

HOPE, FAITH, AND PATIENCE
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The song “Louisiana 1927” briefly tells the story of a great flood which engulfed New Orleans. Randy Newman wrote this song in 1974 to describe events which took place in 1927, but many people find that this song could just as well describe the great flood which engulfed New Orleans in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

My attention returns again and again to these two lines in the song:

Some people got lost in the flood
Some people got away alright

One year ago, why did some people get lost in the flood while some other people got away alright? How did it happen this way?

In a pastoral letter dated September 6, 2005, Rev. Bill Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, offered these reflections about why some people got lost in the flood while some other people got away alright: “These last days have provided a picture of what racism and classism and privilege look like. Racism is not about individual prejudice. Classism is not about individual poverty. And privilege is so often allowed to be invisible. I am so angry. Look at New Orleans. Tens of thousands of American citizens, almost all of them poor and Black, living in unimaginable conditions with no food and water, waited for days while evacuation buses passed them by to pick up tourists from luxury hotels. Citizens in devastated small towns on the Gulf Coast are still without evacuation or adequate supplies. New Orleans was too ‘dangerous’ for the small number of National Guard troops available to enter the city. How much of that perceived ‘danger’ had to do with the color of the citizen’s skins? Why were food and water not brought in by helicopter? Did relief have to wait five days? How long would it have taken the people in the Superdome and the Convention Center to receive assistance if they had been middle-class White Americans? Isn’t it deception to say that this disaster was a surprise when government reports have predicted it for decades? These reports predicted that the poor, Black neighborhoods in the lowest lying areas of the city would be the most devastated. Funds for the Iraq occupation took precedence. Why were there so few National Guard or regular Army troops available for the relief effort? Can we believe that the deployment of Guard units to contain resistance to our occupation of Iraq had no impact on our response? Our national priorities are

clear. The media is far from blameless. Why were Blacks described as looters and Whites described as ‘searching for food.’ Where were the images of white New Orleans police officers ‘searching for food’ as they carried off wide-screen TVs. Local leaders share the blame as well. What was the meaning of ‘mandatory evacuation’ from New Orleans when so many Black and low income citizens had no means to leave the city? At the end of the month, people living from pay-check to pay-check do not have money for gas, if they have a car, nor money to stay in a hotel for days. Where were the school buses to take these citizens to relative safety? Racism and classism mean that the concerns, even the very lives of people of color and poor people, remain invisible.”¹

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Writing in the current issue of The Nation, Gary Younge offers these thoughts: “That anyone could have witnessed the scenes outside the Superdome and Convention Center and think race did not play a part speaks to the level of denial that remains among white Americans and to the persistence and prevalence of racism. . . . [And yet,] while race was clearly a factor, it was not the only factor, or even the dominant one. Those African-Americans with money could leave, and most did. Those without could not. . . . In a nation that prides itself on taut bootstraps and rugged individualism, these [facts] strike at the heart of one of America’s great taboos—class. Those who could not get out after the storm were the same ones who could not get on before it. . . . One in four in New Orleans did not have a car, yet there was no public transportation out of the city. Even if they did have a car, they needed money to fill it up with gas and for a motel at the end of the trip. . . . The inability of the poor to leave New Orleans reflected not just a lack of geographical mobility but of social mobility. . . . Race and class in this respect are not contradictory and antagonistic but complementary and symbiotic—so closely intertwined that to try to understand either separately is to misunderstand both entirely.”²

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I invite you to continue to ponder the social realities exposed one year ago by Hurricane Katrina. But let us also take a step back from New Orleans and consider how we, as Unitarian Universalists, can muster the spiritual resources we need to respond not only to the acute personal difficulties but also the chronic social challenges which we find in the world around us. I would like to suggest that our response will be strengthened if we can cultivate three spiritual virtues—hope, faith, and patience.

¹ Bill Sinkford, pastoral letter entitled “A Gentle, Angry People,” September 6, 2005.

² Gary Younge, “New Orleans Forsaken,” The Nation, September 18, 2006, pp. 18-20.

First, let us consider hope. Physicist Freeman Dyson offers these challenging words: “Hope is not the lucky gift of circumstance or disposition, but a virtue like faith and love, to be practiced whether or not we find it easy or even natural, because it is necessary to our survival as human beings.”

The problems in the world seem so huge, sometimes one wonders how it can be possible to have hope that these problems will ever be resolved. The AIDS epidemic in Africa, the injustice and conflict in the Middle East, global warming, habitat destruction, the conflict in Darfur, the continuing practice of human slavery in some parts of the world, the use of violence against civilians for political or military purposes, the unsustainability of wasteful patterns of production and consumption, the persistent presence of racism and classism here in the United States—all these problems and many others are tremendously challenging. In the face of these challenging problems, hope may seem downright unreasonable.

