

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Living With Hopelessness”

Rev. Sam Trumbore April 10, 2022

Readings

from the book “Embracing Hopelessness” by Dr. Michel de la Torres

Take, for example, Pope Benedict Sixteen’s argument:

“Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey” (2007:par. 1) Speaking from the palatial Vatican, it becomes disingenuous to claim an arduous life. Even more, the ideology of some salvation history makes resistance futile, forcing the dissenter to question their own sanity. Easier to assimilate is believing in some heavenly goal that makes the present arduous life acceptable, to commit to actions derived from the dominant worldview, even when said acts are detrimental to our being because of the blessed assurance that our faithfulness in the here-and-now is redeemed in some future eschaton.

However, rather than accepting dominant narratives of the basis of fabled future utopias, praxis that is based on the lived experience and worldviews of the poor and dispossessed is a primary act of resistance. Why? Because it refuses the normalized dominant narratives and codes. Resistance may not lead to some liberated utopia; nevertheless, it does enable the liberating process of decolonizing one’s mind. In short, it leads to salvation here-and-now. That is, of course, a double-edged statement: it is to deny a promised transcendent future, and it is to resist, or reject, any Christian belief or teaching that presumes that to imitate Jesus is to accept abuse, pain, humiliation, or violation as “carrying the cross.” (pp31-32)

Mark 15:34-37 (NIV)

And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, why have you forsaken me?” When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.” Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

Sermon

Unitarianism, Universalism and Unitarian Universalism have always been hopeful and optimistic, faith traditions. That was especially true after the Civil War with the abolition of slavery. That was a time of great leaps forward in science and technology. Advances in transportation and global trade was creating enormous wealth. A popular example of our optimistic faith comes from Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke. In 1886, Clarke published his Unitarian revision of Calvin’s five key points of theology. Clarke’s restatement can be summarized as:

"The Fatherhood of God, The Brotherhood of Man, The Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, and The Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever."

Many nineteenth century churches enthusiastically adopted these five points as their core belief statement, even reciting it on Sunday morning.

In the lifetime of many here, we experienced a bit of a surge of this kind of optimistic energy with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Soviet Union. The 1990's were a time of great expansion of global trade, science and especially technology with the development of the microcomputer and the Internet. Except for Y2K fears, we began this new millennium with a great deal of optimism that we could solve the world's problems and make it a better place through the spread of democracy.

So much has changed in the last 22 years. 9/11. The war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The failed Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war and ISIS. The 2008 financial meltdown. Overwhelming student debt burdens. The weakening of democracy around the world and the rise of authoritarian leaders. Especially right here with the Trump Presidency and his attempt to overturn the 2020 election on January 6th. And now, with having to adjust to living with COVID, the disruption of the global supply chain driving inflation and now the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the dire warnings about climate change, we are not living in times that inspire "onward and upward forever" thinking.

The cumulative effect of the troubles of the world and the increasing polarization fed by social media is making it increasingly difficult to be hopeful about the future of humanity right now.

At the beginning of my sabbatical in February, I attended the COVID delayed Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association's Convocation in San Diego. I value attending UU ministerial continuing education events, like this one, because it gives me a chance to hear what my colleagues are thinking about, what they are reading, and how they are interpreting and adapting to the times. I keep careful notes of books, resources, and authors mentioned. The President of our Meadville Lombard Seminary in Chicago, Dr. Elias Ortega, spoke during one of the presentations and mentioned a social ethics scholar who teaches at Iliff Seminary in Colorado by the name of Dr. Michel de la Torres. Torres is Cuban American, bilingual and deeply engaged with the world south of our border and developing nations around the world.

What caught my attention, was Dr. Ortega mention that Torres had written a book with a positive perspective on hopelessness as a response to the state of the world. Googling him took me to a couple of YouTube presentations he had done as well as a sermon he offered at the UU congregation in Tulsa that addressed the topic of hopelessness. He drew me in with what I saw in the videos and read in his book titled, "Embracing Hopelessness."

Before I begin to open some of his ideas, a word of caution. There is a medical dimension to hopelessness that needs to be addressed. Hopelessness correlates with depression, despair, grief, and suicide. It isn't clear if hopelessness leads to these conditions or if they are symptomatic of them. We also know that denial is a very powerful capacity that shields the mind from the harmful effects of hopelessness. One can experience hopelessness about the aging process which can't be avoided. Then, in the next moment, live as if youth is eternal and we'll live forever. The power of our minds to compartmentalize is quite strong.

The hopelessness that Dr. Torres focuses on is the lived experience of the marginalized and oppressed.

Dr. Torres started developing his theology of hopelessness in 2006 after taking a group of white students to visit a squatter village in Mexico to learn from the poor. He writes:

During our outing we spoke with many families living in horrific conditions. That evening as we processed the day's activities, one student struggling with what she had witnessed, shared that, in spite of the miserable conditions in which these people lived, she still saw "hope in the eyes of the little girls." Hope, as a middle-class privilege, soothes the conscience of those complicit with oppressive structures, lulling them to do nothing except look forward to a salvific future where every wrong will be righted and every tear wiped away ... Hope is possible when privilege allows for a future ... for so many from minoritized communities where surviving into adulthood is itself a challenge, and where skin pigmentation ensures lack of opportunities to wealth and health, hope runs in short supply. My immediate response was to explain that this same little girl in whose eyes my student saw hope would more than likely be selling her body in a few years to put food on the table or be trapped in an abusive marriage ... [in that moment] Among the disenfranchised, the dispossessed, the least of the least, I discovered an ethos where hope is not apparent; rather, it is imposed by those who might be endangered if the marginalized were to instead act.
(page 5)

Throughout his book, Dr. Torres makes a strong case for the futility of hope for the vast majority of those living today on this planet. The world-wide interlocking systems of white supremacy, colonialism, resource extraction, wage slavery and oppression aren't going to be dismantled anytime soon if ever. Reasoned expectations for liberating social change as a foundation for action are practically non-existent.

