

HOPERS UNITE!

The central theme of our UURMaPA conference this week is *Transition*. So, whether or not you're transitioning in a relationship, a living site, or a mind-set, transitioning from a professional post to retirement, or what others have called "desire-ment" or "re-wirement" or what I dub re-*fire*ment, reality forces one major question, a spin-off of what Sonya Vetra Tinsley raised in our reading "You Have to Pick Your Team": Which transitional squad will you be joining? The team of the hoppers or the team of the cynical and the despairing?

And my own response, indeed our core message as Unitarian Universalists allows no wiggle-room, no alternative: we're compelled, by our theology and by our history, to join the team of steadfast hoppers! HOPERS UNITE, HOPERS UNITE!

I'm not suggesting that the world's problems, let alone our own nagging personal burdens, are solved, far from it, but hopeful news too frequently slips beneath our radar screens nowadays. And it's the job of those of us who belong to a genuinely life-affirming, this-worldly, buoyant faith such as Unitarian Universalism to proclaim hope, to nurture hope, to be hope all our remaining days and nights. Because hope, as you well know, is ensnared in a dogged battle with despair!

Just a couple examples. Although the world's population has doubled between 1960 and 2000, the rate of growth is now declining. Families on every continent are having fewer children, and in the past 30 years the global average fertility rate has fallen from 6 children per woman to 2.8 children per woman. Now that's hopeful news, folks. And literacy in the developing world has jumped from 47% in 1970 to 70% today, meaning that many more people have tools to

improve their standard of living. *Yet* the fact is that still almost a billion people are currently illiterate. That's not good enough! Yes, hope is in a ruthless battle with despair!

And, of course, right here, right now in our own homeland, racism keeps reinventing itself in Ferguson, New York City, Baltimore, and in each of our home towns as well. Racism shows its ugly, vicious presence in profiling, police brutality, mass incarceration of black men, and rampant poverty and lack of education among our darker skinned sisters and brothers. In America, whites are generally judged by their behavior, and blacks are harassed by their appearance.

And yet there are brave and countervailing forces against racism in our land. *Black Lives Matter* is but one hopeful force, started by three young women and sprouting dozens of BLM groups across America. Countless numbers of our UU congregations, despite internal tension and dissent, are campaigning for greater racial justice. And even incidents of vandalism are serving as teachable moments for dialogue about the perniciousness of racism within and beyond our own congregations.

This past Spring, Carolyn and I participated in the 50th commemorative anniversary of the Selma protest march that I had attended, back in 1965, as a bookish, pious (boy, was I pious!) 23-year-old Bay Area seminary greenhorn. Clearly, we can't recreate the past, but we can remember it. And we must remember Selma: the spirit, the solidarity, and the sacrifices...“I know one thing we did right was the day we started to fight. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on, hold on...” To fight not for injury but for impact, to scrap and scrape for what's just and merciful, at home and work, in our congregations and in American society, always remembering

that the nonviolence of King was neither passive nor weak-kneed but rather tough-minded and tender-hearted.

We were blessed in Birmingham, Alabama to hear one of the three founders of *Black Lives Matter*, Opal Tometi, who spoke with such fierce gentleness for justice and compassion among the classes, races, orientations, and religions of America. And I knew, at that moment, with tears flooding my eyes, that BLM would not fade away and that when those of us in our homestretch years re-enter the soil, we could turn the struggle over to the Opal Tometi's of America.

And yet, you and I are still above ground, still charged to join the team of hoppers, and hope is still locked, right now, in a raging battle with racism: America's original and most intractable sin. Why do Carolyn and I wear this symbolic BLM arm band daily? We don't wear it as a badge of honor but as a bodily (I guess, it's our tattoo!) reminder that solidarity with the oppressed is the supreme pathway toward universal salvation. We wear it, because our own lives matter most when serving those whose lives count the least. We wear it, because BLM isn't a nice philosophy or a current social cause but a nation-altering movement that summons the best and rest of our days and nights. We wear it, because hope is snared in a ruthless battle with despair!

You can listen to this commentator or read that columnist. We all do. You can round up positive stats as easily as you can dig up negative ones. It depends on one's mood and mindset, right? Yet, in the final analysis, it always comes down to which side you're willing to join: the team of hope or the squad of despair, and that choice must be consciously renewed every morning we get out of bed.

There was a recent meditation retreat where a teenager got up and boldly pressed the world-renowned Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh: “What, sir, is the hardest thing that you practice?” And without hesitation, Hanh replied: “Not being overwhelmed by despair, not being overwhelmed by despair!” You see, even the giants of mindfulness and mercy wrestle daily with despair!

As a Unitarian Universalist we’ve consciously thrown our lot—for better, for worse, and forever—with an incorrigibly hopeful faith, and by hope I’m not referring to optimism. The optimist tends to be fanciful and dreamy-eyed, often leaving the world’s problems up to George or God, Gertrude or Goddess to solve while remaining a bouncy, mindless cheer-leader on the sidelines. Instead, the hoper isn’t convinced that something will happen but is willing to work his or her rear off to make sure that it might just come to be. The optimist lays back; the hoper moves forward. The hoper is an activated human being, one who arouses in self and others a “passion for the possible” (William Sloane Coffin’s phrase). Hoppers stay on purpose even when not immediately successful.

And the hoper differs from the pessimist as well as the optimist. Realism would often demand pessimism. But the hopeful person talks not in terms of crisis, a concept that usually overwhelms and immobilizes us, but in terms of issues and tests and jobs...with our names on some of them. Remember hope arouses passion for the possible!

