

## **A House for Hope?**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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*Meditation:* “Hope is the affirmation that there exists, beyond all data, all inventories, and all calculations, a mysterious principle [a source] that consents [and works] with me, that cannot but will that which I will if what I will deserves to be willed and is in fact willed with the whole of my being.” (Gabriel Marcel)

“My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we’ll change the world.” (Jack Layton)

Once upon a time, back in the late 80s, we bought our first house. It was a 120 year old fixer-upper—we bought it for \$40,000; I could walk downtown to work in fifteen minutes; it was spacious—a real plus after having lived crammed in a two bedroom apartment with four young children—and it rested on almost a 1/3 of an acre with ancient box elder and elm trees and enough arable, well-lit ground for a sizable kitchen garden. It even had its own artesian well.

Not that it was paradise—the house was located, literally, on the wrong side of the tracks, those were a block away to the east, a freeway towered above the neighbourhood two blocks to the west, and a lot of the surrounding housing stock suffered from decades of neglect. What had once been a vibrant part of the original garden city design and intimately linked to a pioneer city had become a shabby, isolated run-down urban island. Here’s a picture for you—while turning over the soil to prepare our first garden, my children were fascinated by the hypodermic needles, discarded whiskey bottles, and broken china our shovels unearthed. We even found a set of lethal looking brass knuckles. Welcome to the neighbourhood!

And did I tell you that that the house was a “fixer-upper?” Considerable penny pinching and a number of federal grants for low-income, first-time home owners enabled us to install energy saving windows, replace a leaking roof, and carry out ambitious interior renovations. We nurtured and harvested a fabulous garden. I planted and pruned fruit trees and grape vines. It

was a lot of hard work and a long haul—years of it. Those were also some of the happiest days of our lives. And as I was thinking and feeling my way back to those days and writing these words, I wondered why that was so. To be sure, we had our share of hard knocks, but it's the happiness and sweetness of those years that seem most true of that time. It wasn't just that we were younger, less world weary and had more energy. There was something else.

First, I'm thinking about the confidence, the trust we shared; let's call it faith, the faith we had in ourselves and each other: marriage, family, friends; trust and faith, as well, in the learning and skills we had acquired step-by-step, over time, that enabled me to land my first real job and for my partner... to start a community radio program and create a music conservatory for low income families as well as those who could pay. We had well-tested faith, with promises refined and steeled through trial-by-fire: that two individuals could become a couple; that three generations under one roof could become a family; that a disparate collection of people sharing interests and needs could become a community of friends; and that a run-down house on the wrong side of the tracks with brass knuckles in the garden, that even a place like that could become a home. With the eyes of faith, of trust, we saw each other and from that discerned a purpose, a kind of end or goal arising that we were moving toward.

That's the thing about faith, it's restless; it arouses desire; it discerns things not-yet-proved, achieved or given that we will and want to attain: things like partnership, family, a garden, community, a home and well-grounded belief. It gives rise to deep expectations; a feeling that what is wanted *will* and *should* happen. We call *that* desire, when accompanied by anticipation for something we *really* want, something-yet-to-come—we call that hope. Faith may show the end or goal; it is hope that moves us toward it. Jack Layton said it's better than fear; and it's definitely the opposite of despair. Makes me think of Tony, when he sings in *West*

*Side Story:* “Something’s coming/I don’t what it is/ but it is going to be great.” “Could be, who knows?” he asks. But the music and lyrics are telling us: Oh, he feels it, wills it, expects it, and wants it to happen. It does, and her name is Maria. Faith sees, hope moves, love unites.

Faith, hope and charity, or love, have been called “theological virtues,” and they join with the “classical virtues” of prudence, justice, temperance and courage put forward by the ancient Greeks to comprise the seven virtues that have been the bedrock of Western morality and ethics. The first three have been called “theological” because you find them a lot in scriptures and theological texts whose authors claim that virtues are dependent on some prior divine source and activity; though they do then arise and accompany us in order to help us fulfill faithful, hopeful and loving feelings, wants and actions—especially when they take place in the context of religious communities and stories. By contrast, the four classical virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage are more secular in nature and were defined by the ancient Roman Cicero as “habits of mind in harmony with reason and the order of nature.”

