

The Shapes of Hope
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Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg
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I. Kerry

Shortly after 9/11 I found in the New York Times a quiet and poignant photograph that encapsulated the harsh blow to our collective psyche: a silver tea set in an apartment near the fallen towers, coated with the dust of the catastrophe, a graceful symbol of hospitality negated by the debris of hostility. This week I saw another such symbol: the brand new sneakers of an Orlando physician, symbols of stamina and devoted care, soaked in the blood of ER patients brought in from the hate inspired shooting in Pulse.

It's been a painful time. Since last week's service the story has unfolded more fully. The worst mass shooting in American history, 49 dead. The usual responses: can you believe, we have a usual, even conventional response to mass shootings? – changing your Facebook profile picture, candlelight vigils, a renewed debate on common sense gun safety, like keeping people on terrorist watch lists from buying guns – maybe some progress this time. And the nuances and echos of tribalism – the victims were largely Latino, largely GLBTQ. The shooter was apparently a lone wolf terrorist, with overtones of ISIS allegiance, previous domestic abuse, perhaps uncertainty about his own sexuality. GLBTQ people are viscerally reminded once again of feeling unsafe every day. Parents who lost school age children to gun violence, relive that awful day. Preachers who claim to be Christian deny Jesus by gloating at the deaths of gays and call for more such “executions.” At least no one hiding in the bathroom cared about the birth gender of the body they were hiding behind. And even gay-hating Chic Fil-A opened on Sunday in Orlando to offer food and water to those gathered for the giving and receiving of comfort. In this stew of horror and despair, where do we find hope?

Hope. Some years ago in the Christian Century magazine was a little squib about a family with three daughters. They named them Faith, Hope, and Mildred. The title of the piece was “Anti-climax department.” But I've been thinking about it. Maybe it wasn't the audacity of tinkering with what is possibly the most famous verse of the New Testament.¹ Maybe the parents realized that if you have hope, anything afterwards is an anti-climax. So why not Mildred?

But what about hope? Hope is not just a wish, not just a likelihood of a desired outcome. I wish there would be no more shootings, but I hope we will learn to listen to each other. Hope runs deeper than optimism. Hope, I believe, is that sense of the possibility of goodness. Hope is what enables us to go on when things are tough, when we are sad or defeated or frightened.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:13: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (NRSV)

Goethe wrote that “Reality has but one shape. Hope is many shaped.”² What are the shapes of hope for me? The first is human connection. I have been fortunate to have not been directly affected by these large public horrors, but like everyone else I have had my experiences of pain and despair. When my life fell apart in 1976, when I couldn’t imagine how I was going to survive as a single parent with two small children and a resume that featured two years as a Latin teacher, I found myself literally counting my blessings – numbering friends and family and allies and mentors, people who would stand next to me and not stab me in the back. It was very reassuring to me to know that I was connected, not isolated.

I met a professor at a party who causally held out to me the hope of a plan – I could get an MBA he said, (I’d never heard of an MBA) and in two years I could step into a job that would enable me to support myself well, to do good work, to make a new life for myself and my children. Just that conversation, that slight and tenuous human connection, gave me hope. The possibilities in that hope gave me new energy, a renewed direction and purpose. It all came together. After starting in business school, I went back to church, back to Unitarian Universalism, where I had once found such strong bonds of care and connection. And those bonds reformed and, through a long and meandering path, to this day here with you.

These days, when my life is calm and satisfying, the hope I draw from my sense of connection it is less stark, less desperate, less about my life, but deeper and wider. One evening in Fayetteville, I attended the annual Women’s History banquet, where each year a broad array of women’s organizations honor four Arkansas women who have made a difference. Just being in that room with two or three hundred supporters and a small group of honorees filled me with hope. To hear the stories of accomplishment – literacy programs, environmental efforts, drug court – they gave me hope for the future of Northwest Arkansas. To see those efforts honored gave me hope for the continued liberation of women, hope for my granddaughters’ futures. And when I realized that of the fifty women honored over ten years, five were associated with the UU congregation, it made me proud, yes, but also hopeful, hopeful for the future of our splendid young people who have such examples before them, such mentors and advisors, such human connection.

One of the honorees, Ann Wiggins, told about her childhood Sunday School class at First Baptist Church. The teacher held up a paper chain, and snipped it, saying a church is only as strong as its weakest link. Many years later, Ms. Wiggins, with UU Eunice Noland, showed, that, no, a church, or any organization can be as strong as its strongest link. Together they took on a local project, formed the Friends of Lake Wedington, a once lovely but now neglected swimming facility, rescued facilities from the bulldozers, and then tackled the IRS – not only did they get 501(c)(3) status (figuring it out from a book) but they got it applied retroactively. Two strong women, connected with each other and with the community, and with us. Hope. We can find it in our human connection.

