

THE COURAGE OF WINTER
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January 27, 2019

OPENING WORDS *On Faith ~ Margaret Wheatley*

The journey of perseverance begins with fire, with passion for our cause, with hope to change things.

As the journey continues, passion dissolves into weariness. The obstacles are larger than we expected. This insanity is more than we can bear. But still we travel on, one foot in front of the other. And then there comes a point when we realize that we will not see our work bear fruit before we die. And that's o.k. We feel content that we have planted seeds for some future harvest. That we have met good people. That we have learned many things. That we have survived this far and lived to pass on the stories.

Certainly, we're not the first ones to have our dreams pushed so far into the future that we won't live to see them. Consider Moses or Abraham or Martin Luther King. They each carried clear visions revealed to them by their god, but they also knew they would not live to see these promises fulfilled.

What led them forward was faith, not hope. Faith in the truth of their visions that came from a source beyond petty needs for satisfaction and accomplishment.

Perhaps holding true to the vision and not losing our way is enough for one lifetime.

RESPONSIVE READING *The Wisdom to Survive ~ Wendell Barry #465*

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees
on a ruined place,

 __Renewing, enriching it,

If we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,

 __Then a long time after we are dead

 __the lives our lives prepare will live here,

Their houses strongly placed upon the valley sides,

 __Fields and gardens

 __rich in the windows. The river will run clear,

 __as we will never know it,

And over it, birdsong like a canopy.

 __On the levels of the hills will be green meadows,

 __stock bells in noon shade.

On the steps where greed and ignorance cut down the old forest,

 __An old forest will stand,

 __its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.

The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields.

__In their voices they will hear a music
__risen out of the ground.

They will take nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting.

__Memory, native to this valley, will spread over it
__like a grove, and memory will grow into legend,
__legend into song, song into sacrament.

The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling light.

__This is no paradisaal dream.
__Its hardship is its possibility.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Wind that Wanted to Rest* ~ Sheldon Oberm

(An old, cold winter wind is tired and looks for a place to rest. Everyone shoos him away...until he is welcomed by a young girl.)

MEDITATION *Wild Geese* ~ Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

RESPONSIVE READING *Connections Are Made Slowly* ~ Marge Piercy # 568

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
__You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

More than half a tree is spread out in the soil
under your feet.

__Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.
Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.

__Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.
Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar.

__Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Live a life you can endure: make love that is loving.

__Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble
wilderness to the outside but to us interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows
and lairs.

Live as if you like yourself, and it may happen:

__Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.

This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always,

__For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the
long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

MESSAGE *The Courage of Winter* ~ Rosana Salvaterra

It figures - you want a talk on perseverance, you ask a public health physician. After all, what requires more perseverance than the work of disease prevention, the elimination of health inequities and the preservation of the very health of this planet? My day to day work is one of perseverance, and I continually remind my staff that we in public health are the "cathedral builders" of everlasting health and wellbeing - we can toil away, inspired by our vision, but we will probably not see all the fruits of our labour in our lifetimes. Some kinds of change are harder to achieve, and require perseverance.

I think it is safe to say that people who toil away for years and years, inspired by a vision of what can and should be, are prophetic. When I read about the early history of our UU faith, I can't help but be moved by the courage and foresight of our early Universalist and Unitarian prophets - and what they endured in order to do the work of their cathedral building on our behalf - and it seems to me that to be a prophet calls for a heck of a lot of perseverance.

Being prophetic, and having the perseverance to endure persecution, or ridicule, or shunning or any number of negative experiences, is very much akin to visioning spring, when all around us, we are surrounded by and living in the cold and the darkness of winter.

And that "winter" metaphor? That's what the work of justice-seeking is like. So if we UUs are to be real about our commitment to work for a better world, then we need to get ourselves winterized - just like our cars. Those winter eyes will help us see that times are tough. But when haven't they been this way, for someone? For some group of marginalized or oppressed

people? With our winter eyes, we can see the many opportunities for us to insert ourselves, educate and equip our minds, embolden our hearts and commit to transformative action.

Following Trump's rise to power in the U.S. almost two years ago, some women friends and I decided to read Rebecca Solnit's book *Hope in the Dark* together. "It is a nightmarish time," she writes. "It is a time of hideous economic inequality and climate chaos faster and more devastating than all our predictions."

Solnit begins her book with "Your opponents would love you to believe that it's hopeless, that you have no power, that there's no reason to act, that you can't win. Hope is a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away".

She wrote the book over 15 years ago, at the outset of the Iraq war but released a third edition in 2016. The idea of finding, or making, hope in the dark is not new, neither is it a one-time event. Like winter, it keeps coming. And like winter, a flicker of light will not do - we need to put some logs on that fire if we are to survive.

