

Time for Hope

A sermon given for Ingathering Water Celebration

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, Sept. 9th, 2019

The last time we were gathered in this Sanctuary, it was June, and summer had already made its way through the door. Now we are here at the unofficial start of fall, the beginning of a new program year, and summer has been suddenly ushered away. Seasons change and our situations do, too, both for the better and the worse. Some of you have celebrated milestone anniversaries during the past couple of months; some of you have suffered major personal losses; some of you moved into new homes or moved back into old homes made new. A beloved member of our church choir died and we feel his absence keenly today. We are all somehow different now than we were in June, which means our community is too.

Sometimes when they meet again in September, people ask one another how their summer plans went. Increasingly, I am uncomfortable talking about my own plans, because I'm bothered by how reluctant the world seems to conform to them. Stubborn social issues persist, like unchecked gun violence in America. Our climate crisis makes itself felt in catastrophic storms like that visited on the Carolinas and Bahamas by Hurricane Dorian. Immigrants to our country are still racially profiled, criminalized, and threatened with family separation. You all know this, of course — we all read the same headlines.

During this service of Ingathering, as your minister, what I want to do more than anything is apologize for things not being in better global shape. I hear how foolish that sounds, but I maintain this delusion that if I had made better use of my clerical authority, if I had worked smarter or harder during my study leave, say, I could have single-handedly spared everyone sorrow and saved the world from itself over this past summer vacation. Perhaps you harbor some similar, secret shame of your own, whatever fantastical frame it you put around it, whatever outsized powers you believe have been given in your own life. It might

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be easier for me to absolve myself, or even to have you absolve me, if I had not gone to the beach.

This is a beach some of you may know well, just a few hours north of here in Maine, called Ferry Beach. Founded in 1901, it was the location for a historic Universalist summer camp before it more recently became a Unitarian Universalist retreat center. I timed my trip there to coincide with a conference on Hope. Hope, by the way, was also the 2019 theme of the summer at the center. The word was writ boldly across stickers that dotted the Ferry Beach campus, each with a seagull taking flight with a sunrise.

Hope has always occupied a special place in Universalist theology, which for centuries taught a bold gospel of universal salvation and inclusive love. Since 1901, Universalists at Ferry Beach have gathered in an outdoor chapel where summer services are held. In the earliest photos of it, there's a pulpit under a canopy of pines emblazoned with the phrase, "Good Tidings". Universalists had good tidings to offer people sinking into religious despair, hope to offer everyone.

Just before my conference on Hope was about to start, though, the coordinator called to tell me some conference participants had scheduling conflicts, so we would have to do a compressed version of it. Could I agree to that abbreviated schedule, she asked. While I could and did, something inside me sunk at the very suggestion. What did it mean, that together we could find so little time for Hope?

In her book Almost Everything: Notes on Hope, the spiritual writer Annie Lamott observes: "Some days there seems to be little reason for hope, in our families, cities, and world. Well, except for almost everything. The season change, a bone mends, Santa Rosa rebuild after the fire..." She recognizes just how deep our human need for hope runs, just how much we need to create spaces and times and prompts for buoyancy, love, and joy, all vital to our existence, and just how much we need nearby companions who provide us with these in our lives.

Lamott expresses special gratitude to the people who help her to stay as sane: those involved in her Twelve-Step recovery fellowship, those in her extended family, those in her circle of friends, those in her Bay Area neighborhood, and those in the faith community she has devoted herself to for years. "We believe

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and hope that we will get through these terrifying times,” she writes. As helpless as we might feel at times, she suggests, we need not feel hopeless.

Hopelessness is not the place of last resort; it is the place of no resort. Is our planet imperiled? It is. But it has been imperiled before, too. As I roamed about Ferry Beach, I peered into the frames of camp photos from days gone by, pictures of scores, possibly hundreds of Universalists, gathered by the sea, decades after decade, away from familiar homes, customary routines, business as usual. They gathered through both World Wars, through the Great Depression, through nuclear brinksmanship of the Cold War. In a recent interview, one academic said, “When I look to the future, I despair. When I look to the past, I feel hope.” I understand what he means; looked at those sepia-toned faces in photos, I countenanced hope.

At the start of the summer, I told you good folks that my plan for this summer was to read more poetry. I did not do that. Instead, I read the Psalms, which were never part of the plan. What happened was that I had started to read a book about the Psalms which I was rather enjoying but forgot to pack when I went out of town. Since I could not read that book, I decided that I would read the Psalms themselves. (That this would not have been my first impulse only demonstrates why jokes about UU ministers are so funny.) Be advised: if you read enough Psalms in succession, though, you are no longer reading them. You are praying them. So this summer, I prayed the Psalms.

The Psalmist has a stubborn habit of singing out praises to creation and lifting them up to the heavens, and after a while, I saw it as enviable. Too often we dismiss ancient religion as primitive or naive, when it is neither. Ancient people witnessed plague and pestilence, violence and barbarism, the collapse of entire civilizations and histories. No hardship was lost on them. Yet in the most famous psalm of all, the Psalmist describes what is found in his walk through the darkest valley, the valley of the shadow, where he finds those still waters and quiet pools that restore his soul and give him new strength, such that his cup, it overflows.

More recently, I’ve started to wonder if what we might need today is not so much causes for hope as sources of it. Let’s assume that these sources exist and are (miraculously!) discoverable by us. We need time to tap these sources so that we

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can fill our cups until they overflow. Every single person here has a thirsty soul. Every single one of you deserves to be restored in your soul. The state of your soul merits attention. Trust this, and you might become the person who spills out hope for others. Whatever is contained in the vials you brought for our Water Celebration, I hope it represents your own life-giving waters, originally sourced.

One of my favorite professors used to warn my class not to let our schooling get in the way of our education. After a similar fashion, at the start of this promising and full program year ahead, I want to caution each of you not to let the vital work of this religious community obscure your need for a rich spiritual life. Soon our Social Action Council will begin coordinating the important work of various Task Forces; the Standing Committee will resume its regular evening meetings, and the Hospitality Team will begin its steady Sunday rotation. It's easy to get carried away on some swiftly moving currents. Please — don't drift too far away from the deepest sources of your faith. Remember to draw on them here. This year, we will give some thought to congregational plans and policies, yes, but we will also contemplate the wide range of our spiritual practices, both communal and individual. We will be intentional about building Beloved Community together.

The hope that the Psalmist and poets and spiritual writers throughout the ages found and extolled is hearty and well-travelled. It stays on the move, such that if what we most fervently and dearly hoped for does not come to pass, there is still more hope reaching beyond that, beckoning us onward, shifting the horizon we scan. The Universalists at Ferry Beach long believed that and preached that hopeful gospel wherever they went, not merely at that place where the Maine woods met the sea. Ferry Beach is not what it once was; instead, it is what it needs to be today. In recent years, following disastrous winter storms arising from climate change, it has worked hard to reclaim and restore its shoreline, and now educates all its visitors about environmental sustainability, embracing its future as well as its past. We can do the same here.

When all of us together make time for hope — take time for hope? — we find time for all kinds of other things in our lives, too. We are newly motivated and mobilized. Forces much larger than us are always at work in the world — acts of nature, social movements, the weight of history, even the spirit of the times —

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and that fact can be alternately sobering or cheering, when it is not both simultaneously. We can openly acknowledge that here at UU Wellesley Hills. Our hope ought never be false.

Actual hope, authentic hope, has no need to deny what is true and that is precisely what makes it a reliable witness for us. We can name very difficult realities and still have there be something more to the story we tell, the possibility of surprise. My fondest hope is that none of us here loses hope, that through everything and all of us it springs eternal.