Hope, he argues, is a luxury of the privileged who have all the reigns of power at their disposal. The scariest hope for him is the hope for salvation in the next life. This anesthesia is peddled by religion to keep the wretched in their place, accepting the hardships of their existence for the promise of heaven in the hereafter. It also justifies the abuse of their masters demanding slaves obey to qualify for that reward. The privileged elite then can detach from the slave's wellbeing knowing *whether* they suffer in this life or not isn't of great importance. Feed, clothe and shelter them just enough to keep them productive and extract their labor because their reward will happen after they die.

Not only are the marginalized oppressed by their overlords, but they are also written out of history and their very existence hardly mentioned as part of the salvific narrative of the progress and triumph of the elite at the end of time. Their existence isn't part of the conversation about the coming rapture and paradise. Their lives may not even be considered in the final judgment except as a reference point for the virtues of the elite.

This isn't the religion of Jesus we get from the Gospels.

The first hymn we sang, When, Jesus, Looked from Olivet, speaks to how disaffected Jesus was from the power center of his religion. Most coming to Jerusalem for Passover would have been awed by the splendor of the walled city and the Temple. But instead of awe, Jesus weeps.

The combined heavy taxation from both the Romans and the Temple were breaking subsistence farmers. The Romans came up with a clever way to loan money to the farmers if they couldn't pay their taxes. If they couldn't pay those loans back with interest, the Romans would confiscate their land as collateral. To be landless, homeless, meant then, as it does today, desperate poverty. Day laborers could only make enough in one day to buy one loaf of bread, enough to keep them from starving. No work, no food. A whole new class of poor that didn't exist in Israel before suffered greatly without hope. These were the people Jesus ministered to before going to Jerusalem. He understood their oppression and the interlocking systems that trapped them in poverty.

When Jesus made his symbolic protests, entering Jerusalem on a donkey (a reversal of the usual entrance of dignitaries on fine horses with an entourage) and overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple, I doubt he had any hope of making any real change. He behaved just as prophets of old did, reminding the rulers of their betrayal of the covenant between God and Israel. As he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, he knew the terrible fate before him, a bitter cup he didn't want to drink. Jesus had no hope of some supernatural redemption after death. Yet he still acted.

The critical part of this story, I highlight this morning, is Jesus had no hope. He knew the futility of his actions. Yet he acted anyway. He did what he believed was right. And recognized he very well might pay with his life for those actions.

And here is the core of my message for you for today. The actions we need to take in the world cannot be conditioned on our hope for some salvific outcome. There are times we just need to step forward and do what is right without consideration for the outcomes. This isn't a rational cost-benefit calculation. This action comes from a different place, from our core values, our core commitments, and from an even deeper place.

Motivating the prophetic action of Jesus was a deep love and appreciation of the marginalized, oppressed, unclean, violated, rejected people who he moved among and who moved his heart. He came to Jerusalem to bring their voices to the halls of power and to have them be heard.

Jesus acted from love and not from hope.

There are so many forces today working against hope for the future. I've been very discouraged watching the polarization of the Trump Presidency and the rise of authoritarian leadership around the world. The damaging effects of too many human beings living on this planet and climate change, as well as the unresolved hatreds between ethnic and religious groups around the world. Rather than sharing power peacefully through democracy, autocratic power is undermining democratic principles. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is proving false the vision that interconnecting global trade can keep nations at peace with each other. And the trade blockade with Russia is revealing our deep dependence on fossil fuel to feed the world.

We are not living in hopeful times and worldwide suffering is likely to get much, much worse, driving more war and conflict.

Living without hope **does not mean** abandoning meaningful action, far from it. Action becomes an even more important response. Rather than from hope however, it must come from our love and care for those who are oppressed and marginalized. Those of us who are privileged and can have a

US Passport, need to know, at a personal level, what is going on in the world, and have contact with the suffering, not to see hope in the eyes of little girls, but rather to witness their suffering and recognize how our nation and our world is complicit in that suffering. We need to recognize at the heart level, the humanity, the inherent worth and dignity of the oppressed rather than pity them from a distance.

Dr. Torres puts it this way:

The choice to live a life committed to the gospel message of liberation (salvation) is never based on some future reward in the hereafter. It is based on the meaning and purpose that praxis toward liberation gives to my life in the here-and-now. Following the example of Jesus's ultimate act of solidarity with the least of these, demonstrated by picking up the cross and following them to crucifixion, becomes the model to emulate.

This is not easy, nor pleasant, nor safe work. It is work most of us will not do all by ourselves. But as a religious community, we can support and encourage each other to grow our capacity to love, our capacity to feel our own pain and the pain of others.

If there is any redemption, any salvation to be found after this life, it will not be different from what we find in this life. Acting from love for the benefit of others is its own reward. Whether bringing a meal to someone recovering from surgery, helping a child to read at Sheridan Academy, or advocating for social change at the Capitol down Washington Avenue, our actions can make a positive difference.

May we take inspiration from Jesus this morning, cultivate our capacity for love, and be willing to put our love and our faith in action.