The Courage to Hope

November 10, 2024

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Laconia, NH

Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope is a thing with feathers."
was composed in 1861, the first year of the American Civil War.
A dark time, indeed.
Emily uses the image of a bird for hope,
which withstands the ravages of many a storm
-hope "that keeps so many warm."
She writes of finding hope in "the chilliest land – and on the strangest sea."
Hope, Emily believes, perches in our souls,
"and never stops at all."

We are living in a very different time from when Emily wrote this poem,
and yet, I find her words about hope as true today as ever.

Just as Emily's world faced the terrible storms of civil war,
we, today, face, what Mark Gerzon and Mesa Sebree, researchers,
call a "polycrisis consciousness."[1]
These thinkers view our world today through the lens of what
they call "the compounding pressure of simultaneous global crises."
The polycrisis or metacrisis is the sum total of all stressors

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[1] Mark Gerzon and Mesa Sebree. Blog. Mediators Fourdation. "Towards a Polycrisis Consciousness." June 10, 2024. www.mediatorsfoundation.org/blog/towards-a-polycrisis-consciousness. Mark Gerzon is the president and founder of Mediators Foundation and has specialized in leadership that bridges divides for over three decades. Mesa Sebree is a Research Associate for Mediators Foundation, specializing in human rights, international law, and nonviolence.

affecting planetary health.

Here is one definition of the metacrisis we humans are now facing:

> A global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade human prospects. These interacting crises produce harm greater than the sum of those crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected.[2]

These researchers urge all of us to see the unprecedented dangers

of this era of human history.

They warn us to see the interconnectedness

of all the different crises we are currently experiencing.

For us, as Unitarian Universalists, this reminds us of our Seventh Principle

of Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Gerzon and Sebree advocate that the first step in dealing

with the unprecedented challenges we now face is to recognize

fully the relationships between the different crises we all are experiencing now.

The biggest danger, according to these researchers is not climate change,

nuclear war, or any single other issue.

The enormous threat comes from the interacting components of the current crises.

These researchers list 10 crises that are interlocking issues threatening us today.

They also state that there are other crises, as well that we might also include.

They challenge us to not become entrenched in one issue alone,

but see how everything is interrelated.

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[2] Definition is from the Cascade Institute, a Canadian research center addressing urgent and entangled global problems.

Here are the 10 issues that Gerzon and Sebree list,

each separately described by their activists

as the most pivotal challenge of our time:

1. There is no more urgent issue than endangered democracy.

2. There is no more urgent issue than Climate Change.

3. There is no more urgent issue than economic justice.

4. There is no more urgent issue than toxic polarization.

5. There is no more urgent issue than artificial intelligence.

6. There is no more urgent issue than mental health.

7. There is no more urgent issue than racism.

8. There is no more urgent issue than nuclear war.

9. There is no more urgent issue than Gender Discrimination.

10. There is no more urgent issue than the Illusion of Separateness.

(see cover photo of this model)

These researchers believe that it is best for us to focus, yes, on one or two issues,

and that while we do so, we remember the interconnectedness of whatever

issue we are working on with other issues that others are spearheading.

Gerzon and Sebree write:

> Strategically, it is necessary to focus on part of the polycrisis
> but with an awareness of the whole. Every organization today
> must make a strategic choice about where to focus.
> One's chosen issue(s) will inevitably be at the center of one's strategy.
> Yet, in the polycrisis era, we have to organize
> and act with the broader awareness that our
> particular cause impacts and is impacted by all of the others[3].

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[3] S

Where do these researchers find hope today in dealing with these overwhelming crises?

Here are some of their strategies for how to approach this new reality:

First, they believe we best think of ourselves as belonging to the planet as a whole,

- that we think of ourselves "like earthlings, first and foremost."

Our main identification would be as an earthling

– and not simply as a member of a particular nation or faith tradition, for example.

Secondly, they believe that in order to make real change,

it is vital to have a holistic way

of perceiving whatever crisis we are currently dealing with.

To do so, they suggest that we "think like a mountain range."

Using the metaphor from Aldo Leopold's pioneering book on the environment,

The Sand County Almanace, where Leopold advises us as humans

to "think like a mountain," and thus, not be separate from the entire ecosystem.

Borrowing this metaphor from Leopold,

Gerzon and Sebree are suggesting to us that we "think like a mountain range,"

- as they believe that change will only occur when we act as a team with others, and not if we try to create change all by individual selves.

Thirdly, these forward thinkers state that

"our passion requires detachment from outcome.[4]"

Here, they are suggesting that we may not see the results of our efforts

in a timeframe that is comfortable for us

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[4] Gerzon and Sebree. Mark Gerzon and Mesa Sebree -- Towards a Polycrisis Consciousness - Part 2 | Beyond Intractability. July 18, 2024, p, 11.

– we may not even see any results in our lifetime,
but our efforts will bear fruit sometime in the future,
perhaps even after we have passed on.
This made me think of Unitarian Rev Theordore Parker
who said in the mid-19th century
that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."
His thinking on justice would influence Henry David Thoreau.
Thoreau's writings went on to influence Leo Tolstoy,
whose thinking on justice, then influenced
Rev. Dr. Martin King, Jr, who today is often given credit for saying
"the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."
All four of these men gave their life energies in working for justice, and
understood that their work would not be completed in their lifetimes.

