

*Beyond Hope to Commitment* by Rev. Doug McCusker

Years ago, in my previous career as a Systems Engineer, I was giving a presentation at a quarterly project review. I was going on and on about the benefits of my project, selling it with hopeful optimism and rosy results. The big boss who was listening to the presentation stopped me right there in front of a roomful of peers and said, "Hope is not a course of action, show me the plan." I'll never forget that stinging rebuke, partly because I was embarrassed, and mostly because he was right. Hope is only part of any project; a necessary step toward the future, but without a commitment to action it's like a one hand clap. I can understand the boss' impatience. He wasn't buying into the hope unless he could see that I truly believed in my project; that I had thought it through enough to develop an achievable plan.

Two weeks ago, I talked about wanting what we have, both the good stuff and the bad, and about the difference between acceptance and resignation. When things are bleak, what St. John of the Cross described as the dark night of the soul, we have the choice to accept our situation with an openness to learn from the stern teacher of life. Or, we can resign ourselves that nothing will change. That we are victims of a cruel universe. How we choose to respond is within our control. And believe me, those are some of the hardest decisions we ever have to make. Time seems to stand still when we are going through the valley of despair. It is hard to imagine that "this too shall pass" when our life is turned upside down. And yet, acceptance is our only way out. It is the stillness that enables us to be aware of our suffering; to feel our feet on the ground and our place within humanity.

For the last 13 months, I have been visiting the Coffeewood Correctional Center in Mitchells, VA as a volunteer at least once a month. This is a medium security State Prison about an hour away from here. Talk about a place of despair. In the words of Todd Landeck, one of the inmates that I visit: "Prisons, in addition to being wretched, overpopulated warehouses of human suffering, also are environments designed to subjugate and stifle individuality, creativity, and ideas. Inmates are conditioned to believe they lack any real potential, and those inmates who refuse to accept this are discouraged by nearly insurmountable obstacles placed between them and their dreams by prison officials, probation/parole officers, outdated laws that strip them of their civil rights, and a public who is not always ready to accept them back into their communities."

I have been working with an amazing group of about 25 male prisoners who formed a Humanist Group in the summer of 2016. They fought an uphill battle within the predominantly evangelical Christian environment. They were met with many roadblocks both bureaucratic and discriminatory, but they persevered and prevailed. They filled out tons of paperwork, pled their case, and at one point, acquired the services of outside lawyers to make sure that they were not discriminated against. They sent me several letters inviting me to come help them get started. I ignored them for a while, but eventually, they won me over.

I help them study what it means to be a humanist in this world, how they can open their theological lens to incorporate other spiritual teachings, and how they can apply those lessons in prison and out in society when they return. Many of them have been incarcerated for over a decade and a few are serving life terms. And yet, their

spirit has not been broken. The group has become a life-line for them. A place where they can share their experiences, expand their minds and support each other as a community of spiritual seekers. Most inmates spend their time waiting for their eventual release. The Humanist group has moved beyond waiting to preparing and practicing what it means to be a contributing member of society.

Today marks the beginning of Advent, the time when our ancestors waited for the end of darkness and the beginning of light. In this lunar cycle the days grow ever short while darkness hits its zenith. It is a time of waiting and preparation for an inevitable change that we anticipate with open hearts and quiet assuredness. It is a time of hope that no matter how terrible things can be, there will be brighter days ahead; and that just as surely as the world turns, the forces of peace and love will transform evil and oppression into justice and freedom.

This is a universal longing that energizes all the religious and wisdom traditions that Unitarian Universalists count as sources of our prophetic vision of Beloved Community. Our Judeo-Christian roots provide a spiritual practice of waiting for a Messiah who will be sent by God to deliver his people from suffering and oppression. Christians believe that the Messiah came once, and they await his return to finish the task of establishing God's kingdom on earth. Jewish people are still waiting for God to fulfill the promise of a Messiah who will redeem the house of David with a benevolent reign of peace and justice.

Our humanist roots teach us that humanity holds the keys to both oppression and justice. As rational beings we have a better chance to flourish as a unified people than as adversaries over scarce resources. This is an evolving consciousness that moves us toward a kinship on earth that one day will reject devastating wars and brutality.

