

Holding On to Hope©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on January 20, 2019

Last Sunday many of you heard me speak from this very pulpit about the benefits of letting go. My intention today is to have us look at the other side of the coin. Today, on the day before the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, I want us to think about the benefit of holding on. Specifically, I want us to consider the benefit of holding on to hope. Last week as we pondered the possibility of letting go, we learned about Buddhist teachings and scripture that speak to the topic. Our focus of holding on to hope arises from the religious and cultural experience of a large group of people who lived on this continent long after the Buddha's death.

I am referring here specifically to people of African ancestry who were either brought to this country, usually in chains and against their will, or their progeny. I am talking about people who were brought here to be sold into slavery, as if they were nothing more than property. I am speaking of people who were born into slavery, who knew nothing other than being considered and treated as property. Finally, and just as importantly, I am referring to people who, to this day, live with the intergenerational trauma that is the result of slavery.

Before we begin talking about holding on to hope today, I believe it is important for us to consider a bit of the history of slavery in this country. The first African slaves arrived in this part of the world near the very beginning of the 14th century. It wasn't until 1581 when the first African slaves made it to the shores of what is now the continental U.S. Interestingly, no laws were established on this continent regarding slavery until 60 years later. In 1641 Massachusetts, which was not the bastion of liberalism it is today, became the first colony to adopt specific laws legalizing slavery. For the next 224 years, until 1865, hundreds of thousands of slaves of African descent were bought and sold, worked and punished, as if they were no more than livestock. Many were treated considerably worse than livestock. These people had no freedom, no "rights" as we think of them today. And most had little, if any, material possessions. The vast majority of slaves during this almost 300 year time period had next to nothing to let go of other than their lives. They experienced pain and suffering that quite probably none of us can imagine. Yet somehow, against all odds, they endured. Many lost their lives while still enslaved. In spite of this, as a group, they endured. And as one of my theology school professors often said to her class, they made a way out of no way. How did they possibly do that? They made a way out of no way by finding and holding on to the message of hope that was and is the very foundation of the religion of their captors—namely Christianity. Christianity proclaims that Jesus lived to provide salvation and salvation was what those who were enslaved needed desperately. Religious faith, then, became a significant element of what we might consider the rope of hope that black slaves reached for and clung to.

Many slaves learned and placed their faith in the key messages of Christianity—messages that include salvation, freedom, love of one's neighbor, and caring for those in need. They put these messages to music and they sang their songs of faith and hope to get them through the day. Our hymnal includes a number of such songs—songs like "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," "I'm On My Way," "No More Auction Block for

Me,” and “Kum ba Yah.” Songs such as these are often referred to today as African American spirituals. These songs were strands in the rope of hope for African slaves as well as their descendants. Long after slavery ended, songs based on Christian teachings and Bible verses continued to inspire and maintain hope for many of the descendants of slavery. The song the children led us in earlier, “This Little Light of Mine,” is a good example. This simple song played an important role in the civil rights movement that Dr. King championed. Along with “We Shall Overcome,” another African American spiritual, “This Little Light of Mine” has been sung at countless marches, protests and worship services as a means of affirming the power of hope.

But the rope of hope involved more than braids of religious faith which held the promise of salvation in an afterlife. One of the other important messages in Christianity is justice. Martin Luther King, Jr. often quoted a line from the Book of Amos in the Hebrew Bible. “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.” In citing this Biblical verse, he was inviting a larger cross-section of people in this country to grab hold of and to anchor the rope of hope. On March 7, 1965, after white authorities and vigilantes in Alabama killed people who were advocating for voting rights, King put out a call to religious leaders from across America. His telegrams and public statements were, and here I quote, “calling on religious leaders from all over the nation to join us on Tuesday in our peaceful, nonviolent march for freedom.” I am sure many of you know that story. The march drew religious leaders and people of faith to confront vestiges of slavery—vestiges such as racism, white supremacy, segregation and discrimination. The march was successful in bringing significant attention to the inequality that existed in this country at the time. And it also resulted in meaningful civil rights legislation.