I think sometimes about what’s happened to the term “virtue”; one contemporary philosopher said it’s become a rather quaint or old-fashioned word. Which may be the case if it’s reduced to meaning conformity of life to a set of rigid religious principles, to rectitude and sexual purity; and it’s the notion of diligence and hard work to something that may be suspiciously religious, passé, stodgy, and unfashionable that makes us hesitate to say: “she or he’s a virtuous person,” or “that was a virtuous act.”

And to be honest, thinking of virtue as quaint may also have very much to do with the fact that in our got-to-have-it-now, market-soaked world virtue is a kind of excellence; it’s relatively rare and attained like any skill—by practicing it. And here we’ve stepped into Malcolm Gladwell’s rule of how it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill or craft. I love his

example of how, between 1960 and 1964, the Beatles amassed over 10,000 hours of playing time by performing live more than 1200 times in Hamburg, Germany before they broke in **big-time**. Ask any master carpenter, plumber, teacher, or physicist just how long it took them to gain excellence in their field. Ask any parent, or home-maker (!)—they'll tell you; or any kid for that matter. Do you know how hard it is to master the daunting art of being a teenager?!

The ancient Greek philosophers, and those who follow them down through the ages, affirmed that the practice of prudence—the opposite of being foolhardy and rash—makes for a wise, far-sighted person; that the pursuit of justice begets justice; that temperance—the opposite of giving up—helps us become patient, and that we become brave by doing brave things.

And before we give a pass on the traditional notions of the theological virtues as quaint, or even irrelevant, as grim impositions of chastity or hard-hearted rectitude, or as pipe dreams attuned exclusively to pie-in-the-sky-when-we-die, here's something I remember about teaching history, and that was the utterly transformative power of the Exodus narrative from Hebrew Scripture in the Afro-American struggle for freedom from slavery and the achievement of their civil rights. A promise of freedom and a promised land where they could live it was made by god to an enslaved people. Their god worked mighty miracles to achieve it, and it took a people resolute to make it happen though at the cost of suffering, of setting out and wandering forty years in the wilderness. Through faith they saw it; through hope they expected it and worked for it; and love...? Love for the kind of God who listens and cares for slaves, love for a suffering son lynched on a tree by masters of an imperial power...it inspired, united and sustained them.

And here, though I don't mean to take it out on him, Richard Dawkins is surely wrong when he said that Martin Luther King's leadership of the civil rights movement didn't arise from his religious beliefs, but was based, instead, on Gandhi's teachings of non-violence alone. King's

language, writings and leadership were soaked in the Bible—its stories, message and morals, and arose from his deeply held religious faith. With the eyes of faith informed by stories of a God who promised to deliver slaves from bondage, King saw the promised land of racial equality, civil rights, and economic justice not only for his own people but for all of us. He couldn't prove it was there; it was not-yet-seen or present. But with prophetic sight, he set his eyes on the prize, and others shared his vision. And then arose this prophetic hope, an undaunted expectation—he wanted it, he willed it and inspired others to work to make it a reality—and then, in the words from our meditation—“beyond all data, all inventories, and all calculations, a mysterious principle consented” to work with them, one “that cannot but will that which I will/ if what I will deserves to be willed/ and is, in fact, willed with the whole of my being.” (Gabriel Marcel) “I may not get there with you, but I have seen the promised land....mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord.” That's the language of the virtue of hope speaking to us; and it resonates still down to this time, this room, forty-five years later.

But we may say, and with good reason: he didn't get there and neither have we. A mysterious principle *may* consent and work with us for that which we will with the whole of our being. But for all that...there is evil, suffering and disappointment. “We are strangers, before thee,” it says in the *First Book of Chronicles*, “and sojourners, as were all our fathers and mothers. Our days are as a shadow and without hope.” “What happens to a dream deferred,” asked Langston Hughes. “Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore-- And then run?”

