

“The Courage to Hope” – Sermon Notes
Rev. Aaron Payson
Sunday, November 27, 2022
Unitarian Society of Hartford

Sermon contains three questions that I want you to answer:

1. What does fear tell you to do?
2. If you are hope, what does hope look, sound or act like?
3. What does it take to truly see yourself?

I want to begin by returning to a story that I shared as part of a nugget earlier this month, one told by Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron:

Once there was a young warrior. Her teacher told her that she had to do battle with fear. She didn't want to do that. It seemed too aggressive; it was scary; it seemed unfriendly. But the teacher said she had to do it and gave her the instructions for the battle. The day arrived. The student warrior stood on one side, and fear stood on the other. The warrior was feeling very small, and fear was looking big and wrathful. They both had their weapons. The young warrior roused herself and went toward fear, prostrated three times, and asked, "May I have permission to go into battle with you?" Fear said, "Thank you for showing me so much respect that you ask permission." Then the young warrior said, "How can I defeat you?" Fear replied, "My weapons are that I talk fast, and I get very close to your face. Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say. If you don't do what I tell you, I have no power. You can listen to me, and you can have respect for me. You can even be convinced by me. But if you don't do what I say, I have no power." In that way, the student warrior learned how to defeat fear.

What does fear tell you to do?

Return to the reading. . .

[\(https://thegreenmarketoracle.com/2021/01/30/eco-anxiety-for-finding-hope/\)](https://thegreenmarketoracle.com/2021/01/30/eco-anxiety-for-finding-hope/)

Sounds a lot like Cornell West whom I've often quoted about Hope. But in one interview, West demonstrates this with his love of music.

<https://www.masterclass.com/classes/cornel-west-teaches-philosophy/chapters/hope-and-optimism-love-and-loss>)

[JAZZ MUSIC] - I think it's very important to always draw a distinction between hope and optimism. Hope and optimism are two very, very different things. Hope is about making a leap beyond the evidence that is given to you. Optimism usually looks at the evidence and sees whether it's possible to infer that things are going to get better. So you see, hope is over against the evidence sometimes.

Optimism oftentimes, again, has to do with being a spectator. How do things look, how are things going down there. Is the evidence allowing us to lead us toward a conclusion that we ought to be optimistic. Whereas hope is in the mess, in the muck, in the mire, in

the funk. And it helps create new evidence. Because when you are in the funk, in the mire, in the mess, your actions, your attitude, your inspiration, your impact on others can create new evidence.

And so it's dynamic., It's forever changing, because you are a participant. You're not a spectator. So that from the very beginning, hope is something that is much deeper than optimism. And it's no accident then that hope and despair go hand in hand. Hope is a wrestling with the despair. Over and over again, but never allowing despair to have the last word to dampen your fire to sustain your hope in your quest for truth, goodness, beauty, and maybe the Holy.

I mean, great Ludwig Beethoven used to get up every morning and he said--

[CLASSICAL MUSIC]

He would say, "how do I look unflinchingly at all of the evil in the world and still attempt to not just love beauty, but create something beautiful?" And this is Beethoven not just writing the "Eroica," or "The Third Symphony" or "The Ninth Symphony," or "Opus 131," one of the saddest pieces of music, and yet some of the most sublime pieces of music ever written, right before he died. But this is the same Beethoven who was losing his hearing and is going deaf more so, day by day, week by week. How can somebody going deaf still write such beautiful music.

So when he talks about the darkness of the world, the dimness of the world, it's not just what is going on in Vienna. It's just it's not just Napoleon, expansion and domination, and his critique of expansion and domination. It's that "Ode to Joy," the very end of "The Ninth Symphony." A deaf man, a grand figure, genius, tied to a tradition, holding on to hope for his very life with his very life. Is he wrestling with despair? Absolutely. Absolutely.

So that when we talk about hope, when we talk about despair, when we talk about optimism, we really are talking about our conception of what it means to be human in time and the three dimensions of time-- the past, the present, and the future. And what will be our relation to the future in light of our present given our understanding of the past. And will we have hope. And when you say have hope, hope is not just a virtue-- it is a. Verb you have to be a hope to really have hope.

It is not just a virtue – it is a verb. You have to be a hope to really have hope.

If you are hope. What does hope look like, or sound like, or act like?

Let me share with you another Buddhist tale, this one begins the way all such stories begin. . .

<https://purposefocuscommitment.medium.com/leadership-story-the-wise-teachers-test-of-integrity-d81e3900fb04>)

Once upon a time on the outskirts of a big city in Japan there stood an old temple. From a young age boys who wanted to study Buddhism would come to live in the temple and to learn from the master teacher, a Buddhist monk.

One day the Buddhist monk who ran this small temple decided to teach his young students a lesson. He gathered them around him, and spoke, "My dear students, as you can see, I am growing old, and slow. I can no longer provide for the needs of the temple as I once did. I know I have not yet taught you to work for money, and so I can only think of one thing that can keep our school from closing." The students drew close with eyes wide.

"Our nearby city is full of wealthy people with more money in their purses than they could ever need. I want you to go into the city and follow those rich people as they walk through the crowded streets, or when they walk down the deserted alleyways. When no one is looking, and only when no one is looking, you must steal their purses from them. That way we will have enough money to keep our school alive."

"But Master," the boys chorused in disbelief, "you have taught us that it is wrong to take anything that does not belong to us."

"Yes, indeed I have," the old monk replied. "It would be wrong to steal if it were not absolutely necessary. And remember, you must not be seen! If anyone can see you, you must not steal! Do you understand?"

The boys looked nervously from one to the other. Had their beloved teacher gone mad? His eyes shone with intensity such as they had never seen before. "Yes, Master," they said quietly.

"Good," he said. "Now go, and remember, you must not be seen!"

The boys got up and quietly began to file out of the temple building. The old monk rose slowly and watched them go.

When he turned back inside, he saw that one student was still standing quietly in the corner of the room. "Why did you not go with the others?" he asked the boy. "Do you not want to help save our temple?"

"I do, Master," said the boy quietly. "But you said that we had to steal without being seen. I know that there is no place on Earth that I would not be seen, for I would always see myself."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the teacher. "That is just the lesson that I hoped my students would learn, but you were the only one to see it. Run and tell your friends to return to the temple before they get us into trouble."

The boy ran and got his friends who were nervously gathered just out of sight of the temple, trying to decide what to do. When they returned, the Master told them the words the boy had spoken and they all understood the lesson.

What does it take to truly see yourself?

Closing

Quote - Maria Popova, from The Courage to Resist Cynicism

(<https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/05/16/annenbergs-graduation-remarks/>)

Our culture has created a reward system in which you get points for tearing down rather than building up, and for besieging with criticism and derision those who dare to work and live from a place of constructive hope. Don't just resist cynicism — fight it actively, in yourself and in those you love and in the communication with which you shape culture. Cynicism, like all destruction, is easy, it's lazy. There is nothing more difficult yet more gratifying in our society than living with sincere, active, constructive hope for the human spirit. This is the most potent antidote to cynicism, and it is an act of courage and resistance today.