Another suggestion by Gerzon and Sebree is for us
to retire optimism and pessimism,
and to focus on possibility.
They state that both pessimism or optimism are like shooting in the dark,
because we don't know with certainty
how much, how quickly, or where things might get better or worse. [5]
It is best, they advise, for us to look at any situation
and work towards what is possible.

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[5] Gershon and Beshee. July 18, 2024, p 12.

This past week with its election results has been very challenging for many of us

who are liberal in our theology and belief systems.

How do we not become cynical? How do we not despair?

How do we keep believing in the values of our faith?

How do we go on when what we think is best is so very threatened?

How do we find hope in the midst of what many of us experience as darkness?

Where is the light? Where is the hope? How do we find the courage to hope?

I turned to Rebecca Solnit's important book entitled "Hope in the Dark"

for some answers to these disturbing questions.

Rebecca describes ordinary hope as wanting an outcome

that is very different from what is actually happening –

. Often, when such hopes are dashed,

we experience such lost hope as misfortune.

Ordinary hope for Solnit is illustrated by

Someone who … has an expectation that always hovers in the background,

the shadow of fear that one's wishes will not be fulfilled.

This ordinary hope is a subtle expression of fear and a form of suffering.[6]

Solnit's calls for another kind of hope she labels as wise hope.

Wise hope doesn't deny ordinary hope, but at the same time,

looks clearly at things as they actually are – rather than how we might wish things to be.

When we see clearly the suffering entailed in whatever we hoped for,

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[6] The Lion's Roar. Joan Halifax. *Yes We Can Hope*.

that is where we are called to act, even though we may not know what to do next.

Too often - we can become cynical or give up on whatever needs our help -

Losing our hope and even replacing it with negative thoughts.

Buddhist Roshi Joan Halifax, commenting on Solnit's book,

writes of the state of mind of ordinary hope is one where

> So often we become paralyzed by the belief that there is nothing to hope for—that our cancer diagnosis is a one-way street with no exit, that our political situation is beyond repair, that there is no way out of our climate crisis. It becomes easy to think that nothing makes sense anymore, or that we have no power and there's no reason to act.[7]

Both Solnit and Roshi Halifax speak of another kind of hope.

Wise hope, which doesn't mean we deny the realities that cause us so much pain and grief,

but instead, that we see the truth of the suffering found in what is happening –

we see it clearly – and we resolve to do what we can to transform such suffering,

including our despair, our grief, our cynicism.

When we realize that we really don't know what will happen when we work

to transform such suffering, then wise hope comes alive.

Roshi Halifax says that in that spaciousness of uncertainty is the very space we need to act.

Rebecca Solnit writes "that our opponents would love for us to believe that it's hopeless,

that you have no power, that there's no reason to act, that you can't win.

Hope, she affirms, is a gift we don't have to surrender,

a power we don't have to throw away[8]"

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[7] Joan Halifax. Ibid.

[8] Rebecca Solnit. *Hope in the Dark*. 3rd edition. 2015. Xi.

Wise hope doesn't deny the realities of our lives today

– such as the polycrises that Gerzon and Sebree write about.

Wise hope doesn't say that everything was, is or will be fine.

Everywhere we look we can see

tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction.[9]

Rebecca's wise hope is hope that invites us to see the whole picture,

with specific possibilities, that invite or demand that we act.

Rebecca invites us to recognize uncertainty – and states that

Wise Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable,

An alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists….

It's the belief that what we do matters

even though how and when it matters, who and what it may impact,

are things we cannot know beforehand. We may not know them afterwards either,

but they matter just the same, and history is full of people

whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.[10]

Wise hope, Rebecca writes, is the beginning of actions to remedy sufferings.

It is not a substitute for action.[11]

James Baldwin echoed these thoughts when he wrote "not everything that is faced

can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

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[9] Ibid, xiii.

[10] Ibid, xiv.

[11] Ibid, xviii

There is a long history of activists who uphold our UU values of justice, equity and compassion in all relationships.

Wise hope can give us as UUs the courage to act, to plan, to work diligently for positive change.

Let us remember these words of Rev. Dr. King who said "we must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope."

Our second Reading this morning, The Fountain by Denise Levertov,

reminds us, as does Emily Dickinson's poem,

of the enduring power of hope and human resilience.

Levertov's poem challenges us to believe in hope, wise hope,

as an enduring quality of the human spirit.

Don't say, don't say that there is no water.[12]

The waters of renewal are there if through effort and determination,

we work to find and experience them.

And I, too, before your eyes, found footholds and climbed to drink the cool waters[13].

Such relief and solace can be found in even the most unyielding and unexpected places: such as water springing out of a rock.

Levertov's poem The Fountain urges us to remember

the enduring presence of hope and renewal.[14]

And so, Beloveds, wherever we are on the continuum of disappointment, grief, despair, if we are there at all,

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12 Poetry Chaikhana | Denise Levertov - The Fountain (poetry-chaikhana.com)

13 Ibid

14 Interpretation of this poem used in this sermon is found at Explanation of THE FOUNTAIN by DENISE LEVERTOV - Poetry Explorer - Your Free Poetry Website for Classic and Contemporary Poetry

let us learn from those who came before us who used wise hope

to spur them on, in spite of the great challenges of their days.

Our challenges today are great as well, as Gerzon and Sebree so brilliantly tell us

with their model of the polycrises facing us.

May we learn to use wise hope to face our own time in history.

May we work to uphold our UU values

in a world at times quite hostile to what we hold dear.

May we not give up to despair, but resolve to show up, to SHOW UP

and to do whatever we can to make our world a better place.

Peace and love to you.