All these teachings remind us that despair, while a legitimate emotional response, is not an ultimate answer of truth and meaning. Even in the dark night of our soul we plant the seeds for renewal. We remember the importance of not turning away even when suffering feels so heavy and unbearable. In this place we are made to wait, unknowing, with only hope to hold on to.

Last November, after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, many people were stunned. I'll never forget the night a couple of days later when about 50 people came together here in this sanctuary to process their numbness. Some talked about how hard it was just to show up in the presence of others. What I saw that night was the gradual acceptance of something no one wanted, but which we all realized was real. Hearing ourselves and others talk about how we felt, what we feared might happen and what we can do about those feelings served as the crack, however small, that let a glimmer of light in. It wasn't exactly hope at that time, but it was a recognition of our agency and a rejection of our powerlessness.

We came back together in a similar gathering right after the Women's March on DC the day after the inauguration. This time, there was hope. Real hope created by getting up from the fetal position and putting one step in front of the other. Real hope by being part of a mass resistance movement. People started talking about all kinds of different courses of action that now seemed possible. Nothing much had actually changed, Trump was still the President, but something had changed inside each and every one of us. People who had never run for political office started making plans to

throw their names in the ring. Others started or joined political action groups and others started lobbying their representatives.

It's been a year now since Trump won and many of our fears have come to pass. The nationalist right and Neo-Nazis are emboldened by Trump's white supremacy signals. Undocumented immigrants are being apprehended and deported at an accelerated pace. Refugees from war torn countries have been turned away. Climate change deniers are running federal agencies. Science, public education, journalism and diplomacy are being attacked. Facts and truth are being distorted. The bully pulpit is being used to bully people rather than inspire. Division has been exploited as a political tool regardless of the long-term consequences to our nation.

But at the same time, there has been a lot of reason to hope. Attempts to destroy the Affordable Care Act were defeated several times. 13 Million people who would have lost their health insurance were able to breathe a sigh of relief. Even with changes designed to restrict enrollment, people have been signing up in record numbers. Here in Virginia, Trump's agenda was soundly rejected at the polls. People turned out to vote and elected a diverse multi-cultural slate of representatives that nearly overturned control of the House of Delegates from Trump's party to the Democrats.

And recently, across the country, women and some men, have had enough with patriarchal sexual harassment. They are calling out their abusers publicly and working to dismantle the levers of intimidation that enabled men in positions of power to treat others as objects rather than with respect and dignity. There is still a long way to go, but it feels like a tipping point has been reached. Women have moved beyond hope to empowerment and commitment.

If there is one thing we can draw from where we are now and where we were last year, it's that the unimaginable is ordinary, and the way forward is almost never a straight path, but a labyrinth of surprises, gifts, and afflictions you prepare for by accepting your blind spots as well as your intuitions.

Hope may not be a course of action, but it is a catalyst for action. Hope is not a comfortable place where we sit until things change. It is a place of unrest, not patience but impatience. As theologian Jurgen Moltmann describes it, "those who hope can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. True hope means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."

Hope may be forward looking, but it is rooted in the present. When we move beyond hope to commitment, we are ready to construct a new reality. The key is to do so without attachment to results. To be open to what emerges like the gardener in the spring. Preparation and planning are essential, but we must allow space for the unexpected. When we set out into the unknown, setbacks and failures are part of the process.

Ultimately, the only essential things for our journey are our deeply held values and principles. As Unitarian Universalists, we promise to affirm and promote these 7 principles in our daily lives: 1) each person is important; 2) be kind in all you do; 3) we are free to learn together; 4) and search for what is true; 5) all people need a voice; 6) build a fair and peaceful world; 7) take care of the earth. They are not commandments. They are an aspirational vision of what it will take to achieve Beloved Community.

Even when we are stranded along the side of the road, if we are true to our principles we have a chance of getting back in the race. That is why I have jumped on the bandwagon in support of the new UU holiday, Chalice. Some think it's hokey or that we are worshipping our 7 principles. I see it differently. I like the emphasis on action, on making good deeds a spiritual practice.

If you take the long view, you'll see how surprisingly, how unexpectedly, but regularly things change. Not by magic, but by the incremental effect of countless acts of courage, love, and commitment, the small drops that wear away stones to carve new landscapes; and sometimes by torrents of popular will that change the world suddenly. To say that is not to say that it will all come out fine in the end regardless. Just remember that everything is in motion, and when we commit to action in pursuit of our hopes and dreams, we are that movement.