hope. You wouldn’t believe how many magazine editors have asked me to write about the [environmental] apocalypse, then enjoined me to leave readers with a sense of hope. At a talk I gave, I was asked to define hope. I turned the question back to the audience,

and here's the definition we came up with: hope is a longing for a future condition over which you have no agency; it means you are essentially powerless. I'm not, for example, going to say I hope I eat something tomorrow. I just will. I don't hope I take another breath, I just do. On the other hand, I do hope the next time I get on a plane, it doesn't crash. To hope for some result means you have given up any agency concerning it. Many people say they hope the dominant culture stops destroying the world. By saying that, they've assumed the destruction will continue, at least in the short term, and they've stepped away from their own ability to participate in stopping it.

...When we realize the degree of agency we actually do have, we no longer need to "hope" at all. We simply do the work...When we stop hoping for external assistance, when we stop hoping the awful situation we're in will somehow resolve itself, when we stop hoping the situation will somehow not get worse, then we are finally free – truly free – to honestly start working to resolve it. When hope dies, action begins.

Wow. Agree or disagree, do you get what Jensen's trying to tell us? If I have it right, he's saying that by clinging to hope (the emotion, mind you), can give us license to set lofty, out-there, goals, then tell ourselves that God or goodness or sanity will prevail unassisted. We think we've done our part – that's what *false* hope is.

Example: I want to see an end to world hunger. I can pray for that end. I can wish for it. I can hope for it. But, unless you want to make the case that my prayers, wishes and hopes, *by themselves*, feed empty bellies, nothing changes. Hungry people cannot eat prayers or wishes or even hope. My recourse? At least two options come to mind, each grounded in age-old spirituality and each requiring me to tweak my thinking. First, I can get up off my knees and focus my time, talent and treasure in the service of the goal; stop asking God (I'm using that term broadly) and start *being* God (again, broad usage). Or, second, I can begin honoring the passion (burden?) within – the one that shouts aloud that hunger need not exist in this age of mass farming and genetic modification – as God; I can consider the possibility that the notion of "being called" to work on world hunger is, itself, an urge toward the holy. It's a calling to "be" God.

Just a little more from Derrick Jensen before we bring some other voices to bear on the topic. Let me warn you in advance that things might get a little earthy as he tries to make a point:

...At one of my recent talks, someone stood up during the Q and A and announced that the only reason people ever become activists is to feel better about themselves. Effectiveness really doesn't matter, he said, and it's egotistical to think it does.

I told him I disagreed. Doesn't activism make you feel good? he asked. Of course, I said, but that's not why I do it. If I only want to feel good, I can just masturbate. But I want to accomplish something in the real world. Why? Because I'm in love. With salmon, with trees outside my window, with baby lampreys living in sandy streambottoms, with slender salamanders crawling through the duff. And if you love, you act in defense of your beloved. Of course results matter, but they don't determine whether you make the effort. You don't simply hope your beloved survives. You do what it takes. If my love doesn't protect those I love, it's not love.

KEEP HOPE ALIVE?

Derrick Jensen may be too hardcore for some, and I admit that when an author takes an absolutist approach to something as venerable as hope, I, too, have some ready rebuttals. But hope is hot right now, and Jensen need not be the last word. Listen as I randomly cite some recent uses of the word, hope.

- Oprah, in taking up the role of kingmaker with her recent, very public endorsement of Barak Obama, uses the phrase, "Audacity of Hope",
- The *Star Tribune*, when talking about the new generation of wonder drugs, frames and article on the high cost of those drugs with the title, "Hope, at High Cost"
- Borrowing from a longtime military slogan, Thomas Mowle has written an expose on war titled, "Hope Is Not a Plan: The War in Iraq From Inside the Green Zone"
- Using that same phrase, Jason Neville's expose on a nearly forgotten city and disaster is called, "Hope Is Not a Plan: A Letter From New Orleans, One Year Later"
- The online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, recently updated its reference to the word, hope: *Hope is a belief in a positive outcome related to events and circumstances in one's life. Hope implies a certain amount of perseverance – i.e., believing that a positive outcome is possible even when there is some evidence to the contrary...Hopefulness is somewhat different from optimism in that hope is an emotional state, whereas optimism is a conclusion reached through a deliberate thought pattern...*

Hope is typically contrasted with despair, but despair may also refer to a crisis of faith. Hence, when used in a religious context, hope carries a connotation of being aware of spiritual truth.

Hope is passive in the sense of a wish or prayer – or active as a plan or idea, often against popular belief, with persistent, personal action to execute the plan or prove the idea. Consider a prisoner of war who never gives up hope for escape, and, against the odds, plans and accomplishes this. By contrast, consider another prisoner who simply wishes or prays for freedom, or another who gives up all hope.