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Opinions on the World, Mankind, Literature, Science, and Art*, tr. Otto. Wenckstern, p. 55

II. Dave

To be honest, I have not been feeling very hopeful lately. If I mention the initials DT, you'll probably know where I'm coming from. Or Orlando. Or Syria. Fred Muir, in this morning's responsive reading,³ tells us to look for hope within ourselves, but at times we just can't find hope within ourselves. When that happens, we have to look for hope within others. We need help from our friends to restore our hope.

Unitarian Universalism, in my opinion, is a religion of hope. It's a religion of hope, but not easy hope, not superficial hope. I'm talking about hope here at a fundamental level, hope at the core.

As Unitarian Universalists, we stand at the gates of hope, not at St. Peter's gates. Our gates are firmly set in this world, not the next one. We have a message of salvation, not a message of fear.

What is our message of hope? What is our saving message for today? There is no single, authoritative Unitarian Universalist answer. Indeed, there is no single, authoritative Dave Hunter answer. But this morning I would like to share with you three statements that I find in Unitarian Universalism, three theses that for me open up the gates of hope.

- First, reason and faith are compatible;
- Second, God loves you, and
- Third, you are not alone.

Reason and faith are compatible. That's a familiar idea among Unitarian Universalists. Reason and faith are compatible; they can coexist. We do not have to set aside our critical faculties to be UUs. We affirm the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." Among the sources of our living tradition are "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science." We do not have an official creed, let alone a creed that has some fairly implausible assertions. We are not afraid that the findings of science will shake our faith. We can, at least most of the time, sing our hymns without censoring the words.

Reason and faith are compatible. But I would not claim that reason by itself is enough. It's not. My second statement is that God loves you. God loves you. For those of us who reject the idea of God, or don't find "God" a useful concept, or can't put "God" and "love" in the same sentence, this idea will be a stretch. I certainly do not mean it as an empirical statement, nor can I produce a philosophical argument in support of it. What I have in mind is an attitude, actually, quite an implausible attitude, given the state of the world, that there is reason for hope, an attitude that inspires us to proclaim, against all evidence, that the universe is a friendly place.

³ Fredric John Muir, "Hope," in *Heretics' Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals* (2001).

And the way that we can show that God loves us, that God loves humanity, is by *our* loving humanity, by our working together to bless the world, by our working together to bring about what some would call the kingdom of God here on earth. God loves you. We are God's hands; it is up to us.

This approach comes from Socrates. As my ancient philosophy teacher at Princeton University, Gregory Vlastos, explained, piety, according to Socrates, consists of our doing on God's behalf, in assistance to God, the work that God wants done but cannot do without us.⁴ The current word for piety is spirituality. To be spiritual, I would contend, is to do God's work on earth.

In this effort, to go on to my third statement, you are not alone; we are not alone. We deepen our faith as members of a religious community. We work together to bless the world, as members of a religious community. We celebrate with each other in times of joy. We support each other in times of sorrow. We find hope in each other. We need one another, and we have one another.

You are not alone. If you move to Arkansas or Wisconsin, a Unitarian Universalist congregation will be there waiting for you. There are hundreds of UU congregations scattered across our nation, with their doors open to welcome you.

You are not alone. You are part of a tradition that goes back to the formative years of our nation. You are part of a tradition that has deep roots in the Radical Reformation in Europe. You are part of a tradition that can trace its origins to leaders of the early Christian church who were branded heretics for their unitarian and universalist ideas.⁵

You are not alone. You can have faith that a hundred year from now, two hundred years from now, our spiritual descendants will remember us, they will appreciate our common heritage and values, they will consider themselves part of the same religious movement. Their religion may be as different from ours as ours is from that of William Ellery Channing, but we will be connected together. We are not alone.

To sum up—

- Reason and faith are compatible;
- God loves you, and
- You are not alone.

⁴ See Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991), pp. 173-78.

⁵ Arius and Origen.

That is our saving message, or at least one version of it. But our message should be our starting point, not our ending point. We are standing at the gates of hope. But we don't just stand there. We welcome people in, inviting them to come through the gates to share our hope.

