

## **Hope and Courage**

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John Murray, the father of American Universalism, was speaking to Universalist missionaries when he said it. Those famous words that are captured in our hymnal as number 704, “Go out into the highways and byways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage, preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” What an exhortation! It is little wonder that we Unitarian Universalists still recite those words as part of our liturgy. You have a call to action, a spiritual practice, some teaching and instruction, and it is all grounded in a pretty good one sentence summary of early Universalist theology: the kindness and everlasting love of God. It is truly one for the ages.

John Murray knew what Universalism was all about. He didn't need any denominational committees or pamphlets to explain it to him. He had argued against it for the early part of his preaching career, only

to be converted by the opponents he had sought to defeat. Universalism held for him a message of love and compassion, not only about God, but about all of humanity. It was a message that spoke to his heart and to the hearts and minds of many others in his day. What else could one do but go out and preach it? This got me thinking, what is our compelling message for today? John Murray's message worked for him, what works for us? For many people in our nation there is still the experience of hell; both the fear of it in the next life and the actuality of it in this one. What message of hope and courage can we bring to people? It is all well and good to say that Unitarian Universalism brings hope to people who are in the midst of fear and pain. I have said that myself many times, and will say it again many more times. But what is the actual content of that message of hope? Hope is just a description of the message, it isn't the message itself. I think we need to go deeper. Join me as I quest to go deeper into a modern Unitarian Universalist message of hope and courage that would be relevant to today's world.

My good friend Mark is minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Des Moines Iowa. Mark and I have been friends since seminary. He met and married an Iowa girl when he lived briefly in Omaha Nebraska—he recommended the experience so much that I did the same! Mark and Susan were at my wedding, and he and I served on the UUMA Chapter together.

One day, this must have been a couple of summers ago now, Mark was up early in the morning on a Saturday. His wife was out running errands and he was dressed in some pretty grubby clothes. They were repainting the house and fixing it up before they put it on the market to sell. Suddenly the phone rang. A woman on the other end asked if he was available to do a wedding on short notice. “How short a notice?” “We are on our way to your house, what is your address?” “Hang on a second,” Mark said, “This isn’t Las Vegas. I don’t do things like that.” “Well time is of the essence.” “Why is that?” “Well two of my neighbors want to get married. They are college students at Iowa State University. They are both men. They have a wedding license.” “Come on over.”

You see right around the time the Iowa Caucuses were heating up, a judge ruled that same sex marriage should be permissible. However, shortly after making that ruling he figured that he really shouldn’t do that on his own and that the Iowa legislature should pass a law permitting same sex marriage in the state of Iowa. The length of time between the judge’s ruling and his taking it back; four hours. The number of same sex weddings performed in Iowa within that four hour window: one—on Mark’s front lawn. As he told me the story, he had no robes at home, nothing written down, and didn’t even have a clean shirt that one would wear to church. He found a polo that seemed respectable, but had to wear some grungy pants. He happened to have a

stole at home. He sort of remembered some of the words he usually says at weddings and union ceremonies. He could make it work given the extraordinary short notice.

A few minutes later the two men, and their friend who called Mark on their behalf, arrived at his house. So too did camera crews from the four networks and CNN. It was a brief service there on the front lawn. Not a lot of pomp and circumstance for this one. Mark kind of went through the usual ceremony. He noted that this was for all of those couples who are united without a license. And then he signed it. He noted when he wrote the date on the license that it was his own wedding anniversary. He said so out loud, and it was that sound bite that played on the evening news. His wife thought he was an idiot. Most of our wives do.

There are many lessons we can take from this true story. Always keep a clean shirt and a copy of your last wedding at home, is the first thing that occurred to me. Mostly though it is, “Know what your message to the world is going to be before you go out into the highways and byways.” Think it through ahead of time before you need it, because you never know when you are going to need it.

There are two parts of our UU message of hope to the world. The first is this, “Everything is interconnected.” Oh, you could say “respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part.” That

is fine. To me it's just a slightly wordier version. You could say, as the Heart Sutra does, that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. That is the cryptic mystical version, if you will. Whichever version is your favorite it all comes down to "Everything is interconnected."

Of course Daloz notes that in the context of social justice one of the first things to really understand is our interdependence. What affects one person affects us all. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" Dr. King writes from his cell in Birmingham Alabama. But you need not be a mystic or a social activist to understand this principle. The doom and gloom in our nations economy comes from bad home mortgages. These bad mortgages crippled the financial institutions that bought them or bought shares in them. When their credit went bad, money stopped moving around, and the whole thing came to a screeching halt. Soon banks in Europe, Japan, China, and all over the world were in the same downward spiral. The bailouts our government has given out has been mimicked in most of the industrial nations of the world. All of it was interdependent. What affects one, affects them all.

Everything is interconnected. This can be a joyous thing too. It means we are never truly alone. We live with our memories of our loved ones. It means that what we do matters, because the ripple effects of our actions spread out to others, both positively and negatively. It is up to us to bless the world with our life. To act in such a way that our

highest values of love and trust and compassion are made real. That is half of our message to the world.