I wish I was able to say that the struggle for freedom and equality is over, but I can't. Today, the struggle continues. If you follow the news you have surely read or seen multiple stories that indicate there is significant work to be done. As the work continues, hope will need to be encouraged and maintained. The recent news story about Iowa Representative Steve King may offer a glimmer of hope. The fact that leaders from both political parties in our country are paying attention to calls for an end to racist comments from elected officials is a good sign. We can weave this story into the rope of hope to make it stronger.

So far my attention regarding holding on to hope has been on a particular group of people—people of African descent who continue to suffer from the vestiges of slavery in our country. While it makes a good deal of sense that I have spoken to this issue on the day before the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, I want to expand my focus at this point. I want to expand my focus because I believe it is essential that all of us seriously consider the importance of holding on to hope.

There is an issue today that is going to test all of us in the days ahead. And I can confidently say that this issue will challenge our ability to maintain hope for the future. The issue I am referring to is global climate change.

The best scientific minds in the world are in agreement that the world's climate is changing and the change is being driven by us, human beings. Over the past few centuries our way of life has become increasingly connected to, and I would say shackled to, fossil fuels. Unwittingly and unintentionally, we have become slaves to our advancing standard of living. We have become increasingly dependent on our modern

conveniences, many of which are made from or are powered by fossil fuels. Scientists are telling us that the time has come when we must break the chains and free ourselves from our reliance on these fuels. They tell us that only by doing so can we avert an ecological catastrophe greater than anything that has occurred since humans first appeared on the earth. Any of you who have invested time or energy into learning about global climate change know that the predictions are dire and the current proposed solutions to the problem are limited and inadequate. And it doesn't help that the highest elected official of our country views global climate change as a hoax.

Today, as we consider global climate change, I believe that we need to become students of those who lived in slavery earlier in our country's history. We need to think about how we are going to get free of the chains that bind us to fossil fuels. What, we all wonder, is it going to take? I don't know all of the answers to that question but I do have one or two. It is going to take a great deal, possibly all that we have. Quoting my former theology professor, we will need to make a way out of no way. Making a way out of no way will require at least two things. First, it will require that we learn how to better manage our craving for more and more material things. Those of you who were present last Sunday will hear echos here of my sermon, "Letting Go." If you weren't present last week you can find that sermon on the UUFB website. Second, it will require that we have hope—hope that solutions can be found to the problem we humans have created.

So where do we turn to find and foster hope. As I mentioned earlier, many of the African slaves turned to religion. Will we, like them, be able to find hope strong enough to sustain us in our religious faith? Will we look to our Seven Principles and Six Sources for hope and guidance? It is my sincere hope that we will. Hope and guidance can be found in the fifth of our Six Sources, "humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." Science has alerted us to the issue of global climate change and we will need to rely heavily on science to help us discern the best courses of action to address it. We can also turn to our Sixth Source together with our Seventh Principle. The Sixth Source identifies "spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." And our Seventh Principle goes hand in hand with that, "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." For those of you who didn't attend the UUFB Annual Meeting following last week's service, I would invite you to read the Mission Statement which is printed on the front cover of your Order of Service, at the bottom. Last week the members of this Fellowship voted to add the final line of that Statement, "sustain our living planet." And shortly after our service ends this morning the Environmental Justice Task Force will be meeting in the classroom on the other side of the wall behind me. Clearly, here at UUFB we take our Seventh Principle seriously. We can turn to the teachings and the values of our religious faith to find hope and guidance. And just as importantly, we need to turn to one another when our hope is flagging. We will need to practice reaching out with our hands and with our hearts when we ourselves or another is feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. There is no possibility of making it through the difficulties that lie ahead by depending primarily or exclusively on rugged individualism.

As we face the intensifying threats associated with global climate change, I would encourage us to heed the words of Francis Ellen Watkins Harper that we heard as our

Chalice was lit. Harper, who was born a free, Black, woman in 1825, was an African-American abolitionist, suffragist, poet, teacher, public speaker and writer. She worked tirelessly to bring an end to the scourge of her time, slavery. May we have her courage, determination and dedication as we address the predominant scourge of our time, global climate change. And may we heed her call to be “beacons of light and hope, people ready and willing to lay time, talent and money on the alter of freedom.” Our work is cut out for us folks, may we step up to the challenge that lies ahead.

So may it be.