

## Faithfulness and Hope

Lighting a candle is offering a prayer. Lighting a candle is also an act full of faith and an act of hope.... and God (and everyone else) knows these days we definitely need both - faith and hope - very badly. As if the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO alone was not enough, as if the verdict by the Grand Jury not to indict Darren Wilson was not enough, as if the horrific aftermath of demonstrations were not enough, this Wednesday a grand jury decided not to indict officer Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner – an incident clearly video-taped and now viral on the internet. These two current events along with countless others we can name challenge our ability to have faith and remain hopeful. Our faith in the US justice system, such as it was, is once again eroded. Our hope that progress was being made toward a reduction of racism is vaporised. Our faith and hope in humanity – let alone an interceding Divine Being who would allow such tragedies to occur – is truly compromised, once again.

It's the Christmas season and we're supposed to be focusing on peace and goodwill to all, but it's difficult isn't it? It's hard to NOT slip into despair, it's hard not to be discouraged and depressed; it's hard not to feel hopeless and helpless. It is for me, at least. And yet,....and yet this IS the Christmas season and I AM a person of faith - albeit shifting, so the work of my spiritual journey is to find

meaning, faith, and hope in the midst of these challenges while NOT resorting to a Norman Rockwell painting as the desired but unrealistic idyllic outcome. This is the everyday work of a spiritual journey, not just at Christmas time – and for me, honestly, sometimes it’s not easy work.

So, for perspective, I turn to greater minds than mine. Drs. Shannon Kincaid and Philip Pecorino, of Queensborough Community College at the City University of New York wrote on the interrelation of faith and hope. “At first glance,” they write “the relationship between faith and hope might seem obvious. People that have faith, have hope. People that have hope, have faith. Seemingly, a person cannot have one without the other. Faith and hope are interconnected, but in a complex way.” They contend that faith is an expression of a current state of affairs; it represents a belief that actually exists based on what is known from the past and what has been taught or acculturated. Based on my experience of several decades, I have faith that “things” – family situations, financial problems, personal health issues, etc - these ‘things’ are working themselves out and to use a popular phrase, “It’s all good.” Yet hope is different. It is directed towards the future. Where faith expresses a fact about the present, hope is directed at a future state of affairs.

“Hope” is an expression of what the German philosopher, Edmond Husserl, called “directed intentionality.” For Husserl, hope might best be understood as a confident expectation in the

achievement of a desired state of affairs, and it was an example of what he called an “anticipated fulfillment of intention.” I hope that demonstrations and protests in reaction to the Brown and Garner case decisions will have an impact *in the future* to change police tactics, judicial proceedings, the careers of the attorneys and officers involved, and the public consciousness.

Kincaid and Pecarino write further that people have faith precisely because they have hope. One cannot have hope without faith. Faith, they purport, is a NECESSARY condition for hope: that no one can have hope without faith. Thus, if there is hope present one can know that there is faith present as well.

For example, oxygen is necessary for fire. If you have a fire you know that you have oxygen present. Oxygen alone is not sufficient for fire - thank goodness! Therefore, faith is necessary for hope but faith is NOT SUFFICIENT for hope because you can have faith about a number of things and yet no real hope. Consider, one can have faith in an afterlife and no hope that one will meet with a desirable state of affairs when arriving there. So faith without hope is possible: hope without faith is not possible. (At least it is not possible for mentally stable people.) Hope is always accompanied by faith. Faith is almost always accompanied by hope - but not always. **Faith is the servant and server of hope.**

The demonstrations we witness on TV are reactions stemming from deep and righteous anger at the obvious injustice. The reactions are also based on fear – fear that there will be no change in the future, there will never be justice in this country for the poor, the oppressed, and people of color. Both hope and fear are future based AND they are generated from the same place in the human brain – the hippocampus. The most intriguing aspect of this knowledge is that the two opposing emotions of hope and fear cannot exist simultaneously in our brain and life experience. When we are fully experiencing fear, we can not hope and vice versa. I won't digress too far into the neuropsychology of this topic, but suffice it to say – we need hope. In times of great fear and stress, we need hope counterbalance and to feel and act differently about the future.

As Unitarian Universalists, ones who claim a variety of religious faith beliefs or none, we struggle perhaps most authentically with what it means to live a faithful life and have hope. My spiritual conversations with other UU clergy colleagues plumb deeper and wider for the very reason that we do NOT share automatic and unanimous beliefs. Yet, we all share convictions based on our faith that motivate us to live and act in accordance with our faith. UU's are people of hope and therefore, faith... even the most cynical among us. And I would say that we have a “salvific” hope – if

not in a religious divine redeeming force then in a humanistic power to create a better world. Rev. Dr. *Kendyl R. Gibbons (All Souls UU, Kansas City, KS)* expressed it best, I think, when she wrote, “We are here because we are people of faith. Within each of us lives the conviction of a saving faith that could restore our broken planet and illuminate the lives of our sisters and brothers. Ancient wisdom teaches that we who would save the world must first save ourselves. We who would restore the planet must learn to restore the broken structures of the institutions closest to hand; to illuminate the lives of our companions and friends.” We have hope and faith and we are needed in a community of fearful people living in fearful times.

Perhaps we have what is called an Interactive Faith because we bring action to what we believe, we attempt to walk the walk. We can acknowledge that to have faith is to believe in something or someone, to fully trust, to be so confident that we base our actions on what we believe and we have hope that our actions will have a lasting impact for good. We are fully convinced of the truthfulness and reliability of that in which we believe and for us, it is the truthfulness and reliability of the seven principles. We may not describe our faith as a religion, nor always logical, and definitely not manipulative. What we hold as faith ultimately is caught, not taught like a subject. Our faith redefines who we are and because the Spirit works through us, our interactive faith sends a message

to people who have not grasped it. It is done and shown in our daily living and in fearful times of turmoil, when the truth is revealed and forgiveness is needed.

Our hope, as UU's, is founded and grounded in our being able to manifest the Beloved Community one step, one day, at a time. That is why we take a stand on the side of love for justice and equality for all who are oppressed, underserved, and spiritually wounded. Our faith in action is an outward expression of our internal salvific hope.

I'm going to venture an opinion that may be offensive to some of us – I venture to say that, at our very best, we Unitarian Universalists and all we stand for and hope for, are the closest followers of Jesus the Christ. We, UU's - hang on – could be considered Christian. There, I've said it and I mean it. Not that we subscribe to the later formed doctrine of substitutional atonement and all its distorted trappings, but we embrace and attempt to live the teachings and life practices as attributed to Jesus of Nazareth who was seen as the Christ – the chosen and anointed one. We could also be considered Buddhist because of our commitment to right relationship – but that's another sermon. We believe and accept that we are supposed to (ye, anointed to) do the redeeming work in our world. We are to make it better; we are to make it more just and more loving. This was the radical work and message of Jesus 2000 years ago – and the radical work of Gandhi, King, Malcom X and others since. This is our radical work, too.

When you consider the current state of affairs and your faith and your hopes, what do you hope for our world? What are your convictions that motivate you to live a faith-filled life? Take a moment to contemplate this and share as you are willing. ....

At this Christmas time of year, as the darkness of the earth's cycles descends on us, may we light the lights of faith now and hope for the future and may we be ever diligent in living out our faith and hope. May we light the way for others as we work to build the Beloved Community. Quoting Rev. Gibbons again, "To this end let us center ourselves, acknowledging the trouble of mind and vexation of spirit that accompany us even here. Let us open ourselves to that creative mystery which is at work in our striving, whose servants we are and seek to be." Amen