Folks, this is not just a matter of semantics; there is, at least in some quarters, a growing shift in how hope is best understood. Oprah uses hope as a rallying cry to elect a presidential candidate. The *Star Tribune* uses hope as a way to prod pharmaceutical companies into lowering the price of saving lives. Two authors borrow some words to remind us that hope, whatever else it may be, is not the basis for a plan of action. And even an online encyclopedia is distinguishing hope from optimism, hope from faith and hope from action. Maybe a shift in our thinking really is taking place. Maybe hope has been a source of human disempowerment for long enough. Perhaps enough of us have tried hope alone, and found it to be little more than a way of taking ourselves off the hook for greater involvement with a broken and inconvenient world.

Or perhaps hope has just become too expensive. Too expensive when war rages from the Middle East to East Africa. Too expensive when polar caps melt at record speeds. Too expensive when children starve for no reason other than being born to the wrong parents in the wrong country at the wrong time.

As Derrick Jensen noted, hope is held up as a shield against despair. Never mind that hope can also be a spiritual firewall that keeps us from utilizing despair as a means of “bottoming out” on what Jensen called false hopes. Fact is, getting past spiritually infantile thinking means we have to deal with despair rather than waste time trying to avoid it. Fact is, despair is not a spiritual black hole from which we can never return. It could be that hope is the perfect set-up for despair itself, whispering to us that we, like Job, deserve a better fate. It could be that despair is not the dragon we think. It could be that despair is just hope disappointed. But might it also be that despair is so threatening because it requires us to get off the fence of life? To fish or cut bait?

HOPE IS NOT A PLAN

Just two final quotes before I close, one from Jason Neville’s “Hope is Not a Plan: A Letter from New Orleans, One Year Later”:

...hope is not a plan. Hope will not rebuild the levees. Hope will not restore the wetlands. Hope will not give hardworking people their rightful-but-still-denied insurance money. Hope will not open the habitable public housing that our government paid to have locked up. Hope will not restore electricity to the dozens of neighborhoods still in the dark at night. Hope will not bring back home our brothers and sisters sent to war, so they can help rebuild our cities, instead of destroying those of other lands. Hope is not enough to save New Orleans...

So, what’s the bottom line? That the face of love is not always the face of hope. That hope is not sufficient when left to fend for itself if you and I are serious about linking love with service, mercy, with action.

Is there ever a time when hope is healthy? Helpful? *Necessary*? Not if it means diminishing our personal power and responsibility. But is there ever a time when hope is the right thing – the *moral* thing? I'll give my qualified yes in the form of an excerpt from, "Common Ground and Common Sense", Jesse Jackson's address to the 1988 Democratic Convention. In that speech, he sounded to me part Sojourner Truth, part Dr. King and part Sermon on the Mount, framing American poverty as a dream in search of hope, and hope in search of action:

What is the fundamental challenge of our day? It is to end economic violence. Most poor people are not lazy. They're not black. They're not brown. They're mostly white and female and young. Most poor people are not on welfare.

I know they work. I'm a witness. They catch the early bus. They work every day. They raise other people's children. They work every day. They clean the streets. They work every day. They change the beds you slept in in these hotels last night and can't get a union contract. They work every day.

They work in hospitals. I know they do. They wipe the bodies of those who are sick with fever and pain. They empty their bed pans. They clean out their commode. No job is beneath them, and yet when they get sick, they cannot lie in the beds they made up every day. America, that is not right. We are a better nation than that...

...Wherever you are tonight, I challenge you to hope and to dream. Don't submerge your dreams. Even on drugs, dream of the day you're drug-free. Even in the gutter, dream of the day you'll be on your feet again. You must never stop dreaming. Face reality, yes. But don't stop with the way things are; dream of things as they ought to be. Dream. Face pain, but love, hope, faith and dreams will help you rise above the pain...

You must not surrender. You may or may not get there, but just know that you are qualified and you hold on and you hold out. We must never surrender. America will get better and better. Keep hope alive. Keep hope alive...

Hope as a verb. In this "season of hope", there is an African American, a woman and a Latino running for president. In this "season of hope", there is the memory of young people who bent a familiar Christmas story into the shape of courage. In this "season of hope" there are those who have a healthy suspicion of the very word, yet work and give and love in defense of the planet. In this "season of hope" there are men and women trying to reclaim their lives and rebuild their homes with precious little support. And in this "season of hope", a political speech from another era still resonates, daring us to consider the kind of hope that renders despair nothing more than a springboard to action.

It's enough to make a body feel...well, downright hopeful.