The other half is this: “Everything, and everyone, is uniquely itself.” This is individualism in the best sense of the word. Each person is particular, specific, and unrepeatable. No one in the entire world has lived the life I have lived. No one has learned exactly the same lessons that I have. No one has loved like I have. No one has cried like I have. And the same is true of each and every one of you. No one has the same story to tell; not exactly. There are commonalities of course, but each of us is a one-of-a-kind gem; only more precious. Sure it is possible to become too enamored with ourselves and fall into that narcissistic illusion known as individualism. But perhaps that is more the pathological extreme than the everyday reality.

The Hindu scriptures known as the Upanishads take this even a step further. They say that the greatest joy is understanding, truly and deeply understanding, that the entirety of the universe, the Ground of All Being, resides in each one of us. You may or may not wish to take it to this mystical interpretation, but imagine what that could mean. That potentially each one of us holds somewhere in ourselves a little fragment of the divine; just a small nugget of God in our hearts. Amazing to think about.

Any way you take it, the humanist version that we are all unique creatures with meaningful life stories to tell, or the more theistic version that we are all the children of God, I think it is still the same Unitarian Universalist message of hope that we have to offer the world. You see this clearly in the story about the wedding Mark did on his front lawn. He had been involved in an interfaith clergy group in Des Moines that was working to get same sex marriage legal in the state of Iowa. That is how the woman who called him got his name and number; from one of his colleagues. In the interviews he has done since, Mark insists that he was just in the right place at the right time. Any one of his UU colleagues would have done the same in his situation. I think he is right. Because Unitarian Universalism has a message of hope for the world. A message that says that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people are connected to all of us. What happens to them happens to everybody. Each and every person, gay or straight, has that unique story to tell that makes their life a precious jewel. Each person is a manifestation of the Holy, and it is only our lack of spiritual understanding that prevents us from seeing that. Of course you do the wedding. Not because of the publicity, but because you have done them a million times before. Because it is the right thing to do.

Well I have spoken about our message of hope, what of our message of courage? Actually courage is not so much a message in and of itself. Courage is our willingness to take a risk and speak out on the

side of hope. Courage is about being out there even when it is scary and hard, because you believe we are connected and each one of us is uniquely themselves. This need not mean pamphleting your neighborhood. In fact that probably would not be very effective. Courage is about speaking out about who we are in large and small ways.

I have an idea about how we might do this. What if our church had a big sign on Concord Pike for people to see as they drove by?! What, did I touch upon a sensitive topic? Actually people ask me about the sign all the time. “When are we getting our sign back, and will it work?” It reminds me of the time I was stuck on an airplane that sat on the tarmac for four hours. It was a nightmare. Periodically the pilot would come on the intercom and say, “They are doing repairs, just ten more minutes folks!” After the third hour of this pilot promising that we would take off sometime in the next ten minutes, my fellow passengers and I would groan every time he made that announcement. If you don’t know when we are going to leave, then keep quiet about it. Make no false promises about a process over which you obviously have no control. A good lesson for the new minister regarding the sign. I won’t make promises as to when it will return. Soon. Perhaps in the next ten minutes.

Other than discussions about its return, it is interesting to hear people talk about the sign. You see, despite my status of being the

newly installed Senior Minister, I am still pretty new around here and can see some things with my newcomer's eyes still. One definition of the word "faith" is "belief in things not seen." That would mean our sign on Concord Pike qualifies. This is a test of our faith. One observer noted that when it was there, but had a malfunctioning LED screen, it was worse in a way. A LED screen that doesn't work is like proclaiming to the world "We are the church with nothing to say!" That is worse than actually saying nothing.

However, I would point out that churches, like individuals, get anxious about the things they care about the most. When one of our collective values as a congregation is threatened, or we perceive it to be threatened, the natural response is a feeling of anxiety. This is no huge revelation to you, I imagine. This actually happens all the time in all churches. But to a new minister, the sources of congregational anxiety are a clue to the values that that church holds dear. To be anxious about a sign that doesn't work, and then is no longer here because it is being repaired at the workshop, tells me that our church cares about putting out a message to the world. We are a church that is not content to merely be only concerned with ourselves, but feel that it must take our good news, our message of hope out beyond our walls and into the community. I know that because you don't like it when you don't do it.

Imagine if the sign on Concord Pike, one of the busiest streets in North Wilmington, was broken and then missing, and no one noticed.

No one cared that it was gone. What would that mean? We would all be much happier, I guess, not having this be a source of anxiety for us. But we would not be healthier. In fact we would have a big problem; no one cares about anything other than this. We would have no sense of vision or possibility for the future. The very fact that there are people here who care that deeply about our message to the world, means that courage is a strongly held value here. We want to be the church with something to say. That is good. John Murray would be proud.

As Unitarian Universalist we inherit a message of hope. It is a message desperately needed by a hurting and bleeding world. It is a message that is a paradox; two things that seem in contradiction to each other but are actually in creative tension with each other. Everything is interconnected and everything and everybody is uniquely themselves. That is a message that can inspire hope. Let us now not hold on to it too tightly. Let us have the courage, as Murray implored his contemporaries, to move out into the literal and figurative highways and byways to share our hope. It will have a slightly different content depending upon the speaker, but that is ok. As long as hope is there, courage will buoy the effort. May both hope and courage swell in our hearts and overflow out into our lives and in the world. Amen Blessed Be.