

When Hope and History Rhyme

BY RACHEL LONBERG, MINISTER, PEOPLE'S CHURCH OF KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN



Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders were rather demoralized that spring of 1963. They had started a campaign to end segregation in Birmingham, Alabama and it wasn't going well. The police were jailing every marcher, which, understandably, meant that fewer and fewer people were willing to march, were willing to go to jail. King had recently been imprisoned himself. He had just written his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." It was a call to action aimed mostly at white liberals—and white liberals were not responding to that call.

Taylor Branch is a historian who has written a trilogy of books recounting the civil rights movement in tremendous detail. In *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* he writes: "The leaders could not predict exactly how an uprising would lead to victory instead of further pain, but they did recognize they were lost without some decisive move.... Having submitted his prestige and his body to jail, and having hurled his innermost passions against the aloof respectability of white American clergymen, all without noticeable effect, King committed his cause to the witness of schoolchildren."

The first children's march was on May 2, 1963. On that day, 958 children marched. As many of their parents watched from the sidewalks, the children sang and held signs. They overwhelmed the police and law enforcement infrastructure—over 600 children, ranging in age from 6 to 18, were arrested.

The following day, 1,000 more children marched. There was no room left in the jail so the police were instructed to get the children to disperse, using every tool available. A group of 60 children were targeted with fire hoses—and while most of them fled, ten stayed and started singing, "Freedom." The authorities brought out more powerful hoses and the force of the water pushed the children across the pavement. Other children who marched in other directions were met with police dogs. Three children were bitten badly enough to require hospitalization. The images of all of this were seen throughout the world. And in the face of this horrific violence, 3,000 children marched on May 5. They knew that they might be hurt, knew that they might end up in jail—and they marched anyway.

Those children acted from hope, from the belief in human goodness. Those children hoped, despite ample evidence to the contrary, that those who wielded power would have the moral imagination to see them as human, worthy of equal rights. They acted with the hope that those in power would be pressured to protect them from fire hoses and police dogs, to listen to their demands for equality. They had hope that their actions would be seen and would change people's hearts. They believed they could bend the moral arc of the universe.

And, as we know looking back, their hope that people in power would hear their calls for justice was realized. After more marches, some that were met with violence and some that weren't, an agreement was reached. Birmingham would have integrated restrooms, water fountains, and lunch counters. The momentum from that victory carried the movement through to the March on Washington that summer, which carried the movement toward the legislation passed in the following years that ensured equality in law beyond Birmingham.

From historian Branch again, "There was no historical precedent for Birmingham, Alabama in April and May of 1963, when the power balance of a great nation turned not on clashing armies but on the youngest student demonstrators of African descent, down to first and second graders.... Never before was a country

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In a time of
destruction, create
something.

—Maxine Hong
Kingston

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT HOPE

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transformed, arguably redeemed, by the active moral witness of schoolchildren.”

That is one story of hope that I hope we hold as a seed in our soul, that we tend and watch so it might bloom within us, among us, and beyond us.

Here is another, an ancient Greek story about an archer named Philoctetes. Philoctetes was among those who set out for the Trojan War with Odysseus. He possessed a magical bow, given to him by Hercules just before that hero died. On the way to Troy, Philoctetes was bitten by a snake. The wound never healed. Philoctetes was in constant pain and the wound smelled terrible. Odysseus abandoned Philoctetes on a deserted island and sailed off to war.

*The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history
rhyme.*

Ten years later, the war raging on, there was a prophecy that only that bow from Hercules could end the war. Odysseus returned to the island in search of that bow, bringing with him a young soldier, who he convinced to try to steal Hercules' bow. The play by Sophocles based on this story takes place wholly on the island, with the three men discussing war, morality, trauma, and forgiveness before Philoctetes ultimately is convinced by an appearance from Hercules, now a God, that he must go to Troy, end the war, and be healed.

Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet, playwright, and Nobel Laureate, made his own version of Sophocles's work, called *The Cure at Troy*. Heaney's version brings in echoes of the modern to the ancient story. He has said that he wrote it in part to explore the challenges of reconciliation in South Africa and his native Northern Ireland. Heaney died several years ago; the words

“walk on air against your better judgment” are carved on his headstone. What a powerful call to hope that is!

The character of Philoctetes is a fascinating one. He is hurt, abandoned by people he thought he could trust. His physical and emotional wounds have been festering for ten years. He wails in pain throughout the play. He has spent ten years alone, living in a cave, ruminating on what has been done to him. Then these men appear. The young soldier tries to trick him into leaving the island, saying he'll take him home. Odysseus tries to explain how abandoning him was the right choice, how his wailing and stinking hurt the morale of the other soldiers. And they tell Philoctetes that there is a healer at Troy who can heal his wound, that there is a prophecy that only he can lead the Greeks to victory. What does one do at that point? How could he trust these words from the man who abandoned him? Should he hope? What could hope even look like after ten years of pain and isolation?

When Philoctetes is certain he won't go to Troy, when he has convinced the young soldier to take him straight home, the chorus chimes in, with a mature hope—a hope that is fully aware of all of the suffering in the world. The chorus says:

*History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.*

Relieve your body and your soul.

And so, with a little divine intervention from Hercules, Philoctetes gives in to hope and trusts Odysseus despite his past untrustworthy behavior. He is

willing to seek out the further shore on the far side of revenge. He is able to return to right relationship with a man who has hurt him. The Gods and the chorus tell him healing can only be found through returning to relationship. He moves beyond his pain to act as though things can get better.

Now, it is dangerous to tell people to turn the other cheek and bless those who persecute you. Words like those have kept people in cycles of abuse and oppression. Forgiveness isn't always the best course of action... but we also know that the ability to hope when there appears to be no good reason to hope is a power with the potential to change the world. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” is a refrain often repeated by Martin Luther King Jr. He borrowed it from Theodore Parker, a 19th century Unitarian minister and abolitionist.

This echoes the statement that:

*...once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*

We, as the church, are called to be the custodians of hope. This isn't false hope, this isn't a refusal to see things as they are. We know things are far from perfect, but we know that we, like those Birmingham children, have the power to bend the arc of justice. We can be a drop in the longed for tidal wave of justice.

Hope is active. Hope is six-year-olds marching in the face of fire hoses and police dogs, and wounded soldiers trusting those who might not be worthy of trust and knowing that is the source of healing. Hope is prophets turning their words into action. Hope is all the other stories of people bending the arc and being the tidal wave that we hold in our hearts.

May we be the people of love, the people of hope, the people of change. ■

The Good News of Hopelessness

BY JOANNA FONTAINE CRAWFORD,
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Hope is tightly woven into Unitarian Universalism. The doctrine of universal salvation was referred to as “The Larger Hope.” In 1886, when describing the “Five Points of the New Theology,” Unitarian James Freeman Clarke affirmed his hope in the “progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” James Luther Adams said that one of the key points of liberal religion is an optimism based on the resources available to us. And every Sunday, in some UU church somewhere, a congregation sings, “I’ll bring you hope, when hope is hard to find...”

If Unitarian Universalists were to do the theological translating we often do, we would probably translate the evangelical idea that “God is good, ALL THE TIME,” into “Hope is good, ALL THE TIME.”

But is it? Is it really? Could it be that you bringing me hope is the LAST thing I need; that in fact, the hope you bring could be holding me back from making a needed change?

Many of us are, I believe, actually afraid of hopelessness. We feel it is a vampire outside our door, asking for entry, and we must be unequivocal in never issuing an invitation. Hopelessness will suck us dry.

In the book *Necessary Endings*, systems thinker Henry Cloud suggests something daring: invite hopelessness in. Look for, in his words, “the lifesaving virtue of hopelessness.”

