

**Plucking a Strawberry in the Midst of Despair**  
**Nora Unitarian Universalist Church, January 24, 2016**  
**Rev. Laura Smidzik, Minister of Membership, White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

**READINGS**

**A Man, Two Tigers, and a Strawberry, A Buddhist Tale**

Once, a man gathering wood from the forest floor looked up to find himself eye to eye with a ferocious tiger. He chucked his load of wood at the tiger, turned, and fled as quickly as human legs would move. He wove through the forest trees, dodged around boulders, and jumped over thorny bushes with the tiger as close as a shadow behind him.

Just as the man felt the tiger's hot breath on his neck and the nick of a sharp claw through his shirt, he came to the edge of a high cliff. Without a thought, the man grabbed a thick vine within reach and slung himself over the cliff face. Letting the vine slide through his hands he quickly lowered out of the tiger's reach. He heard his own heart pounding furiously; he could barely catch a breath, but he felt so relieved to have escaped!

As the man looked around to take stock of his situation, he glanced down at the base of the cliff. There, with a tail snaking leisurely back and forth, sat another tiger – her wide eyes intently fixed upon him as he dangled from above. Just then, the man noticed that the vine he held vibrated ever so slightly. He looked up to find a pair of mice, poised on a mouse-sized ledge, nibbling away at the single vine on which his life hung.

His truly desperate situation was dawning upon him, yet something shimmering and red caught his eye and made him investigate. He looked closely and found a luscious, plump strawberry growing right out of a crack in the cliff. With one arm clutching the vine, he reached over with his free arm and plucked it. It was the most delicious morsel he had ever tasted!

***From Apprenticed to Hope by Julie Neraas***

Living in the same neighborhood as hope, with its honesty and awareness of life's harsh dimensions, is optimism, hope's half sister. Optimism deserves respect, after all; it can provide the essential energy necessary to move forward. At times we need to take refuge in optimism. When life delivers up bad news, we go to work revising it into something we can bear...

But optimism cannot sustain us, like hope can, in our darkest hours. It must be constantly propped up, with cheer, for example, or denial, or little pep talks aimed at will. It cannot sustain us over the long haul. "Optimism tends to minimize the tragic sense of life or foster belief that some remedy for life's ills is simple." The hoping person, on the other hand, "has had experiences of fearing, doubting or despairing" and is "realistic about life and the obstacles to fulfillment." This kind of person refuses to pretend things are other than they are.

From *A House of Hope*, John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker

Hope rises. It rises from the heart of life, here and now, beating with joy and sorrow. Hope longs for good to be affirmed, for justice and love to prevail, for suffering to be alleviated, and for life to flourish in peace. Hope remembers the dreams of those who have gone before and reaches for connection with them across the boundary of death. Hope acts—to bless, to protest, and to repair. Hope can be disappointed, especially when it is individual rather than shared, or when—even as shared aspiration—it encounters entrenched opposition. To thrive, hope requires a home, a sustaining structure of community, meaning and ritual.

### SERMON

As you heard the parable of the monk and the strawberry what came to your mind? Are there times you feel like you are running from emotional or physical tigers only to find yourself left hanging precariously? Do you sometimes feel like you are simply holding on for dear life? Have you lived through times when ordinary time seems to cease and you feel suspended? When in your core there is deep despair, grief, or anger? I've known such periods of fear and despair in my life. Have you? If you have not, have you walked with others through such times?

For the monk in the parable a simple vine was there to hold him, avoiding his immediate plunge. But those mice may be the end of him...Yet, somehow, in the middle of such drama he sees a strawberry. The monk loosens his grip and reaches for the berry. Imagine the sweet flavor, the juice of the berry filling his mouth, his taste buds calling out to declare that it is "delicious." Surely, he has mindfulness beyond what we are capable of in such a moment...or perhaps we are capable of such sweet joy even amidst such a crisis.

When I have served as the ministerial intern at First Universalist Church in Minneapolis I had the honor of being a participant in two small groups. One was a Unitarian Universalist *Wellspring* program a Unitarian Universalist adult spiritual development program that lasts for nine months and the other was a twelve-week sermon-based small group. I also led a small group for people experiencing grief.

Members of the small group I led were grieving the loss of loved ones—a mother, a father, a brother, a spouse, a friend. Some came with multiples losses wanting to address their accumulated grief so they could move into the future differently. We read and reflected on different Unitarian Universalist sermons each week. We invited grief in, held it tenderly, and witnessed the lives of those who are gone in body but remain in spirit. As group members spoke their truths, some found their dreams changing, there was more laughter (often coupled with tears), and support found through hearing one's own feelings echoed in another. Nothing changed over the weeks of that small group, their loved ones were still gone. Yet, everything changed.