Is hope a virtue? Can we speak meaningfully of it so that it's not just blind trust, or sunny optimism, or make a wish, or “wouldn't it be nice if...” None of these attitudes, once upon a time, helped two individuals become a couple, three generations a family, a congeries of

people to become a community of friends, or a young family to turn a house into a home. I may remember those days fondly as some of the happiest in my life, but they clearly stand out as well, for whatever we modestly achieved, and for all the hard knocks and times of not-quite-measuring up, as times of trust tried in the school of hope—the kind that brings the claims of faith down to earth and made real in a particular time and place. Yes it took faith and trust and hard work. It also took accepting that we needed help beyond our powers to move toward goals that were beyond our reach. And there *was* a “mysterious principle” that consented and worked with us—that moved through and held true our promises; and it was embodied in the good people and the resources they brought with them that came to our aid—I learned there are things deserved to be hoped for by one’s whole being: enduring partnership, family, community, home and well-grounded belief.

“The whole interest of reason,” wrote Immanuel Kant, “is centered in the three following questions: What can I know? What may I hope? What ought I to do?” What we ought to do is seen with the eyes of faith and driven by what we hope for. “History may give rise to endless doubts about my hopes,” Kant went on to say,

“and if these doubts could be proved, they *might* persuade me to desist from an apparently futile task. But so long as they do not have the force of certainty, I cannot exchange my duty...of influencing posterity...for [some kind] of expediency which says that I should not attempt the impracticable.... And however uncertain I may be and remain as to whether we can hope for anything better for us, this uncertainty cannot detract from the necessity of assuming...that human progress is possible....This duty may [and ought to] be rightfully handed down from one member of the species to another.” (Kant, *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, 1793/1991, pp 88-9)

Hope is an orientation to an uncertain future. It comes with a sense of duty toward others and generations down the line, telling us to do something that would make this a more just, equitable, and compassionate world even though it appears incredibly difficult to achieve. But so long as we have incomplete knowledge of what may happen, we have every reason to take

seriously what is possible for us, and to act in the light of hope. “Let us be loving and hopeful,” Jack Layton said, “and we’ll change the world.” Doing *that*, said the classical philosophers when talking about cultivating and practicing virtues, working here and now on those questions: What can I know? What may I hope? What ought I to do? ***doing that***, they believed is how we can experience real happiness and abiding joy in our lives.

It took 150 years of trial and error for Unitarians and Universalists in Canada and the States, a century and half of passing through refining fires to come finally to forge a statement of principles envisioned with the eyes of faith. *What do we know?*—that those principles embody a host of virtues, of moral excellences worth pursuing and living. That’s what reason, experience and duty to an uncertain but possible future have taught us.

Practicing justice, equity and compassion—we become more just, more fair, more loving; esteeming and valuing spiritual growth as something good—we become deeper, more open, welcoming, reverent, and grateful; searching for truth and meaning—we become more informed, truthful and our lives fill with purpose; exercising conscience and democracy—we become more attuned to that still, small voice within us, and creatively expand the circle of voices and resources of self-governance; embracing the goal of world community—we become peacemakers, emancipators, and seekers of justice for all, from the homes in which we live, to a Canada which needs to put its own house in order, to the furthest reaches of the human family; and finally, if we truly venerate and respect that interdependent web of all existence—we become wiser, more responsible, and thus tread in harmony with the circle of life and the rhythms of nature.

Enumerating these virtues, calling them out, placing them before us—do you feel that restless anticipation of hope rising? Or is it just me? I hope not. For I would, I want to live in a

community of faith whose trust in moral excellence gives rise to the animating, sustaining light of hope. What can we know? What may we hope for? What ought we to do?

Not long ago, one of our members wrote this to me in a moment of anguished hopefulness for what may be possible: “our religion is exactly what our poor world most needs now; a deeply beautiful, rationally mystical, civilized religious way of being in the world. And if we attend to it and renew it, I cannot see how it could fail to endlessly lift, enliven, and inspire each of us and connect to the wider world.”

I pray that his hopes for us will not be in vain! May this house of ours become a home for hope for ourselves, our children and young people, and for generations to come!