Hopelessness can be a virtue, when we allow it to show us the areas in which we need to lose hope, so that we can move into something healthier, wiser. You see, there is bad hope. And there is good hopelessness. The key element lies in facing what is real.



When we believe in something with absolutely no evidence for it, and much evidence to the contrary, that is probably bad hope.

The abused spouse who keeps hoping their partner will stop hitting them. The parent of the addict who keeps hoping their child will heal.

Is the abuser getting therapy? Is the addict in a recovery program? That is fair hope. But without any plans for change? It is bad hope. *It is not based in reality.*

There are things we need to become hopeless about, and number one on the list is the idea that we can keep doing (or not doing) the same things and achieve a different result.

I’m a Gen Xer, and grew up on Sesame Street. What a wonderful show. It gave us a joyous picture of what Beloved Community could look like. The neighborhood of Sesame Street was diverse on many levels, and diversity was always treated as a value. Luis and Maria taught their friends Spanish. Linda the Librarian, who was deaf, taught sign-language. We were enriched by our differences.

But like so many other stories and shows, Sesame Street gave us the unrealistic hope that Beloved Community could just happen. That it was automatic, without effort, without sacrificing privilege.

Inevitable.

We have, most of us, rejected James Freeman Clarke’s hope in the inevitable progress of humankind, understanding that it takes a lot of work and sacrifice to make progress happen, and that it’s not a straight linear line upwards. The pendulum swings and we find ourselves re-fighting battles we thought we’d already completed.

Now it’s time to take the next step. To actively seek out “good hopelessness,”

the areas in which we need to be hopeless in order to change and grow. As Cloud points out, that means examining not only the broken areas, but also the areas where everything is working well at the moment.

Visionaries are able to look into the future and see that though something works successfully now, it will not in the future. In business, the examples of those who did not embrace hopelessness early enough provide a virtual graveyard of failed corporations: Kodak, Blockbuster, Borders.

But there are also the examples of companies like IBM who were willing to become hopeless that what gave them success would continue to work. IBM began as “CTR”—Computing, Tabulating, Recording. Again and again, they have lost hope in their successful product—tabulating machines, punch card machines, typewriters, personal computers—and moved on to something new. Today, they make billions of dollars selling not machines, but services, to businesses.

Hopelessness is a tool.

BUT.

Hopelessness is a visitor. You allow it to stay a couple of days for a visit, but then hustle it out the door. Don’t let it move in and set up permanent residence.

Hopelessness is a stepping stone, never the end. Hopelessness in your life must always be followed by a comma, never a period, and it is there to lead us to a new hope.

When we decide to be hopeless about what holds us back, what keeps us from growing, then we can welcome in expansive, life-giving, challenging, realistic hope. Hope that compels us to take faithful risks, to leave what is comfortable in order to be an active partner in building Beloved Community.

Where is the lifesaving hopelessness in your life? ■

The Reason Why

BY BRANDON, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN IDAHO

For the longest time I found myself living life in despair. I felt that I had little to live for, and had not only contemplated, but also attempted, suicide several times between the ages of 14 and 26. My life felt cursed, and in many ways it truly was, though not in any supernatural form.

As a child I felt that I was being raised in hell. My family was all fire and brimstone Christians, and at a young age not only did I realize my attractions were different from those of my fellow classmates, but also during the same year my family's pastor gave a sermon I'd never forget, about the abomination of homosexuality and how HIV was the divine punishment for gay men.

What that sermon did for me was 1) make me know that I belonged under the label "gay," and 2) make me believe that there was no such thing as unconditional love. If God had no unconditional love, neither could his creation, right?

After a lot of drama, and some abuse, I became legally emancipated from my parents, and at 17 I came out as gay. I would no longer allow fear to dictate the truth. But that truth included a series of better and worse relationships, including a partner who gave me HIV, and an eight-month relationship with a chronic liar who I stayed with so long because the pain he caused covered up the pain of my past. And then my grandma died just before I was arrested in July 2010. It was 17 months of pure hell.

