

# Unity Church of North Easton

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## *Hope In Impossible Places*

I haven't been feeling a lot of hope lately. The fall has been hard, with my hospice demanding a lot more administrative time. My boss's boss has a two-week mental health leave of absence starting tomorrow, my boss has back surgery leaving me the acting director of psycho-spiritual and bereavement care for a month come the 15th of November, with both of these on the heels of a long recertification process with the Department of Public Health. This election is bringing the worst out in people. The inflated economy makes everything so expensive, and unchecked violence is prevalent in many parts of the world. Things seem really bad. Toss in aging relatives with some serious health concerns and despite climate change being a real thing the world feels emotionally colder.

I am tired, not even the extra hour of sleep from the time change is a balm for the weariness not only of my body but of my spirit. Yes, my stomach issues as a result of the Ozempic have disrupted my sleep and in years past I was a stress eater but with the medication that part of my brain has been turned off. I am tired of Americans being called garbage. I am tired of Americans being called an enemy within. I am tired of the mediocrity we have vaunted to political leadership, and I am tired of rich, entitled, nepotism children thinking they are better or smarter than others when the world was handed to them on a silver spoon.

There is a dark cloud, and I know some people are very confident Tuesday will be a day of celebration. I know others who are in a world of tears. I am tired of hearing about women dying due to a lack of access to reproductive healthcare and states accepting that as a cost of business just as I am tired of mass shootings being an acceptable sacrifice on the altar of America's worship of firearms as a divine right.

Hope, is it naive to think such a thing is possible at a time such as this? Hope, really, when belligerence and bellicosity rule the day. Is hope foolish?

Do you remember the painting of Hope by George Frederic Watts? It is a blindfolded woman sitting atop a barren globe plucking a lyre with a single string. The backdrop is blank, lit by a single star. Hope isn't something triumphant, riding atop a majestic stallion like some romantic notion of glory. Hope isn't something massive and victorious. But my friends, let me tell you a secret. Hope doesn't need to be great or grand to be powerful.

Some of you may have watched the Netflix adaptation of Sandman, where the fourth episode was aptly named "A Hope in Hell." Sandman, the incarnation of dreams, was imprisoned and his symbols of office were stolen. Once he is freed from his prison he finds that his ceremonial helm was traded to a demon of Hell. He travels there to regain what is his and the demon who possesses the helm asks Lucifer to be its champion in a duel with Sandman for the ownership of the helm. As mythological beings, the duel is one of ideas where each has to come up with something that kills the idea the other previously stated. Lucifer started as a dire wolf, with Sandman responding with a hunter, to Lucifer responding with a serpent, to Sandman a bacteria, and on and on until Lucifer responds with being the anti-life, the dark at the end of everything, to which Sandman responds, I am hope. Well, Lightbringer? It's your move. What is it that kills hope? Lucifer then demands the demon give Sandman his helm since they cannot come up with a response to what kills hope. Lucifer tries to intimidate Sandman, saying he has recovered his helm, but what makes him think he will be permitted to leave the realm of Hell? Sandman's response further underscores the power of hope when he challenges Lucifer saying what power can Hell have if it does not contain the dream of Heaven. As Dream, the Sandman's power reaches even into the darkest, most foreboding environment because of the unkillable, unbreakable power of hope.

From our reading, Viktor Frankl pointed out how those experiencing the absolute worst of human conditions can persevere when there is still meaning and purpose to their lives. His logotherapy wasn't formed in Auschwitz, but it was tested there. Few places on earth make me think more of a living hell, and yet in the camps there was a power of the human spirit that proved the dignity

of humanity exceeded the ingenuity of human depravity. Even in the face of such meaningless, purposeless suffering through human cruelty, those who had meaning in their days and hope for a future persevered. Nazis may have been able to mutilate and kill bodies, but not the minds and spirits of the camp residents.

From his text, *Man's Search for Meaning*:

It is one of the basic tenets of logotherapy that our main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in our life. That is why people are even ready to suffer, on the condition, to be sure, that our suffering has meaning.

But let me make it perfectly clear that in no way is suffering necessary to find meaning. I only insist that meaning is possible even in spite of suffering – provided, certainly, that the suffering is unavoidable. If it were avoidable, however, the meaningful thing to do would be to remove its cause, be it psychological, biological or political. To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic.

There wasn't a moral or spiritual purity to the atrocity of Nazi cruelty, and it wasn't necessary for meaning-making. It wasn't a silver lining, but it was reality that meaning, purpose, and hope continued on in the bleakest and darkest of times.

My work is not quite that bleak. The deaths I companion my patients and their families on are medical instead of industrialized murder, but bleakness is there. Weekly, I see people whose dementia has passed thresholds of recognizing or remembering their families, and some families have made the decision to no longer visit their family member that far along leading to profound loneliness and isolation for the poor person living with such advanced dementia. The families have said to themselves we have already said our goodbyes, the person who was our mother/father/grandma/grandpa is gone and it hurts too much to visit the shell that still breathes. Each year I accompany patients on their final journey who have disturbing visions and disquieting experiences as their subconscious minds prepare them for the

road they trod. We tend to depart on similar ways we have lived, and those who have not cultivated peace in their living seldom find it in their dying. Yet it is in doing this work that I have hope.

When the wide world seems like it is falling apart on a grand scale, we can see in the very small scale the pinprick of light that is hope. There is hope in simple human connection, even when the situation is greatly compromised. Sitting with someone who is at the end of their life, whose dementia means speech or even nonverbal recognition has passed, it can be a bit awkward. I have colleagues who have been in the field for many years who are uncomfortable in that setting. Yet in those visits I feel hope. No matter how much has been taken away, the true inherent worth and dignity of their humanity remains. It is a namaste moment where the sacred inside of me recognizes the sacred inside of them. Not for what they say, or do, but just by simply being human.

Small pinpricks of light, of human connection, diminishing the cruelty and coldness of this world. That's what hope is, and why not even the greatest of cruelties can stomp it out because it beckons us forward, calls us into what will be. It resists external control or restraint because it is about what might be, what could be, instead of the harsh boundaries around what is. We are searching for a yet to be, a better way, a kinder and gentler way.

In meaning and in purpose there is a power of hope, that life is reconciled to our moral compass and our sense of what is good and true. Elements outside of our control may be out of our agency and we can disagree with them vociferously but we are not ultimately in control. There are so very many things outside of ourselves, larger than ourselves, but they do not get to control or define us. We make those choices. Who we are, and what we value, where we find our purpose, those are controlled internally and our dignified living becomes an act of resistance at those who think they can define who we are for us. Caring for others, empathy, compassion, these are not weaknesses. They are strengths that remind us what it is to be human. Hope that there is a better tomorrow yet to come isn't a fools quest, but rather the power of moral imagination to recognize we haven't discovered everything yet and more will come with time.

Hope isn't about being large, about being obvious, about being overwhelming. It is a small seed, but seeds are the tiniest fraction of the size of the plant that is to grow. Along my house and driveway there are weeds that grow each summer in the tiniest of cracks because life finds a way. In the harshest of conditions, in the most improbable of places, life finds a way. No matter what happens this week, this month, this year there is not a period placed on the end of the human sentence and if we define ourselves only on what has been instead of on that tiny pinprick of light guiding us on we lose sight of the possibility of hope.

Even on a lyre with only one unbroken string, blindfolded on a barren globe in the midst of the darkness hope plucks a tune and from the air itself crafts a song. Our situation is not so bleak. Our struggles in comparison are not as stark. Together, in the darkest of days, in the most fatigued of times, as we feel frayed and come undone, that song beckons. I hope you join with me.

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