We hopers know that the best anti-depressant available on the market involves movement of mouth, movement of body, movement of conscience, movement of heart...moving outside our whining or narcissism to connect with the larger world in specific, achievable deeds of justice and mercy. Leaving, as one activist baldly put it, footprints rather than butt-prints!

Cynicism is all around us; in fact, a new sort of progressive cynicism, if you will, has arisen. Progressive cynics harbor the belief that Western culture and American society are hopelessly oppressive. I would agree that our culture is drenched in racism, sexism, homophobia and a whole array of interlinking oppressions. I know, for as a white heterosexual upper middle class male I'm the Pharaoh in most freedom-fighter's Exoduses, simply because of my given identity. But while reality is profoundly oppressive, it isn't terminally so!

We Unitarian Universalists believe that cynicism is spiritual treason. We harbor a bias that leads us to assert that no problem in human relations is ever truly insoluble. Now we may never solve it in our lifetimes. But you and I belong to a religion that refuses to quit on justice, quit on mercy, quit on politics, quit on civilization. We keep on keeping on, because we're incurable hoppers! It's in our DNA; it's *who* we are and *whose* we are!

Of course, we can't say or bear everything, but we can say somethings and we can bear a ton. And we must. If not now on the 1st of March, 2016, when? If not us, who? Where? Wherever we live. How? Through being angry and courageous enough to make our corner of the globe a bit more just and more compassionate...more hopeful during our earthly watch!

Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman ever elected to Congress in 1968, put it unmistakably: "Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of being here on earth." And hopeful people are simply those who are trying to pay some of our rent. I'm a flawed servant, as are each of you, but here are three guidelines, quickly stated, that propel me in my re-firement, as I toil to pay some of my rent as a card-carrying member of *Hoppers United*.

First, contribute globally, but serve locally. I try to assist my own neighborhood, or as politician Tip O'Neill used to say: "At least carry your own precinct." So my volunteer service at two nursing homes, a homeless center, and mentoring children-at-risk, all transpire within walking distance from our home or just a couple miles away. Believe me, you don't have to search far and wide to become an enlisted servant!

Second, pay your rent according to your passion...serve where your juice is. Perhaps it's driving the blind, or cleaning up trash in your vicinity, or working for climate change, or cultivating a community garden, or spending time at the animal shelter, or being a teacher's aide. You'll know, you'll know...if you don't already know.

As religious activist, Howard Thurman, used to insist: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive." Well, I come alive when I sing, I come alive when I spend time, up close and personal, with children and youth; I come alive when I companion the homeless. My UURMaPA buddies, it's not about being noble or heroic, it's about being a dogged hoper who's willing and ready to pay some of your rent through those tasks and those spots where there's fire in your belly.

Thirdly, wherever you choose to serve, colleague Alma Crawford reminds us that "Discomfort is a spiritual discipline." Knowing well that perfect fits don't exist, opt for a sufficiently good fit. Discomfort and disappointment come with the territory of being a hopeful servant. For example, promises to return my calls sometimes fell through. And certain schools turned me down, because they only "welcome" assistance from parents. And I'm not thrilled with two supervisors under whom I volunteer (nor they with me!): one being a bible-thumper

and the other blatantly homophobic. And elders have died on my watch, and youth have walked out on my sessions for phone calls or smokes or video games or naps or because of outright boredom. But as Geoffrey Canada, Harlem educator and activist, cautions: “Hey, working with youth isn’t rocket science; it’s way harder than that.” Yes, discomfort is a spiritual discipline.

Let me close with a story from my volunteering at our local Uptown Service Center for the homeless. One morning, a man (we’ll call him Mike), came in, and we got to talking (since we had gotten to know one another some over the months), and I took Mike aside and brazenly queried him: “What keeps you going, my friend?” and he quickly responded: “H.O.P.E. which stands for *Healthy Options Practiced Everyday*.” I have no idea where Mike got that mantra or whether or not he fashioned it himself, but it struck me as a most useful prescription for every human being living as hopefully as possible. Even though Mike often fell short of its goal, this phrase, he said, kept him going, step by step by step, thus far. This “passion for the possible” was Mike’s aspiration while not always his achievement! That was the last time I ever saw him.

Yes, **Healthy Options Practiced Everyday!**

Since that grace moment, I’ve used Mike’s acronym in my service efforts, especially with children and youth-at-risk. For example, when I first volunteered at a shelter for homeless youth (13-17 year olds, primarily GLBTQ youth), I described our time together as “*Hands On Play Everyday*.” This weekly playshop involved sharing affirmations, doing simple hand massage and meditation, creating magic tricks, talking together, crafting collages, and ended with a group chant while we held hands. This hour of empowering fun revolved around our heads, our hearts, our hands, and our heels, summarized in one more H: *hustle*, and always grounded in the H of all H’s: *Hope*.

Our hour of H.O.P.E. also often furnished tangible take-aways for each youth's own back-pack (what I labelled their "bags of portable joy"). But I'll never forget that one young man, at our very first session, immediately challenged me: "Yeh, yeh, yeh...H.O.P.E. is a hell of a lot better than D.O.P.E.—'Dead or Prison Eventually'! So, I guess, your job, Mr. Tom, is to help me change from being a hopeless dooper to being a dopeless hoper, right? Are you up to it or are you going to quit on me soon?"

Yes, my UURMaPA companions: hope is locked in a mulish, relentless battle with despair for the souls of every living entity, including the precious younger fellow-travelers striding among us.

The apostle Paul said "faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest of these is love." Well, folks they're all great, they're all critical; but hope, the unsung virtue of the lot, dare not get lost in the shuffle. For we can neither keep faith for long nor share love in steady supply, if we're not brimming with genuine, durable hope.

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UURMaPA Conference Worship
Santa Barbara, California
March 1, 2016