

Thunderous Wings/Wondrous Things:

The Persistence of Hope

**Rev. Kerry Mueller
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg
March 31, 2013 Easter**

It was years ago that I first read the article from the *New York Times*, and I loved it then as now, but it was the wonderful accompanying picture that caught my attention. It showed a skyful of large birds, their motion blurring the photograph. The caption was, "Thunderous Wings." But reading quickly, I dislexically turned it into "Wondrous Things." "Oh," I said, "There's an Easter sermon in that," and I quickly turned the page to read the article.

The migration of the sandhill cranes is a wondrous thing indeed. Each year some half a million cranes herald the coming of spring around the town of Kearney, Nebraska. They spend a month on the Platte River, a way station on their long migration from Mexico and south Texas to their summer breeding grounds in the Arctic, in Alaska, Canada and as far as Siberia. On the Platte, they recover from the 600 mile flight they have just made -- nonstop. They arrive exhausted, in need of food and water. There they rest and eat for a month, taking on fuel for the next leg of the journey. When they arrive, the Arctic will still be in the grip of winter. There will be no food for a while. In Nebraska, where spring is just beginning, each bird will eat enough grubs and snails and corn from the stubbled fields to gain a pound -- some 20% of a crane's body weight.

The cranes are amazing birds. They are one of the oldest species of bird on earth. The fossil record shows that they have been coming to Nebraska for 9 million years. As they arrive, the sky is black with their bodies. An article in the *Washington Post* put it this way:

Above the horizon, thin black chevrons appear and wing toward the Platte, advance scouts of mighty flocks of sandhill cranes flying in ragged V-shaped squadrons. Notoriously skittish, the tall, mouse-gray birds with bald red crowns and 6-foot wingspans nervously ride the currents above the river before flaring their wings and settling onto the north bank.

Within half an hour tens of thousands of sandhills have gathered on the river shallows, filling the night air with their haunting cries, a high-pitched guttural warble reminiscent of a loon's call. Among a hushed group of human observers huddled in a riverfront blind, the reaction to the raucous symphony is almost universal: This is what the world must have sounded like millions of years ago. (3/26/94)

What is it that has kept the cranes coming back here, year after year, generation after generation, for 9 million years? In part, it is because conditions along the Platte River have been perfect. Indeed, this is the only perfect resting place along their migration route.

Sandhills require a broad river, five hundred feet from side to side. They need the banks to be clear of brush, so they can get a good view of eagles or any other predators. The swift spring currents of snow-melt have kept the banks scoured of seedlings and brush. The cranes like to sleep standing in shallow water. You may recall having heard of the Platte being described by pioneers as "a mile wide and an inch deep." Perfect for cranes. During the day they

eat: insects, snakes, lizards, berries and grain. The meadows in the neighborhood provide all of these, in abundance.

But at another level, it is **hope** that keeps the cranes flying from Mexico to the rest stop in Nebraska and on to their breeding grounds in the Arctic. The sandhill cranes yearly leap into the air in their thousands, embarking on a long and difficult flight, trusting, without certain knowledge, that at the end they will again find the places where they can mate and raise their babies.

As is my custom, I looked up the definition and history of the word hope. We often think of hope as a kind of super wish, a wish made with the expectation of fulfillment. Indeed, this is the first definition given by the *American Heritage Dictionary*. But there is also an archaic sense of hope – to have trust or confidence. This is the religious meaning of the word hope: to have a confidence that the world makes sense, to trust that there is always the possibility of good, even when there is no obvious good in sight. As G. K. Chesterton put it, "Hope means expectancy, even when things are otherwise hopeless." Hope is the engine, the energy that keeps us going, that helps us to find a way, even when there is no way.

Then, out of curiosity, I looked a little further back into the history of the word hope. And as so often happens with the ancient Indo-European roots, the most sublime and abstract of words in English can be derived from a very concrete metaphor in our ancestral language. Hope comes from a word that means basically "bent" or "curved." It is related to the word "hop," to leap by first bending the legs. Hope truly is a leap of faith. And as the cranes bend their legs to take off into the sky, they demonstrate to us a leap of hope.

In the children's story this morning¹, we heard about a paper crane that comes to life and brings hope to a failing restaurant by dancing with the people. Dance is certainly central to the social life of real cranes. One bird begins, by leaping in the air, flapping wings and bowing. He is ignored at first, and settles down, but soon begins again. Eventually the other bird joins in. They leap stiffly, bouncing with head held back and neck arched. One leaps over the other. They "crane" their necks. This dance is surely a courtship display, but it is also more than that. The immature birds dance from what seems to be sheer exuberance. It is believed that the dance is a bonding ritual for mated pairs. Cranes mate for life and dance year round with their partners. I even read some speculation that it was cranes who first inspired humanity to dance.