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Rev. A. Powell Davies, a past UU Minister of All Souls Church in Washington D.C., said that church is where we can be in the “consciousness of our soul’s deepest yearnings.” He describes church as a place that “leaves us knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual loneliness, the same need of assurance and faith and hope.” He says, “We are brought together at the highest level possible. We are not merely an audience, we are a congregation.”

Our covenantal faith is what I imagine when I think of that strawberry on the barren cliff. For me, that strawberry symbolizes the life-giving force that appears even in our darkest hours. Whether in times of sacred worship, in small groups or in the way we care for each other with congregational visits at our homes or with food delivered to a person or family in crisis. Our congregations provide spiritual, emotional and literal nourishment in times of despair. We don’t hold promises of a life after this life or that our prayers can change the inevitable pain, suffering and hardship that this life may bring. Nor do we offer simple optimism as the answer. As Julie Neeraas’ reading denotes—optimism is an attitude. It certainly works for some of us. But there are times when optimism feels like a Band-Aid on a wound. The real healing comes from the mysterious wonder of our own bodies and souls.

Julie Neeras, who writes about coming to terms with a chronic illness, speaks of hope as, “an essence that goes deep to the core of our common humanity” existing “in the territory between denial and despair.” Hope reaches deeper than optimism. Hope does not push aside laments, but makes room for our disbelief, our deep sadness and despair. Julie says, “Hope has its eyes open to the problem, but senses a way forward, if only one step forward” (pg. 7). I see hope as tears of deep grief, accompanied by laughter and companionship.

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How do we practice and nurture such hope? How do we bring it out of the church and into our daily lives? I have seen hope come through daily spiritual prayer and meditation, through paying attention to what is holy throughout the day- the different ways we consciously ground ourselves in the sacred. I have seen it come through asking deep questions and honest sharing. Mostly, I have seen hope emerge in times when we are courageous enough to lean into the sadness and name it as part of our lives.

Lauren, A colleague of mine who participated in our *Wellspring* group, spoke of being at home with her school-aged son who was going through a really rough, disorienting time. She wanted to help, not take away his pain but to look for a way to hold the weight of it in a container that was greater than his daily experience. She decided to offer to pray with him and he was willing. “What do you want to pray to?” she asked, offering up the words of “Spirit of Life” or “God.” He replied, “Tomorrow. I want to pray to tomorrow.” So the prayer began, “dear tomorrow...”

Today, tomorrow...what do we really have but this “one precious life” as Mary Oliver notes in her poem *The Summer Day*. And what a precious life it is. Whether we are in full physical, emotional or spiritual health or in some way limited or broken. We know it is here, amongst other tender souls where we can be brought into a larger hope. Hope that grows from a faith community that holds love at its center.

Eric, another member of our group, was a husband and father of two young girls ages eight and five. During our year together he was coming to terms with his diagnosis of ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. He was diagnosed in September 2012 and currently has limited use of both hands. The ALS has more recently started to affect his diaphragm impacting the volume of air he can inhale. You can imagine that this has been a blow, since he was hoping the ALS would affect a less vital system next. If it continues to worsen at the same pace, he may have to go on a portable ventilator in the next several months.

Eric shared what the *Wellspring* group experience did for him. He spoke of wrestling with spiritual questions in a supportive circle of trust. He said, “That process of being alone together seems very wise to me because it encourages discernment, that quiet or not-so-quiet arising of clarity, of fruitful confusion, or of new questions that lead further down the discernment path.” He continues, “Sometimes listening to others speak in the group was, for me, like looking into a new type of mirror that showed me the back of my head or side of my face, instead of the familiar viewpoint of face-forward. Even more surprising were those times when hearing myself speak did the same thing.” He noted, “Hearing or saying something unflinchingly out loud that had previously been kept inside can really give you a more rounded perspective of yourself.” Have you ever had that type of experience in a small group here in this church?

He went on to say, “I know that I, with my anger and my sadness, was held and heard by that group. And that made it something I could more easily hold myself. I didn’t really need any suggestions or guidance, however caring I know they would have been. All I really needed were some witnesses – some sunshine.”

I remember the week we talked about our own perspectives of death. A sermon by Rev. Forrest Church, the previous minister of All Souls Church in New York, was central to our discussion. Rev. Church started his sermon with an image of a large stained glass window. You may have heard it? Some of the words in this description are his and some are mine. He describes how “The glass we look through onto the world is like a lightly stained glass window. Each pane looks out onto some aspect of our life,” such as, your family, work, social life, faith life. At different times in our lives, many of these panes are likely to be “rosy and translucent. We can see through them clearly and their tint casts a gentle glow on the prospect we look out on.” Think of those small gratitudes throughout the day or week which warm you and bring you joy.

Then he asks us to imagine “that one pane in the window that looks out over our life suddenly grows cloudy. What was translucent becomes first opaque and then almost impenetrable.” He speaks about how our “tendency is to press our nose up against that one frame, desperately trying to see through it. When we do this, we lose all sense of proportion. Our entire world goes black.”