Reflecting on my own life thus far, it seemed like at every age, there was the threat of darkness - and consequently, a time for sustained, hope generating activity. I consider myself a child of the nuclear arms threat - beginning with early and vague memories of how at any moment, deadly missiles from Cuba were going to plummet to earth, bringing an end to all life on the planet. I lived in terror and anguished over the impending doom. As soon as I was able, I joined the anti-nuclear activists, protesting at the Litton Industries plant in Toronto, where cruise missiles were being manufactured for the arms race. For years, we staged the annual Good Friday Stations of the Cross there, attracting hundreds to the site for a re-enactment of Jesus's final walk to his crucifixion as a way to symbolize how nuclear weapons were crucifying all of humanity. I travelled to Washington where on November 17th, 1980, 2000 women encircled the Pentagon, put gravestones in the lawn, wove yarn across the entrances to symbolically reweave the web of life, and created rituals of mourning and defiance by chanting, yelling, and banging on cans. I joined women from all over the USA and Canada on a peace pilgrimage to us military bases in Honduras, where the Contras, who were terrorizing Nicaragua, were being trained and deployed.

In the UK, the Greenham Common women protested against NATO's decision to site American cruise missiles at the Berkshire site. By February 1982 it had been decided that this was a women-only protest - and this was crucial: a woman's place was not in the home, but at a protest. Women could use their identity as carers and mothers to say, this is about the future safety of our children. They challenged women like me to boycott childbirth - why would we bring children into this world to be incinerated by nuclear weapons? When I found myself unexpectedly pregnant with our first child, I struggled with the fear of what kind of future we would be exposing our daughter.

And now, 35 years later, we find ourselves living at a time of climate disruption – we are surrounded by forest fires, floods and unpredictable weather. Scientists tell us that urgent action is needed now and yet we’ve elected a new provincial government that is busy unravelling policies that will set us back rather than take us forward. Parents and grandparents are filled with those same fears about the legacy we are leaving for our future generations. I am reminded of the Greenham Common women and their call to boycott childbirth – we are back at the brink.

So all this to say that if we are truly justice seekers, we need perseverance because we are in it for the long haul. And together, it can be our spiritual pilgrimage, our Stations of the Cross, our 40 years in the wilderness, our winter. Our spiritual practice, as a prophetic witness starts with making a promise, like we do every week together, and then LIVING it so that it is true. It is not just kindling a flame, but finding ways to keep it alive. The chalice we kindle each time we come together as a beloved community needs to become the embers that help us survive the long winters of oppression and injustice.

Perseverance, especially when applied to working for justice, is the day to day embodiment of courage. We can’t just speak up and then fall asleep. We are not bears, and this is no time to hibernate. As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the importance of religious community, one that is committed to the never-ending search for Truth, the welfare of others, that all people have equal claim to life, liberty and justice and the evidence of an inner grace is found in how we are engaged socially and communally. Clearly we are all called to practice an active hope in the midst of the darkness, an ACTIVE hope where we are willing and knowledgeable participants in bringing about that which we hope for. Rather than waiting to see what happens, Rebecca Solnit reminds us that “we can BE what happens”.

I have found that being a member of this community renews my courage and my hope. Solnit reminds us that hope and action feed each other. She quotes Vaclav Havel, when he was still imprisoned and Czechoslovakia was still a Soviet satellite – he wrote “Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.”

I can recall several years ago, how our Indigenous Working Group embraced the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action as a starting place for our long work together because was a good journey to embark upon, together. Looking back, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a tremendous gift from the residential school survivors to the rest of us. It has set us upon a journey of healing and restoration. As Solnit would tell us, it has “braced us for entering that dark future with boldness.” She goes on to add “To recognize the

momentousness of what has happened is to apprehend what might happen. Inside the word EMERGENCY is emerge, from an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters."

This environmental emergency we face demands much of us. We need both urgent and immediate action, as well as perseverance. We aren't going to be able to wrap this one up quickly and then go home. Rebecca Solnit warns in her book that "it's always too soon to go home". Just when you think winter is over, we get the ice storm of last April! If we are going to be successful in our climate justice work, we will need to topple giants, and that's going to need? PERSEVERANCE.

Denise Levertov, in her poem "Beginners" finishes with the words "We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle. So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture; so much is in the bud."

So perseverance is to be "in the bud" and to stay in the bud, bonded to each other, warmed by those embers that we keep burning in this sacred, authentic and activist community. As UUs, our daily lived experience of respect for the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the commitment to a democratic process and our dedication to justice, equity and compassion in all our relations, including our primary one with this planet and all who share it with us, is our spiritual practice that cultivates both our courage and our perseverance.

We need to face our winter with realism, creating an active hope through our collective actions. The work of justice can be a spiritual practice. It is a practice in my life that has always given me meaning, has led me to a deeper experience of life and which ultimately led me to join this community - for truly, it is here where we can say together "they tried to bury us but they did not know that we were seeds".

RESPONSIVE CLOSING WORDS

~ Jill Ann Terwilliger

For the longing that told you it was time for a change. 'We give you our blessing'.

For the courage it took to answer the call. 'We give you our blessing'.

For the choices already made and for the daily choices that will shape the life ahead of you. 'We give you our blessing'.

For the communities that have shown you who you are and the new communities waiting to discover you in your new ventures. 'We give you our blessing'.

For the great mystery of what lies ahead. 'We give you our blessing'.

May you see something of beauty along the way, touch hands with those you love, and give more than you get.

May it be so. Amen