The tenacious hope and vitality of the cranes can be seen in their graceful dance, and even in a certain feisty panache. An article in Harper's magazine describes ornithologists as they captured and banded a young white naped crane in Mongolia. The crane was not quite old enough to fly, but it almost succeeded in *outrunning* the chasing car. Eventually, the crane was caught and banded, without harm to itself -- or to the ornithologists. But

¹*The Paper Crane*, by Molly Bang.

when finally it was released, the fierce young creature did not flee, but turned around and advanced upon Go Fujita, [one of the ornithologists] then fluttered upwards pecking towards his face. Not until it drove him back did the young crane turn away, and in no great hurry, stalk away across the plain, crossly shuffling its feathers, shaking the bright green ring around its leg.

The lesson of the sandhills is the persistence of hope. We humans lack the literal thunderous wings of the cranes, but we too must persistently make that leap into the sky. I had a wonderful conversation years ago with a lady of 96 years. She used to be a teacher, and later an elementary school principal. At the time we talked, she was somewhat disabled physically, but her mind was still keen. Actually, she complained that she had slowed down in recent years. If her description was accurate, I would have hated to be called into the principal's office on her watch. I saw a clear judgment and a sharp tongue. She could tell you who on the nursing home staff did a good job, and who didn't. And she'd tell you that most of them do; most of them care, most of the time. I once said to her, "I bet no kid ever sassed you twice." "No kid ever sassed me once," she replied without missing a beat. But I believe this was not from fear. It was her kindness and patience and willingness to always look for the good in each child that kept her school orderly even in difficult times. She led her school through integration in Baltimore without incident, by the force of her character and her commitment to justice. This lady had no relatives close by who were able to represent her on the nursing home's family council -- so she attended those meetings herself. She also kept up with the news. I was telling her about doing research on the cranes. "Oh yes", she said, "I saw them on the news yesterday." It was she who first told me about the 9 million years, a fact I later confirmed in library research. This lady represents the persistence of hope, a lifetime of seeking and expecting the best of people, a hope not always fulfilled, but always renewed.

A member of a congregation in Maryland provided another embodiment of enduring hope. Sy enjoyed painting in his youth. Like many people, he dropped such frivolity in favor of work and raising a family. But in his late sixties, he took up the brush again, produced amazing pictures large and bright and happy. He had a show at the National Institute of Health, and was carried by a Georgetown gallery. Sy reminded me of how his paintings mean hope to him. "I painted when I was young, and I painted again when I lost my business, and I painted when I had my stroke." Sy's paintings are full of life, crammed with people, and bustling with activity. They show in very concrete form his love of humanity and the joy overflowing his life, even in hard times. It didn't take much editing for me to turn his words into something that sounds very biblical: "And now abideth joy, creativity and hope." And the greatest of these is hope.

This of course is the season of hope. What a pleasure it is to see the redbuds blossoming, the leaves swelling on the trees. What a blessed renewal of earth, and of our hearts. It is no accident that both Easter and Passover are celebrated in the spring. Easter is, of course, often a difficult matter for Unitarian Universalist congregations. For many of us, the holiday is part of our family tradition, but we no longer have a literal belief in the Easter story, if ever we did. Even those among us who embrace Christianity are usually more concerned with the teachings

and life of Jesus than with the mythos of a supernatural being whose birth and death were unusual. For others, the whole idea is outside of our experience. But there is a powerful metaphor in Easter. Christianity sees the Christ as God with us and for us, as divinity choosing to enter the world in a physical way. This one person brings a renewal of hope into the world. He lives for 33 years, and offers many radical teachings, teachings that could lay the foundation for a reign of godliness, a reign that is available to all, within us, near at hand. Humanity, however, is not ready to implement this vision. He dies for his teachings, in a particularly terrible way. But his death is not final. On the third day, he is resurrected. He leaves hope in the world. It is a powerful story.

Nearly three years in a Methodist seminary did not make a Christian of me, but they gave me an appreciation of this story. Unlike my Christian classmates, I do not see this as the only story of divinity in the world, or even as the central story. I see divinity as being inherently in the world, manifest in many persons, in many times and places. These persons do not live forever; they are not resurrected from the grave. Often we kill them. We kill them -- Gandhi, Martin Luther King, peacemakers Yitzak Rabin and Anwar Sadat, and thousands of unnamed and unremembered women burned at the stake for witchcraft. But even when they die, hope does not leave the world. Just as with the paper crane, the bird flies away, but the story remains. The people continue to take comfort and joy from it. They continue to pattern their lives after the person who is an example of hope. New bearers of hope appear. Hope persists.