Rev. Church wrote about this as he was reflecting on his own diagnosis of terminal cancer so he is speaking personally about, “how easily this tendency [to stick your nose right up against the cloudy pane] can kick in when we are dying.” Rev. Church reminds us of the truth. The truth that, “All our lives end in the middle of the story. There is ongoing business left unfinished. We leave the stage before discovering how the story will turn out.” He also reminds us that most of us have time, “to help ensure a good exit.” He says there is “one thing is fully within our power. We can take care of unfinished business.”

Our group responded well to this metaphor and Rev. Church’s encouragement. But Eric was not buying it, he verbally disagreed with the sermon stating that he “didn’t think it was possible to die without unfinished business.” It was not until two weeks later that he shared, “About a day later, remembering what I had said, I realized that what I really meant is *I don’t think I can die* without unfinished business, which is a very different thing.”

Later, Eric spoke of an incident that occurred the prior week. He was meeting with one of his clients, a veteran who was living with post traumatic stress syndrome. The news of Eric’s illness had just been announced and his client was reflecting on Eric’s situation. His client shared that his wife lost her mother when she was only nine and that she has no memory of her mother. Needless to say, this was a cause of great grief for Eric, contributing to his already existing worries of leaving his young daughters behind.

Eric left work that day feeling deeply emotional. His wife was out that night and he knew he had to care for daughters alone. He was feeling really depressed and found he was not able to hide his emotions from his daughters. So he decided to tell them that he was feeling sad about having ALS and as he spoke, he cried. One daughter joined him with her own tears. The other daughter did not. Eric turned to her and told her that it is okay to cry. She told him that she was thinking about the stained glass window and was trying to look beyond the cloudy part. He assured her that it was okay to cry and she opened up and wept as well. From there, the conversation moved on to how old they imagined their father getting and what they think happens to someone after they die. One daughter had heard that she started as small as a dot, and she imagined that he would return to a dot. The other daughter said she imagined he would be a guardian angel.

In the midst of a very real, sad hardship Eric and his daughters took time to pause, come together in tears and have a conversation about the mystery of life and death. I believe Eric created a moment as sweet as that strawberry.

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Quite honestly, life delivers what it delivers- call it fate, destiny, bad luck, misfortune...our futures are unknown to us and for many of us our past and present carry such gravity that at times it is hard to imagine the benefit of hanging on. Yet, ours is a hopeful faith. Ours is a faith that says so much more than “life is hard and then you die.” Our faith brings us together at the highest level possible as we search for greater meaning, deeper love and hope within our selves, among each other, and beyond the walls of this church and our own lives. We join together looking for assurance and faith and hope—all which are rooted and nourished here.

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One more story from our group...Arif, who is now in seminary, was an executive director of a non profit. He told us of his struggles in a desperately challenging year of fund raising. No matter what he did he could not reach the funding goals of the organization. Like most guys he knows, his response to failure was to hit the problematic object in question with an ever-bigger hammer; work harder, faster, better, striving for control. He reflected, “But when you do everything you can and it still doesn’t work, what’s left?” He took this quandary into spiritual direction at one point saying something like “I’m just trying to get my arms around this so I can figure it out” and David, his spiritual director said “well that’s an interesting metaphor.”

Arif’s reaction was to sit back, smile, nod, and try to stall for some time. He confessed that he uses that language all the time – “getting arms around things, getting his head around things, so he can hold on to them and make them do what he wants them to do.” He realized that metaphor of getting his arms around something was so clearly a deeply ingrained control metaphor that he couldn’t help but laugh even while he was squirming inside.

He said he looked at David and asked, “So, how do you hold something without holding on to it?” He could not get past his fear and uncertainty about his job, his livelihood, his mortgage. He describes what happened next as “a quiet tantrum” in David’s office and he blurted out, “How do I move this forward without controlling it? How do I hold it? I know what control feels like but that’s not working, so then what’s the opposite? What’s the opposite of control?”

David didn’t say anything and Arif’s mind conjured up images of disorganization and anarchy. And then his heart answered, “The opposite of control is faith, isn’t it? The opposite of control is faith. That’s what faith is.”

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Faith, hope, love entwined together to create a vine that can hold us. They hold us even in the most desperate of times if we are able to speak courageously, wrestle with the hard, meaningful questions and know that we are all held by a love that will not let us go.

The reading from *House of Hope* today described a faith-filled congregation. A place that feeds one's faith through constant nurturing in worship, in making space for courageous conversations, in personal revelation and in working for a greater good. The reading said, "To thrive, hope requires a home, a sustaining structure of community, meaning and ritual." May this congregation be a place that fuels your hope. May it do more than offer an optimistic Band Aid, may it open you and this sacred community up in order to let some sunshine into the darkness. And may the sweet delicious strawberries of wonder emerge in your life as you move toward yet another tomorrow.

May it be so, Amen.