III. Kerry

Dave offers us the hopeful message of Unitarian Universalism. I also have a theological statement embedded in the second element in my trinity of hope shapes: the hard won realization that we don't have to be perfect – more to the point that I don't have to be perfect. Our Christian neighbors have a name for this – grace, they call it. I don't want to get all tangled up in definitions of grace, of prevenient grace and justification and sanctification. I don't have theories or taxonomies of grace, just the idea that we are all imperfect, wounded beings, yet we have much to offer each other. And we never know when our flaws and failings may make us more accessible to someone who needs us. As a pastor, I have found myself talking with recently divorced women. I remembered those days in my own life, and asked an odd question: “Do you find that you have been feeling cold all this winter?” I had had to wrap myself in a mohair blanket all that winter, and I wondered if it was just me or a more widespread phenomenon. Often they look at me with recognition and wonder. Oh, yes, they knew about being cold under the stress of separation. My little weakness made for a connection.

Or consider imperfection on a grander scale, the scale of evolution. Biologist Lewis Thomas points out that evolution happens because genes are self replicating – but imperfectly so. Little flaws may turn out to be more stable and useful, and these changes persist.

In an essay called "The Wonderful Mistake," Thomas writes about DNA and its almost perfect capacity for self replication – the source of everything for us. He writes:

The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute, we would still be anaerobic bacteria, and there would be no music. Viewed individually, one by one, each of the mutations that have brought us along represents a random, totally spontaneous accident, but it is no accident at all that the mutations occur; the molecule of DNA was ordained from the beginning to make small mistakes. . . .⁶

Whether you call it the grace of a forgiving and merciful God or whether you see only the inexorable march of evolutionary chance, there is built into the universe some kindliness, some room for failure, some path by which what seems like a mistake may become an adventure. I find comfort and hope in the idea that we don't have to be perfect.

⁶ Lewis Thomas, *The Medusa and the Snail*, pp. 28-29.

IV. Dave

I could be wrong on this, but it seems to me that the greatest threat to human civilization today is global warming – not terrorism, not nuclear misadventure, not the Zika virus, not some errant comet, not fiscal melt down, but global warming. But I have hope that we will not be defeated by global warming.

Evolution, of course, will respond to global warming, but not necessarily in a way that preserves humanity's preeminence, or even our survival. I wish I could say that human wisdom, foresight, sense of responsibility, and common sense will come to our rescue, but for now I'll put my hope in human technology. I have no scientific or technological knowledge or expertise, but a number of advances that I've read about or heard about give me hope.

A few years ago, back when Kerry and I served the UU congregation in Fayetteville, Arkansas, I was on the University of Arkansas campus, heading for a meeting in the Student Union. All of a sudden I was passed by a young man traveling by skate board. He was highly skilled and he was fast. He turned left about fifty feet ahead of me, following the wheel chair route, and headed south. He was soon out of sight. The technology was simple, but he was going three or four times as fast as I was, and the only carbon he added to the environment was the carbon dioxide that he exhaled.

Personally, I don't plan to take up skate boarding, but consider the possibilities. We can obtain energy from the wind, the sun, the tides, the waves, from deep inside the earth. We can collect solar energy with parabolic mirrors in the Sahara Desert, to provide electricity for Africa and Europe. On a smaller scale, we can capture the extra energy used in walking. You have to wear a special knee brace. Vibrations caused by vehicles crossing bridges can be converted into electricity, as can raindrops, if they fall on the right surface.

And here's the best one of all. The vibrations that your heart makes provide enough energy – energy that can be converted into electricity – to power a pacemaker. You don't have to change batteries any more. Isn't that good news! I realize that not all of you are as interested in pacemakers as I am, but changing the battery requires surgery.⁷

It's now possible – at least in California, and probably elsewhere – to build houses that produce as much energy as they use, over the course of a year. Involved are, for example, rooftop solar panels, smart thermostats, advanced water heaters, spray foam insulation, and dual

⁷ See, for example, Time Magazine, March 17, 2008, p. 46; March 24, 2008, pp. 40, 50; New York Times Magazine, Dec. 9, 2007, pp. 57-58; NPR, All Things Considered, March 25, 2008; Colbert Report, March 31, 2008; Environmental Defense Fund, newsletter, April 2008.

pane windows.⁸ And think how much energy we could save if we could be content with houses the size they were fifty years ago.

Science Friday reported a week ago Friday that by combining advanced catalysts with engineered bacteria, researchers have developed a “bionic leaf” that can produce hydrocarbon fuels from solar energy, water, and carbon dioxide—and it can do it ten times more efficiently than natural photosynthesis.⁹

And that same day the New York Times reported on progress on storing carbon dioxide underground, keeping it out of the atmosphere. The new process involves combining the CO₂ with water – ocean water will do – and the calcium from porous volcanic basaltic rock to form calcite, a stone that will hold the CO₂ permanently.¹⁰

Of course, faith in technology really means faith in the ability and willingness of men and women to create the technology. People are the real key. And this gives me hope. Governments have begun to take global warming seriously. Corporations now see opportunities for profit in providing the goods and services needed to keep the earth livable.¹¹

⁸ Diane Cardwell, “Taking Aim at Free Energy,” New York Times, June 4, 2016, p. B1.