I think Unitarian Universalists have a somewhat easier time with Passover. Yes, in the Passover story, there are miracles and the spectacular contest of magic between Moses and the Egyptians. Nevertheless, the supernatural seems somehow less central than in the Easter story. At Pesach, we see hope in the world, not in the form of a single divine person, but in the struggle of a whole people to be free. It is a story of liberation, of God taking sides with the poor and the oppressed, the theme of the seder. The Hebrews gain their freedom, with all the risks and hardships of freedom. The people of the Passover story embark upon a journey, a journey not of certainty, but of hope.

We are still on that journey today. Despite living in the most prosperous and privileged country in the world at the most developed time of human history, the uncertainties of climate and governance and finance and violence have taught us in a new way that life is uncertain and precious. We have a renewed appreciation of the need to live in hope and compassion. But we are still often mired in complacency. We enjoy a life of freedom, but what do we do with it? All too often we make war upon one another or perpetuate injustice on other people. Our world is fragile. Anywhere we look, we might see evidence of loss and destruction of the interdependent web, the web of life upon which we and all species depend. The cranes offer us a warning.

Even as a child, I remember first hearing about an endangered species, the whooping cranes, whose numbers hovered for years around 15. Their outlook is still uncertain, but with the help of protection laws and breeding programs, and the introduction of an Eastern flock – whose migration is guided by ultralight aircraft – according to the most recent census information I

could find, there are now just under 600 whooping cranes. The totally wild western flock of whooping cranes shared the Platte rest station with the sandhill cranes.

The sandhills number hundreds of thousands – but they too face uncertainty. It is said that as they migrate north, they live on the edge of winter. They may also be skirting the edge of existence. Their species is not officially endangered, but the river upon which they depend for rest and recuperation is in trouble. The water of the Platte is used for irrigation, for hydroelectric power, and for thirsty human cities. The flow is now down less than a third of its original volume. In many places, the river has narrowed, and the slower current has allowed trees to grow along the water's edge. Developments have obscured the clear view of the banks that cranes need. Sandbars have become wooded islands, which might harbor unseen predators. Where once the sandhills roosted along 200 miles of river, they now find only about 60 miles suitable. That crowding makes them vulnerable to disease, or a sudden disaster like a chemical spill. The sandhill cranes are at risk, and their risk is just one example of environmental degradation. Conservationists are working to change the way in which the dams are operated, to preserve and improve the river habitat for the cranes and fish and other species. They are opposed by farmers and other traditional users of the Platte's water.

How do we maintain hope in a world full of suffering, a world in which human beings all too often treat each other badly and in which our activities are a threat to the rest of the ecosystem? In churches across the country this morning, Christians are being told that the resurrection of Christ offers them the hope of salvation. Where do we Unitarian Universalists find the hope that we will ultimately heal ourselves and the world? To what source of confidence will we turn? Unitarian Universalism has a deep wellspring of optimism about human nature. We know that humanity has perpetrated many evils. We might even call ourselves sinners if we were given to using such traditional language. But we also have what UU theologian James Luther Adams calls an "ultimate optimism." We are in some good company. The Dalai Lama shares our ultimate optimism. He spoke several years ago during a visit to Israel, in the midst of turmoil about the hatred and violence that threatens the peace process there. He said that inside each person there is "a seed of human compassion. I still believe that human nature is basically good and benevolent. If we let the negative overpower us, we will only be faced with destruction."

But while I agree with the Dalai Lama's assessment, we cannot rely on optimism by itself. Hope must be persistent, as persistent for us as for the cranes. We must use it as the energy that fuels our action. In an interview in *Parade* magazine some years ago, Steven Spielberg talked about hope. He is speaking in the context of *Schindler's List*, and about human suffering, but his words apply to the whole interdependent web. The interviewer speaks first.

Given the suffering of this century -- the bloodiest in history, with the Holocaust and now "ethnic cleansing" -- and given the violence in our own American towns, I asked if he saw much hope.

"I've always been very hopeful," Spielberg replied, "which I guess isn't strange coming from me. I don't want to call myself an optimist. I want to say I've always been full of hope. I've never lost that. I have a lot of hope for this country and for the entire world in fixing itself."