But little did I know that my time in prison could actually be beneficial to me. I studied HIV virology, and became an advocate on HIV, LGBT and religious issues. But I was still in pain. I couldn't trust anyone. One of my best friends and I had a falling out, and it shook me up pretty badly. I started

being more reclusive. I recognized my views of people did not live up to the Wiccan ways I had lived for the previous 20 years, and started questioning my own core beliefs.

Eventually I found the Unitarian Universalist church and started finding my beliefs lining up with the principles, and even the sources, as I had started working backwards in Wiccan history and finding that my beliefs were aligned more with UUism than with polytheism, dualism, etc. At that point I felt comfortable reaching out to a Buddhist organization to receive a book called *The Untethered Soul* by Michael A. Singer.

I started reading the book around the time I started falling in love with a guy I couldn't bring myself to talk to, because I was so afraid of rejection. The book was teaching about the same type of scenario, and really opened my eyes to who has control over me—not me, only my fear.

A transgender friend of mine said she was going to talk to him for me. I didn't believe her, but she did, and he told her to tell me to talk to him the next day. I was about to back out when I started thinking about the lesson in the book. I chose to follow through, and take my life back from my fears.

Today, I am so happy that I made that choice. I am still falling in love, and so is he. Little did I know at the time that he would be the answer to many of my prayers. Even if the two of us don't work out, he has released me from a self-made prison. While I pray I don't lose him, I'm no longer afraid of the pain that accompanies love and loss. That fear almost stopped me from experiencing the feeling of real love again. Casting out despair returned me to a state of hope.

The truth is, pain is a part of life that we cannot avoid. Yes, there will be heartache—it is inevitable. But we should not fear the pain enough to not engage. That, in itself, is despair. ■



An Airplane That Never Lands

BY JOHN, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN COLORADO

Being in prison is like being dead. Nothing matters. People fall out of your life; the world passes you by and forgets about you. You become a ghost haunting the walls of a house you don't have any more.

It is like taking a trip on an airplane that never lands, perpetually soaring above all the flyover states. No stops, no connections, no destination, and after a while you cannot remember where you came from or where you are going. Time has stolen all the crucial waypoints and markers from your life and you have become empty.

And it hurts every day. Every time I sit down to tasteless, tepid prison fare in unpleasant company, it hurts. Every day I cannot touch or play with my children and watch them grow, it hurts. Every night I go to bed alone, it hurts. Every day that I cannot go to work and build my life, or take a walk in the woods or ride my bike or go camping or rafting or do some other thing I love, I suffer.

Vast stretches of galloping boredom are punctuated by shocking eruptions of hate and violence—and that's all there is. Prison takes everything there is to being human away from you and replaces it with rabid tedium. It makes the very measure and essence of your life—time—your mortal enemy.

What prison has given me is hope for when I get out. When I am free, unless someone I love gets hurt, it will be impossible for me to have a bad day. If I get the flu... I don't have the flu in a cage. If I somehow lose my wallet... I get to go to the store and buy a new one. If I am some day in a hurry to get somewhere and my truck has a flat tire as it runs out of gas in a rainstorm in the middle of nowhere—what a blessing compared to the view I have right now that is crowded by bars, a wall topped by razor wire and a gun tower. ■

When Hope is Hard to Find

BY **MONICA DOBBINS**,
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How can we find hope in circumstances such as these we live in today? Would it help to ask what it is we are even looking for?

If hope is a thing, what is it? Is it like the family Bible or the inherited china dishes, beautiful to look at but never used? Is it wrapped up and locked down, protected like Fort Knox, the key shoved deep in our pockets? Has it been overused and beaten up, thrown out back to rust and decay? Or worse, is it a myth, a dream, a thing forgotten or abandoned, a wisp of a memory that escapes our grasping fingers and blows away?