Yet hope is not a lucky gift of circumstance or disposition, according to Freeman Dyson. Rather, hope is a virtue. To be a hopeful person is to cultivate and practice the virtue of hope. One may cultivate and practice the virtue of hope even when one is not necessarily confident of success. Those who worked for the abolition of slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century here in the United States, and those who worked for women’s rights throughout the second half of the nineteenth century here in the United States, had every reason to feel hopeless about their dreams and visions. Nevertheless, they continued to hold fast to their dreams and visions, they continued to be inspired by their dreams and visions, they continued to practice the virtue of hope with regard to their dreams and visions.

Next, let us consider faith. Some have defined faith as belief without proof in the existence of entities such as divine beings or the effectiveness of practices such as prayer. I have come to understand that this is a rather shallow and simplistic understanding of faith. Wilfred Cantwell Smith offers a deeper and more sophisticated view of faith in these words: “Faith . . . is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one’s own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event.”³ Elsewhere Smith distinguishes firmly between belief and faith, stating that belief refers to one’s determination of what is true and what is false, whereas faith refers to emotional commitments such as a willingness to trust.

My own definition of faith is based on Smith’s understanding. I would define faith as “a willingness to act, to put forth effort, to open one’s life and pour out one’s love, not knowing for sure what the result will be.”⁴ If the virtue of hope refers to one’s willingness to hold fast to one’s dreams and visions, the virtue of faith refers to one’s willingness to act on behalf of those dreams and visions.

I generally avoid references to sports in my sermons, but perhaps a football reference would be in order at this time of the year. Quarterback John Elway was once

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Faith and Belief (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 12.

⁴ “When I Went to Birmingham,” sermon delivered at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, October 20, 2002.

quizzed about why he played with such intensity even in the final moments of games that his team was clearly going to lose. He responded that this was a kind of mental discipline. He said that he played intensely in the final moments of games that were clearly out of reach so that he would be all the more ready to play in the final moments of games that were possibly within reach. John Elway thus offers a wonderful example of what it means to cultivate the virtue of faith—that is, intentionally strengthening his willingness to act even when success is far from assured.

More generally, we live faithfully when we put forth effort toward some distant but inspirational goal knowing that success is not guaranteed. Perhaps we can rework what Freeman Dyson said about hope and say the same thing about faith: Faith is not the lucky gift of circumstance or disposition, but a virtue to be practiced whether or not we find it easy because it is necessary to our survival as human beings.

Finally, having considered hope and faith, let us consider patience. Recently I was reading about the marathon negotiating session at Camp David in September, 1978, when President Jimmy Carter brought together President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel to work out some sort of peace treaty. After some difficult initial meetings, Sadat and Begin did not speak to one another for ten days. Thus, Carter and his advisors had to work the negotiating process, and during those ten days they produced twenty-three drafts of a peace agreement before they came up with something that would be acceptable to all parties.⁵ This seems like an astounding feat of patience, especially considering that everyone began with the expectation that the process would take three days, four at the most, but instead took two solid weeks.

Each of us has some influence on the world. But the effects of what we do and what we say and how we live may not be immediately apparent. As ripples on the water radiate outward from a pebble thrown into a pond, so the influence of what we do and what we say and how we live radiates outward; but just as it may take time for ripples to travel over the surface of the water, so it may take time for our personal influence to become evident. We need hope to hold fast to our dreams and visions, especially when the obstacles seem overwhelming; and we need faith to go ahead and put forth our best effort, even when we have no guarantee of success. But we also need patience, patience to wait for the right time, patience to try again if things do not work out the first time, patience to work with people who need time to be persuaded, patience to act on our best conviction about what is the best way forward when the results will not be apparent for some time, patience to work with people who inevitably have shortcomings and faults, and patience with one's own growing edge.

Gary Younge writes about visiting New Orleans. “I drove through the Lower Ninth in May . . . It looked as if Katrina had arrived just a week earlier: Whole houses had been washed off their moorings and into the road; cars had been washed into the houses; trees had been blown onto cars. And there they were still.”⁶ It will take a great deal of hope and faith and patience to rebuild New Orleans, just as will take a great deal of hope and faith and patience to address racism and classism in the United States, and to

⁵ Benny Morris, Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881—2001 (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 467.

⁶ Gary Younge, ibid., p. 20.

address global warming and unsustainable patterns of resource consumption, and to address violence, and poverty, and all the other troubles in our world today. But hope and faith and patience may not be enough; in these difficult situations, we need to keep asking the question: Why do some people get lost in the flood while some other people get away alright? And in these difficult situations, we need to keep holding fast to our vision, perhaps derived principally from the Universalist side of our faith tradition, our vision that someday no one will get lost in the flood, that someday everyone together will get away alright, that someday everyone, sticking together and working together and caring together, will get away alright.