

Dec. 30, 2007

Sermon: "The Thing with Feathers"

Hope (Emily Dickinson)

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune--without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

The New Year is only two days away. Even the most jaded among us probably take a moment to assess the past year, to imagine what the new year might bring. The New Year is the time when even those of us who long ago gave up on making New Year's resolutions may murmur a private litany of hopes, even if only in our minds. Hope, then, is worth taking a look at. What is it? Where does it come from? And what good is it? Was that shriveled little creature clinging to the lid of Pandora's jar the ultimate curse or the ultimate consolation?

We proclaim that ours is a religion of hope. The Universalist and Unitarian strains of our heritage shared a refusal to accept that humankind was innately depraved and bound for eternal damnation. The 19th century Unitarian believed in "salvation by character." He believed that human nature, individually and collectively, was perfectible and, indeed, was moving steadily toward that future perfection.

The Universalists, on the other hand, believed that nothing that our finite natures were capable of could warrant eternal punishment; God, the loving parent, sought only to help his children see that it was by being good that happiness was attained..

The willingness to deny ugliness and suffering is, according to the 19th century American philosopher William James, a natural human inclination. "The systematic cultivation of healthy-mindedness as a religious attitude is ... consonant with important currents in human nature... In fact, we all do cultivate it more or less, even when our professed theology should in consistency forbid it. We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is."

James then ascribed this faith in the goodness of humankind, the benevolence of nature and the loving kindness of ultimate reality in particular to what he called the “once-born.” He had the Unitarians in mind when he wrote that, “The advance of liberalism, so-called, in Christianity, during the past fifty years, may fairly be called a victory of healthy-mindedness within the church over the morbidness with which the old hell-fire theology was more harmoniously related. We have now whole congregations whose preachers, far from magnifying our consciousness of sin, seem devoted rather to making little of it. They ignore, or even deny, eternal punishment, and insist on the dignity rather than on the depravity of man. They look at the continual preoccupation of the old-fashioned Christian with the salvation of his soul as something sickly and reprehensible rather than admirable; and a sanguine and 'muscular' attitude, which to our forefathers would have seemed purely heathen, has become in their eyes an ideal element of Christian character. I am not asking whether or not they are right, I am only pointing out the change...”

Such individuals James describes as possessing souls of a “sky-blue tint,” and “affinities [that] are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions... [They] can think no ill of man or God... Of human sin they know perhaps little in their own hearts and not very much in the world; and human suffering does but melt them to tenderness. ”¹

I've quoted William James here at some length because his comments remind us that the hopefulness, the optimism, the faith, if you will, in the inherent dignity and worth of every person, did not spring full-blown out of nowhere with the articulation of the 1st Principle. Our understanding of ourselves as people of hope goes way back. I also wanted you to see why, in my darker moments, I might wonder about the “sky-blue tint” of my own soul. As James describes us, we're “healthy-minded,” perhaps, but rather superficial... theological lightweights, “melting to tenderness” when confronted with human suffering while the orthodox set their jaws in grim determination to save the world, not for this life, but for the next one.

So I have this secret doubt from time to time: Must I be an optimist in order to be a good UU? Must I celebrate only our human potential for goodness and relegate our shadow side to the category of aberration, of nightmare and perversion? According to one of my classmates in theological school, yes. In sonorous tones, he declared that if someone didn't believe in the innate goodness of human beings, they had no business being UU. Apparently, it's possible to be condemned as a heretic even within our proudly heretic tradition. Is it heresy to say that just maybe this world is in need of saving?

Hearing this opinion stated by a more advanced and much more confident fellow student, I kept my mouth shut... kept my doubts secret. Nowadays, you may be glad to know, I would gladly challenge such a know-it-all and his right to define who could and could not be a Unitarian Universalist. But in those days, in my first year of seminary, I merely thought, “Jeez... I guess I missed that class. What if he's right? What if this

whole mid-life ministerial call thing turns out to be a big misunderstanding and after 50 years of being UU I find out that I never was one after all? Yikes!”

Hence the topic of today’s sermon. Maybe **you’ve** wondered about how anyone can open a newspaper these days – or a history book, for that matter -- and claim to remain hopeful. Maybe you’ve wondered if it’s possible to hope without willfully closing your eyes to poverty, racism, global warming; torture and child soldiers and mass graves; abuse, addiction and corruption; selfishness, cruelty and contempt for life. What kind of holy fool can profess hope in the face of all this? What are we talking about when we talk about hope? Let’s see if Emily Dickinson can give us any clues.

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune--without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
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I’ve heard it in the chillest land,
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It asked a crumb of me.

The thing with feathers – the bird – in itself defies the law of gravity, the laws of probability. Flight is a miraculous and mysterious thing, after all. The bird – that is, hope – perches in the soul. It is something light and insubstantial, something elusive and free. Hope is not compared to a rock, but to a bird. It is not foundational, not essential to the soul, but merely a visitor, poised and delicate, ready to fly away if it so chooses – Yet it chooses to stay. The tune it sings is without words. Hope does not communicate in words, it can’t be explained, it is not to be understood by the conventions of language and logic. The song it sings is not defined by its content – its words – but by its very existence – its tune. It is the fact of its being there at all that makes hope a thing of wonder.

And the song it sings “never stops at all.” Yet surely we do not always feel hope. Perhaps it is there, nevertheless, waiting for us to notice it, to hear it sing. Its song is sweetest in the storm. It is our need for it that gives it its sweetness. Our circumstances determine whether hope is ignored or valued.