We humans, with our acquisitive nature, are always searching for a thing to hold onto. Yet I have learned that we feel less hopeful if we are uncertain of what to do next. By contrast, we often feel a little more hopeful if we can think of something to do to help. So what will happen if we let go of hope as a thing to find, acquire, or achieve, and instead consider hope as a way of living?

As a lifelong music lover and former professional musician, I have a fondness for Russian composers, who have known something about hope and despair. My favorite composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, wrote his Seventh Symphony, the Leningrad Symphony, for the Soviet people while Leningrad was under siege during the second World War. It is a relentlessly desperate piece of work, yet the story behind it is one of unshakeable hope.

Leningrad of the early 20th century was a jewel in the Russian crown, a thriving, trendy city full of artists, writers, and thinkers. Dmitri Shostakovich was

one of these artists, already a well-known Russian celebrity, with a doting wife and two adorable children and a comfortable teaching position. He was a musician with an anti-authoritarian streak, yet his political grumbling had been tolerated by the Soviet regime in favor of his formidable talent.

In 1939 Adolf Hitler invaded the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa. He had managed to convince Joseph Stalin that they were on the same side, and Stalin had cooperated with the invasion of his own country by selling Germany munitions and supplies and by allowing the Germans to conduct reconnaissance and build up troops in Soviet-occupied territory. The invasion was swift and merciless; twelve hundred Soviet aircraft were destroyed in the first few hours of the operation.

The response in Leningrad, the city of artists and thinkers, was overwhelming. Biographer M.T. Anderson says, "Leningraders were so intent on responding to the Nazi threat that on the first day of the assault, a hundred thousand of them volunteered to take up arms." Shostakovich was one of these volunteers, but he was turned away at the recruiting office because of his poor eyesight. In the following days of the invasion, the teachers at the Conservatory would instead be enlisted to dig trenches. Shostakovich was a terrible trench digger, as were most of the music teachers, who took frequent breaks to read a few pages of a book or pound out a few notes on a piano.

Over the next two years, the invasion would become a terrible siege, one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history.

Shostakovich evacuated his family, but refused to leave himself. Consumed with compassion and solidarity, he stayed in the starving city with his comrades, and began work on the Seventh Symphony. Its famous invasion theme, styled to sound at first like annoying toy drums that gradually beat

louder and louder until they overwhelm the listener with terror, gives way to a triumphant chorus. It was a rare message of hope and solidarity for the Russian people.

The most compelling performance of the Seventh was given by the Leningrad Radio Orchestra in August 1942, just a few months after its world premiere. Though the symphony had been scored for over 100 musicians, only 15 of the Leningrad Orchestra remained; the rest had died, or been sent off to fight. "My God, how thin many of them were," one of the organizers of the performance remembered. "How those people livened up when we started to ferret them out of their dark apartments. We were moved to tears when they brought out their concert clothes, their violins and cellos and flutes, and rehearsals began under the icy canopy of the studio."

Shostakovich was a world class composer, but when people are facing the greatest imaginable evil, who needs music? Yet with this work of art, Shostakovich had renewed the Leningraders' will to live. This composer could be nothing other than what he already was, and so he created hope out of what he had been given. Had he dug a thousand practical and necessary trenches, he could not have done half of what he did with his true gift, the magic of his music and its singular message for the survival of the human heart.

No one person can save the world all by themselves. The sooner we come to terms with that, the better. And yet, I believe that the world needs more compassionate, selfless ordinary people—more nurses, clerks, mechanics, scientists, insurance adjusters, more teachers, more artists, and more trench diggers—who find ways to do ordinary things with extraordinary love. May we be blessed with the wisdom to discern our gifts, and the courage to use them to create hope out of what we have been given. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I believe that the CLF mission statement is a recipe for hope: *We seek to cultivate wonder, imagination, and the courage to act.* More specifically, I believe that this is the basic recipe for restoring hope when it is lost.