But we just can't sit back and be inactive and simply hope things are going to turn out all right for our children and their grandchildren," he continued. "We all have to be more active in our groups, communities, religions, in affecting world opinion. We can't just sit by and hope the guns and drugs will go away. We have a responsibility. We have a duty to voice our opinion, and to work to fix the world."
(Parade, 3/37/94)

Spielberg expresses his hope in movie making. President Obama has been emblematic of hope, in the very fact of his election and reelection in a world still poisoned with racism. The shift in public opinion – even among Conservatives – towards Marriage Equality for same sex couples is a hopeful sign. As Unitarian Universalists, we have many options for living out the hope that is inherent in our faith. Being part of a religious community leverages our energy and our resources. Together we can do things we could not accomplish alone. Our faith calls us, and enables us to persist in the endeavors of hope, even when things seem bleak. In Nebraska, Sil Pembleton speak about the cranes' annual departure:

"Ed and I only saw them leave one time," said Sil Pembleton. "They were rising and spiraling, just going in circles, higher and higher. Then, with this great hoorah, they went up and were gone. It felt like they'd ripped out my heart and taken it with them."

The Pembletons stood in the cornfield stubble, tears running down their cheeks. Of joy. And the melancholy that comes when something wonderful leaves. (New York Times, 3/21/93)

The cranes leave Nebraska every year. But they are not gone forever. They have gone on to the Arctic tundra to breed yet another generation. They leave, taking with them the heartstopping beauty of their thunderous wings. But they leave with us that wondrous thing, the embodiment hope. The cranes come and go, and come and go again, for generations upon generations, for 9 million years, and hope persists.

In recent weeks I have felt surges of that great leaping hope of the cranes taking off into the sky. I know that not all the cranes will survive and thrive, and not all my hopes will be fulfilled. I know about the environmental threats to the cranes and the often poisoned political atmosphere of Congress and culture, but still I feel that surge. In the face of intransigence from the NRA, thousands of ordinary people continue to demand meaningful gun reform, a commitment to a reduction of violence on our streets. More thousands have camped out before the Supreme Court, changed their Facebook profile pictures and otherwise made public their

commitment to equality for all, embodied now by marriage equality, so that same sex couples will have the same right to marry as others. One way or another, sooner I think rather than later, it will come. And among our Roman Catholic neighbors, a new pope has embodied hope in the form of humility and a mindfulness of the needs of the poor. On Thursday, Francis knelt and washed the feet of young prisoners, one a Muslim. Will everything change? No, surely not. Will be disappointed. Yes, surely sometimes. But hope, that leap of faith. Hope persists.

May hope persist for us as well this Easter morning. May the annual resurrection of the cranes fill us with energy of hope to heal the wounds of the planet and of our own species. And may we always have the faith to join the sandhill cranes in their tenacious and lovely dance of hope. Amen, shalom, salaam, and Blessed Be.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Kenworthy, Ken Washington Post. "Cranes, Rivers and Dams: a Change in Course," 3/26/94.
- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Third Edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992.
- Matthiessen, Peter "Alighting Upon the Daurian Steppe: A Mongolian journey in search of the white-naped crane." Harper's Magazine, June 1993.
- McNulty, Faith The Whooping Crane: The bird that defies extinction. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1966.
- Rader, Dotson "We Can't Just Sit Back and Hope," *Parade*, 3/27/94.
- Raver, Anne New York Times. "Beside a River's Troubled Waters, These Harbingers of Spring Dance On." 3/21/93. (Also picture on first page, "Thunderous Wings Herald a Change of Seasons")
- Terres, John K. The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.
- Watkins, Calvin The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985

Beside a River's Troubled Waters, These Harbingers of Spring Dance On

by Anne Raver NYT March 21, 1997

Kearney, Nebraska

It's spring. The sun crossed the Equator yesterday.

...

Nebraskans know it's spring because the sandhill cranes are back. Big gray birds with six-foot wingspans and long, skinny legs held out in the air like tuning forks. They started returning to the Big Bend of the Platte River a couple of weeks ago, swooping in by the tens of thousands, blackening the skies and filling the air with strange high cries.

From a distance, you would think it was a crowd gone wild over a home run. But as the birds fly overhead, the beat of their powerful wings could be thunder. Or the thumping of your own excited heart. Their honks and shrill cries and low guttural purrs mix in a joyous din that draws some ancient music up out of the soul.

"I love that sound," said Margaret Triplett, who owns a 200-acre farm along the Platte. "When it's gone, you feel a little lost for a few days."