

## Where There's Hope

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered February 1, 2015

*When despair for the world grows in me...*

With all of the things bombarding us in the news these days, sometimes I feel like Josh Rittenberg's parents as they worried about the state of the world they were handing over to future generations.<sup>1</sup> Given many of the news stories and events happening, it's hard not to think about that.

A voice came over the intercom – would the passengers of Flight 3935, a summertime flight out of Washington DC, please collect their carry-on luggage and exit the plane. The passengers gathered on the tarmac alongside the plane and witnessed something I hope to never see – it was so hot that the plane had sunk into the black pavement as if it were wet cement. After attempts by a series of increasingly powerful tow vehicles, the plane was finally dislodged and went along its merry way.<sup>2</sup>

I'm not sure what disturbs me more about this story – that it got so hot that this actually happened, or that the passengers and airline company hardly gave it a second thought before they hopped on the plane and generated even more emissions that contribute to the problem of our accelerating climate change!

Now don't worry that this is going to be a downer today – we'll get to the hope eventually. But sometimes that hope is just hard to find.

I grew up as an environmentalist. And not just a we-need-to-care-for-the-earth kind of environmentalist, but I had *50 Things You Can Do For the Earth* memorized and went about making and suggesting every possible change in my family that I could. It wasn't something that my parents were into, or any of my siblings – it was just me.

And I kept going with it beyond my childhood, too. I helped start up an environmental effort at my first UU church before Green Sanctuary existed, started up a Green Sanctuary committee at another, helped to found the Baltimore Green Forum and ran their communications and marketing for a year, and I've integrated simplicity and environmentalism throughout my own life and household.

But it turned out that it wasn't sustainable for me. My voracious reading caught up with me one day. I had heard a book mentioned, and then when looking it up stumbled onto the problematic "readers who liked this also liked" recommendation list. A couple of books later, I found one that utterly crushed my sense of hope. The reality and modeling described by this book dismantled every dream that I had been carrying. And I haven't found a way to get my hope back.

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<sup>1</sup> Josh Rittenberg, "Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day," in *This I Believe*, edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, pages 1-2.

*When despair for the world grows in me.*

News and models about climate change aren't the only things that can disrupt our sense of hope and leave us with despair instead. The murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and Tamir Rice and others, and the aftermaths. The fact that we're only a month into 2015 and Wilmington has already seen 6 homicides. And on a personal level – long periods of unemployment or financial difficulties, illnesses, injuries or chronic pain. Being alone when you don't want to be, or losing a treasured relationship. These all leave the present and the future ever more uncertain.

Sometimes it is hard to find hope... and then there are also the forces that work to drain away the hope that we've got. I don't have to stretch far to claim that fear and despair are amplified by our culture and especially by mass media. In Rittenberg's story, I think this is where his parents are acting from – the fear kicked up by our news media. Now I'm not saying that our news is untrue – although it always helps to listen with a critical ear. But I get upset nearly every time I go through the entire news myself.

Stories of peace and of success do get air time, but not nearly as much as destruction does.

A couple of things about human nature are working against us too – the human brain estimates probabilities based on how easily it can come up with examples of something happening. And randomness and magnitude can fool our brains, too, into assuming that something is more widespread than it really is. Combine these with the abundance of examples of destruction, and I can see why I wake up at night worried for my daughter's future, too.

These are things that drain hope and feed despair, but I think we can counter them. We don't have to let these things drain our hope and well-being. To begin with, we can intentionally limit our exposure and not get drawn in by the seductive nature of the fearful headlines. My husband has been doing a bit of this lately – for short breaks, he used to peruse CNN's homepage, alternating between news and sports. Lately though he's changed this practice. Under the guise of looking for things to open lectures with, he's spending those breaks with humorous YouTube videos. Others have shared with me how they seek out human interest stories and particular columnists that frequently inspire them. Now, it's crucial to remain aware of what's going on in our world to be able to engage in it in a meaningful manner. We have to. I believe that's one of the obligations of our faith.

But that doesn't mean we have to drown in the agony of it. We have a choice. We can limit our exposure to the fear. We can remember the big picture progress that's been made and not get paralyzed by each individual tragedy. Maybe they can fuel us instead. We have a choice.<sup>3</sup>

But coming back to my own search for hope – these things, as well as whatever else each of us needs – these are what we can do to address the drain on our sense of hope. But we still need

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/foreigners/2014/12/the\\_world\\_is\\_not\\_falling\\_apart\\_the\\_trend\\_lines\\_reveal\\_an\\_increasingly\\_peaceful.single.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/12/the_world_is_not_falling_apart_the_trend_lines_reveal_an_increasingly_peaceful.single.html)

to find what will replenish ourselves. My underground environmentalist self isn't through yet – I still want to find reason to hope, and I want to find ways to hope.

*When despair for the world grows in me...  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests ...and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Wendell Berry finds his reason to hope in his experience of wild things and the promise that the light of the stars is there even when he can't see it.

Activist Joanna Macy draws a path to hope also, but from some different perspectives. She calls the path to hope “despair work,” and what she does is works with groups – not with folks alone – she works with groups and leads folks to open themselves to the pain and lean into their despair in a very intentional way. Her belief is that by leaning into our pain and despair, by leaning into them we'll find hope.