⁹ Science Friday, June 10, 2016.

¹⁰ Henry Fountain, “Project in Iceland for Storing Carbon Shows Promise,” New York Times, June 10, 2016, p. A6.

¹¹ Here’s what economist Paul Krugman wrote in his New York Times column earlier this month:

On climate: Remember claims by climate denialists that global warming had paused, that temperatures hadn’t risen since 1998? That was always a garbage argument, but in any case it has now been blown away by a series of new temperature records and a proliferation of other indicators that, taken together, tell a terrifying story of looming disaster.

At the same time, however, rapid technological progress in renewable energy is making nonsense — or maybe I should say, further nonsense — of another bad argument against climate action, the claim that nothing can be done about greenhouse gas emissions without crippling the economy. Solar and wind power are getting cheaper each year, and growing quickly even without much in the way of incentives to switch away from fossil fuels. Provide those incentives, and an energy revolution would be just around the corner.

So we’re in a state where terrible things are in prospect, but can be avoided with fairly modest, politically feasible steps. You may want a revolution, but we don’t need

Religious groups have a major role to play. Unitarian Universalists, both at the national level and here in Pennsylvania are actively involved. And religious groups that we don't always view as our natural allies have begun to see the light as well. Increasingly, Evangelical Protestants are becoming committed to preserving rather than plundering the beautiful earth that God has entrusted into our care. We are God's stewards, they would say – we no longer have license to plunder the earth.

And if all else fails in our battle for survival, the New York Times reported a week ago today that a couple of astronomers now argue that we have good reason to believe that in the course of cosmic history a trillion civilizations have appeared.¹² It's not all up to us.

V. Kerry

Dave finds a practical hope for the world in technological creativity. Quite independently, the third shape in of hope for me is the nameless conviction that creativity is deeply embedded in the universe. Former fundamentalist Michael Dowd and his scientist wife Connie Barlow travel around promoting evolution. He talked about this when he was at the UU congregation in Fayetteville. He told us that at every level of analysis, from the most basic building blocks of physical reality – quarks, charmed or colored, top or bottom, or whatever lies beyond our understanding of quarks through every level and layer like a set of Russian matrioshka dolls, atoms and molecules and stars and galaxies, cells and organisms and persons and brains and societies, that creativity bubbles up and through and out and beyond. Dowd declared this and claimed it as accepted scientific fact, but he didn't give us evidence or recount the history of the idea or its acceptance, and I am not capable of evaluating it as science. But the idea of that inherent fecundity, of boundless creativity, means hope to me, hope that life will always arise and evolve and persist, that justice and compassion and love will somehow arise and be valued and ultimately prevail – I am convinced of it and I find hope in it. How do I know? It came to me in a dream at a time of despair in my life, a dream that in response to a seminary assignment, I transformed into a parable. Here is the parable:

one to save the planet. Right now all it would take is for America to implement the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan and other actions — which don't even require new legislation, just a Supreme Court that won't stand in their way — to let the U.S. continue the role it took in last year's Paris agreement, guiding the world as a whole toward sharp reductions in emissions. [Paul Krugman, "The Id That Ate the Planet," New York Times, June 3, 2016, page A23]

¹² Adam Frank, "Yes, There Have Been Aliens," New York Times, June 12, 2016, p. Review 10. Frank's collaborator is Woodruff Sullivan.

The Woman and the Potted Plant

There was a woman whose household was in disorder. Everything was lost or misused or broken. Nothing was in its proper place. The woman despaired for herself and her children.

One day, the woman remembered that she had left a potted plant in a closet for months. Believing the neglected plant to be dead, she hastened to the closet to dispose of it. She opened the door, climbed a ladder to the high shelf and reached into the darkness to draw forth the plant.

When she pulled out the plant, behold, it was not dead! Not only was the plant still alive, but it was blooming. The woman rejoiced and took pleasure in the luxuriant pink blossoms. She set out the plant on a table near the window, watered it tenderly, and called her children to come and admire it. Its beauty and vigor nourished in her the energy and hope she needed to restore order to her household. If that woman's plant could thrive neglected in a closet, how much more will yours bloom when you set it out in the sunlight of the universal creativity.

So there you have it. Hope comes in many shapes. It may come when we least expect it. Hope rings through the ages like an unspoken promise. May you find hope in the shapes that will come to fruition in your life, and may you be the nurture of hope in the lives of others.

Amen, shalom, and blessed be.