Hope sings in the “chillest land” – those times of lifeless winter in the soul – and on the strangest seas – when no land is in sight, no safe harbor, those times of life when our surroundings seem alien to us, seem to stretch before us without rest or familiar markers to guide us. At these times, hope’s song provides warmth and reassurance.

Hope is present in extremity – in times of crisis or despair – and asks for nothing. In other words, hope is available to us by grace. It isn't something we earn or deserve, but is a gift freely given and available to all. (Could this message sound any more Universalist?) Hope is miraculous, we hear. It is Grace that is with us always yet makes itself known to us when we most need it. Hope, the poem tells us, does not arise from within, but comes to us as a gift. Hope, it tells us, is a thing of the air, descended to perch lightly within us. Hope, it tells us, is a spirit, a messenger of the divine, perhaps... Certainly a representative from another world – the world of the transcendent, made manifest in us, in our souls.

Now this sounds like a kind of hope that I could perhaps believe in. Not a promise, nothing concrete, but a feeling, a presence, a possibility.

For the seemingly miraculous does happen. When the statistics tell you that 95 percent of patients with your condition will die, that means that 5 percent will not. No promises, nothing solid, nothing to be negotiated -- simply the presence of possibility. And as is the way with Grace, the gift it brings may not be the one we asked for. It does not promise control of the outcome; it does not promise the result we wish for. It merely accompanies us, singing, if we care to listen. This kind of hope makes sense to me. This kind of hope seems real to me.

Hope is not shallow optimism. It doesn't deny the fact of pain or refuse to recognize the costs of our mistakes, our selfishness, our foolishness. It does not offer the false assurance that everything is going to be okay or the nonsensical insistence that everything always works out for the best. It is not the stubborn "affinity[y]... with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies" that William James accused us of nursing while deluding ourselves that there exist no "dark human passions."

Optimism says, "I'm sure my marriage will turn out to be a good thing. It may not seem like it now, but I believe that eventually I'll see why all this pain and suffering were really useful or good for me."

Hope says nothing. It is, after all, the tune without words. It **is** a feeling, though. It is the feeling that I have the strength, the moral fiber, the faith in myself and my resources, to let me believe that I will be able to do whatever it is I must do. And if I fail, I will be able to deal with that, too. I need not despair. I am not helpless, as long as I have hope.

Because hope does not intervene in our destiny. It doesn't make things happen. It urges **us** to make things happen. And assisted by the vision that hope provides, we become more likely to realize our goal.

If you or I tried to break a board with a blow of the hand, chances are we'd end up with a bruised or broken hand and a board still very much in one piece. The martial arts student, by contrast, visualizes her hand passing through the board, breaking it cleanly in two. Those of us without her training hesitate imperceptibly at the moment of contact

with the board. Our deepest convictions about what is possible – and impossible – are thereby confirmed: It is impossible to break a board with a blow of the hand if we believe it to be impossible. The expert makes no such hesitation. By imagining her hand passing through it, she is able to direct the energy of her arm, uninterrupted, right through the board.

Hope sometimes works this same way. It requires the capacity to imagine a future goal in order to effect some action in the present. A saying that is often attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. actually originated with our own Theodore Parker: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” These are beautiful words, but I confess I have often had trouble believing this, much as I wanted to. There just didn’t seem to be much evidence that that arc **was** bending toward justice. In fact, it often seemed it was bending away from it. I’ve changed my mind, though. There are admittedly many bumps and detours; the arc often **does** bend the other way, for awhile. But the arc of the moral universe, remember, is long. Seen from a great enough distance, the curve is visible, just barely, but visible. The earth appears to be flat until the horizon is seen from a great distance. Then the curve becomes apparent if we know what to look for, if we know what it is we are seeing. The progress of our moral universe seems non-existent or even to be moving away from justice when viewed from the perspective of daily events. But from the long view – the very long view – we can, in fact, discern it bending, every so slightly, toward justice. War and hunger and genocide and brutality continue, yes. Is it in our human nature to be cruel? Yes. But it is also within us to resist cruelty.

Three hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, one hundred years ago, war and famine and genocide were accepted as the inevitable and normal course of human events. We could not imagine a world that was otherwise. Today, this same suffering horrifies us, fills us with outrage. We imagine a world in which all are fed, all are safe. This is the first step. We hope for it. This is the second step. The next step and the step after that? We work for it. Not because we are optimistic that we will see an end to atrocities in our lifetimes or our children’s lifetimes, but because we understand that, without the vision of justice, without the vision of the hand passing through the board, without the hope, there is no possibility of justice. There is only cynicism, despair, or indifference.

It takes courage and character to resist the cultural pull of an easy cynicism, a comfortable hopelessness. The cynic, after all, is not called to take action.

It takes courage also to resist the temptation to the other extreme, the refusal to acknowledge the darker side of our natures. The naïve optimist is a happy person, at least until reality breaks in through the self-delusions he has constructed.

Either way, it takes courage to hope. Far from being the moral lightweights I feared we might be, we blue-sky UUs are challenged to proclaim our vision of hope to the world – not because it is the morally correct stance to take toward a broken world, but because it is the only truly credible one. The sky may not be blue at the moment. It may be leaden with storm clouds. But the thing with feathers sings to us, without words.

Without words, it sings to us of possibilities, of freedom, of flight. In this New Year, may we listen to that song. May we listen with all our hearts.

¹ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience, Lecture IV*.