My observation comes from my own experience of almost three decades of ministry, in which I have been privileged to hear the struggles and triumphs of hundreds of other people's lives. Wonder, imagination, and the courage to act—a three-legged stool designed to bring hope. No two legs of the stool will do, any more than we'd sit on a two-legged stool and expect not to fall.

The beat poet Diane Di Prima wrote: "The war that matters is the war against the imagination," and goes on to describe real wars as failures of imagination. Decades later, in another depressing time in history, Adrienne Rich noted Di Prima's words and then wrote: "*Despair*, when not the response to absolute physical and moral defeat is, like war, the *failure of imagination*."

When I am feeling despair, as I often do, about the wars being waged against so many people, communities, places, and ideas, I often feel a complete absence of imagination. Instead, I am filled with helpless rage and a sense that nothing I do will make a difference. For me, what helps most at these times when my own ability to act has disappeared is to connect with someone who used imagination in a situation with far fewer options than I have.

Our CLF members who are currently incarcerated often use their imaginations in ways that lift me from despair, as much as the ways they are mistreat-

ed fill me with it. These are people who need their imaginations to save their lives daily, because virtually nothing around them reflects humanity, love or compassion. One memorable piece I read was written by a UU in solitary confinement in response to an assignment in a CLF correspondence course about creating joy. The curriculum, designed by CLF friend and self-proclaimed minister of joy, Rev. Amanda Aikman, asked participants to use the colors of the rainbow to lift up practices that are shown to increase joy. The color green asked participants to align themselves with something living around them. This person, in solitary confinement, wrote that at first he thought that he was the only living thing in his cell. But then he realized there were some ants in the corner. He got down on the floor and studied them carefully for a long time, and observed that this practice did, in fact, bring him joy.



This brought me up short. He was magnifying his joy in life by practicing the observation of ants, and I—surrounded by so many signs of life I could drown in them—could only focus on reasons for despair? There are a couple of ways to respond to being brought up short in this way. One route, that does not in fact lift me from despair, is to feel guilt and shame about my lack of appreciation for all that I have. The other route, which does in fact lift me up, is to deploy the first leg of the CLF triangle—wonder. Instead of looking at myself with dismay or disgust or shame, I can look at this other person. I can take time to feel the wonder of the imagination of this other person. Such creativity! Isn't the human spirit amazing! There are so many sources to connect with—authors, artists, activists, healers, neighbors, friends—who can offer us this gift of wonder if we take time to notice, as

this incarcerated UU took time with the ants.

Wonder, imagination, and the courage to act. Connecting with someone else's imaginative acts can bring me inspiration and courage to act myself. So many things I have done out in the world—actually the huge majority of them—have been done because of someone or some place or some idea that I love. When I am connected in love with plants, or land, or communities, taking action to protect them is not optional. The mother tiger in me emerges, and I'm going to fight.

For me, the misery of helpless rage drives me (eventually) to come out from under the covers and see what tiny act I might accomplish. And always, for me, this begins with prayer. Holding someone in prayer, even when I can't heal their illness or stop the oppression against them, is an active choice which brings me a sense of connectivity and hope.

Years ago, when I was helping to launch the Standing on the Side of Love Campaign (now called, more wonderfully, Side with Love!), we decided never to post on Facebook in a way that someone couldn't click "like" about. We did not want to end our posts leaving people feeling worse than when they began them. So even if we posted about a horrific hate crime, we would end with, "Please pray for the family of so and so, and remember all of the people who are praying with us." Or we would include some small step that people could take—calling a representative, sharing on their own page, etc. Giving each other prompts for action, grounded in wonder and imagination, is a way to help each other along in these difficult times.

There are endless reasons to despair. Each day we need to make choices about how we will respond. But when we join together in wonder, imagination and the courage to act, we can keep hope alive. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR
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In what is surely the most famous English-language description of hope, Emily Dickinson declares that:

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the
words,
And never stops at all.*

It's certainly not a definition that you could put in the dictionary, but, frankly, I haven't seen a dictionary definition that really gets at hope as I understand it. "A feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen" describes some piece of hope, but not, I think, the whole thing. Certainly we can want something to happen without having much hope that it will. And we often hold out hope when we really have no reasonable expectation that what we want will actually come to pass. Somehow, hope goes beyond expectation and desire to a place where poetry serves us better.

Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul. Hope is a lightness inside. A lift. A conviction that even though we might not see any way to walk away from where we are stuck, we have wings. Hope *sings the tune without the words*—it doesn't depend on details and definitions and a workable ten-point plan. Hope just sings, because the tune is enough. And it *never stops at all*. Hope is not dependent on circumstances. It is a conviction, not a prediction.

Hope is more of an experience than a belief, somehow closer to faith than to expectation. But what happens when you lose hope? What if that feathered thing in the soul should, in fact, stop



after all? It happens. For whatever reason, whether circumstances or brain chemistry, pretty much everyone

knows what it feels like to experience silence rather than singing, hopelessness where once there was hope.

Of course, as Rev. Joanna Fontaine Crawford points out elsewhere in this issue, hopelessness isn't necessarily a bad thing. Giving up hope can look very much like the Buddhist practice of non-attachment.

In a section of his poem "East Coker" T.S. Eliot writes:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait
without hope
For hope would be hope for the
wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong
thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the
hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not
ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light,
and the stillness the dancing.*

Sometimes we have to wait without hope, settling into the emptiness and the not-knowing in order to open ourselves to something new. Sometimes we need the stillness with no bird singing in order to discover the dancing at the heart of stillness. Sometimes we need to give up and sit still before we can discover a new way forward. Hopelessness can be our friend.

But I would say that hopelessness is not the same thing as despair. Hopelessness happens when the feathered thing in your soul stops singing. Despair sucks that bird up and eats it for lunch. The dementors of *Harry Potter* are the embodiment of despair. Despair is the thief of joy, of courage, of creativity. Despair lies. It not only tells you that the situation is hopeless, it tells you that you, yourself, are hopeless, useless, pointless. Hopelessness invites you to sit in the dark and wait for the

sunrise. Despair assures you that the sun has been snuffed out, never to return. You can sit with Hopelessness in companionable silence. Despair will shove you off the bench and into the dirt.

Despair is an enemy that requires us to fight back. Luckily, we have weapons. Humor is a potent weapon against despair—it introduces lightness to counter Despair's sucking weight. Movement—action of any kind—fights back against Despair's lie that there is nothing to be done. There is always something that can be done. What you can do might not fix the problem, but simply doing anything that feels like a step or a lean in the right direction is proof that you have agency and choice. When you move forward, despair moves back.

Hopelessness is not the same thing as despair.

And, perhaps more than anything, connection and community are weapons against despair. We know that the powers of greed and cruelty are more than any one of us can take on. Each of us can throw stones at those dragons, but there's not much hope that any of us can stand against their might.

But you know what? We have no idea what we might collectively be able to do. Certainly, no victory is guaranteed, but when people come together (in person, online, on the written page) then there is simply no telling what could happen. Love in the shape of justice has done what seemed impossible before. Connection creates possibility, and Despair cannot withstand possibility. Despair depends on your belief that the future is fixed and nothing can change. But simply the act of reaching out to connect with another person is a declaration that something new could come into being. Connection creates possibility, and possibility is, of course, another name for Hope. ■



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Freedom Ridge

BY JOHN, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN OKLAHOMA

Outside my window, past the razor wire and fence, lies a ridge. A quartet of blue jays and a woodpecker live in the scrub oaks on the left. A chorus of cardinals and a hawk inhabit the explosion of evergreens on the right. Occasionally the hawk presents himself for a show, gliding in graceful circles, executing rolls and dives no human pilot can ever duplicate. I point out the trees and birds to my friend, but he can't see them. All he can see is the fence that tightens daily around his world. How sad it is to see only the fence and miss the beauty of the moment. ■



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