I admit that I'm intrigued by this idea. Ever since I lost my environmental hope for despair, I feel like I've run away from it. Every time that it sneaks up on me again, my first reaction is that I don't want to think about it, that it feels frightening to even go down that rabbit hole, so I stop myself before falling. But this hasn't ultimately gotten me to anywhere different. Leaning into my fear; maybe for starters I should finish the book that got me going along this path – I haven't touched it since then.

Joanna Macy has this fantastic definition for hope that re-centers my understanding of it:

Hope is an openness to the future. It's a radical openness to what could be. Hope isn't for any particular thing, or an attachment to a particular outcome. It's an openness toward what you don't even have the capacity to think yet because you're still in the present. Hope is a radical openness to what can be.<sup>4</sup>

Hope is an openness to the future that we don't even know yet. I think one thing that gets in the way of our hope is when we think we know what the future will be, but really, we don't. That's when we need openness and imagination. It's the first part of a two-step plan I want to propose to help find our hope again.

Here's the plan: step 1 – **magical thinking** and step 2 – **just starting anyway**

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<sup>4</sup> From an interview with Joanna Macy by Mary NurrieStearns, [www.personaltransformation.com/joanna\\_macy.html](http://www.personaltransformation.com/joanna_macy.html).

Step 1 – magical thinking. Leaning into the future that we don't know, leaning through our pain and despair. This openness, this hope, it's magical. Just for me to try and believe that it will be there is magical.

Now I'm not talking about magic Harry Potter style or any other kind of fantasy magic. And to be quite clear – there are no magical solutions to any of our problems. Magical thinking, not magical solutions. Seeking magical solutions is a fallacy that sometimes we can get wrapped up in – thinking that some idea will solve a cluster of problems. Doing the same thing yet again and expecting a different outcome. This kind of thinking can get going in just about any context – including right here in our churches. But there are no simple seemingly magical solutions. Our realities are just too complex for that – and if there were a simple solution, to anything, it would have been figured out and done a long time ago.

Hope is magical. It's the magic that happens when we open ourselves to hope and to the possibilities of hope.

For me magical thinking is about lifting ourselves out of the rational world that I'm often all too comfortable in, looking beyond that world to what I can't see. Joanna Macy reminds us of that – hope is an openness to the future that we don't even have the capacity to see because we are grounded in the present.

There's a little of this future that I see in our children – this is one of my sources for hope. I call it the philosophy of “well, duh!” As I see my daughter and other children encountering many of the realities in our world, I see how much things can baffle them. When she saw news about the violence in Ferguson, or news about how black youth are treated even closer to home, she just doesn't understand it. It is so far from her values system that it's nearly incomprehensible to her. But that's exactly what makes me hope. It's not just her; it's kids from all sorts of backgrounds, from liberal and conservative families and everything in-between.

Well, duh, of course anyone can get married. What's the big deal?

Why are people losing their minds – their skin just looks different.

Everyone should have homes – and apparently computers and Minecraft games too – but why doesn't the country change to make this happen. Duh!

Magic? I'm not sure. But I am totally open to the future that these kids are going to create! That's magical thinking!

And step two of my plan: just starting anyway.

Starting anyway – this takes either idealism or stubbornness. In the belief statement by Rittenberg, he found his sense of hope from looking at the pictures of his ancestors and believing that the future will be better. Now, not saying anything to disrupt his sense of hope – sometimes that's what it takes – but I get the sense that his is hope that can be shaken pretty easily and was really more the immature idealism of a 16-year-old (which he is). And you know,

I've been there. Sometimes I wonder how much I'm still there and watch with some relief as the different parts of myself mature a bit. But at least this kind of idealism will help to start anyway rather than just worrying about the future. And just starting anyway helps us encounter what we need for a more fully developed sense of hope.

But what happens when there isn't idealism to be found, when it wasn't there in the first place or when it's gotten dried up? That's when it helps to be stubborn. I've found I'm in pretty good company when it comes to that regard here in our congregations. This is the-I'm-going-to-do-it-anyway philosophy that may be a little more prevalent than average among Unitarian Universalists. We usually refer to it as determination. Channeling this helps us keep on moving forward and keep going with the work. And not just doing the work alone, but with others.

Despair doesn't have to be a lonely thing. Someone was sharing with me about a time when she had lost her sense of hope but was heading to be with a group of people. It was that group of people who shifted things for her. They restored her sense of hope, which she found was being with other people who were doing the work.

Magical thinking and just starting anyway. We need to be able to restore and replenish our hope. There are the challenges that come up in our personal lives, things that make it hard to keep going. There's the hope we need when we're doing something that feels risky and uncertain. Then there are the forces that we seek to meet in the world. And we need hope to be able to keep moving forward sustainably against those, too.

Hope isn't just some extra thing that it's nice to have. Hope is an anchor. I've thought for a long time that hope was the opposite of despair, but I've realized that's not quite true. Hope and despair exist side-by-side. Despair – it's there, and it rises and falls in waves. And hope sits right alongside it and enables us to keep going and keep dreaming and keep working despite our despair. Hope is an anchor. Hope is empowering, and hope gets us through. May it be so.