

Imagine That!
Robin Tanner
November 9th, 2008

When I woke up on November 5th I had a little trouble believing it was all really over! I am guessing that many of you may have spent the last few weeks like I did. As soon as I got to work or school, I would check my email and check the polls. Then it would be time to open up my media outlet of choice on the Internet. I would hit the refresh button about every five minutes. Just in case --I missed some life-altering event in the campaign like the revelation of how much money was spent on a candidate's clothing or what kind of puppy a candidate was thinking of adopting. Just in case.

The election was all I talked about to coworkers, friends, family, even strangers on the bus and T. I am sure I qualified for some kind of obsession.

So, needless to say, when the morning of November 5th arrived like any other morning, I wasn't exactly sure what to do with myself. The sun rose, the world appeared to be turning, but the election was over!

And then some of the other election results starting coming in. You probably know the results I am referencing.

I saw the news about Arizona, and Florida that each passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. Then Arkansas weighed in, passing a proposition to prohibit gay couples from adopting children. I held my breath, once again clicking the refresh button as we awaited a decision on Proposition 8 in California. By the following morning, it was clear that California too had passed an amendment banning gay marriage.

In such a historic election, where America has elected its first African-American candidate, how could we also legislatively limit the right to love? Imagine that, it's two steps forward and one step back. I didn't think this was even a possibility in my election expectations.

Since the results from California have been tallied, I've been thinking a lot lately about my first Gay Pride Parade in undergraduate college. I was excited that summer. I had never been to such a huge celebration in Upstate New York with so many bright banners proudly proclaiming love and solidarity. I had also never seen so many feather boas and pink wigs! If you have ever been to a pride parade, you may agree that I am hardly doing the color palette and costume attire justice in my description.

It was a fantastic day. The sun was shining and the crowds were excited. Naturally there were protestors, but none of us were really paying attention. As the parade was closing, my friends and I walked by a group of particularly vocal protestors to get to our car parked down the street.

The protestors were shouting hateful language into the beautiful July sky. We kept on walking, until one of them shouted at our small group "Receive the light of Christ and repent." I don't know why, I still don't, but I turned to look back at the man shouting through a megaphone. And just as I turned I saw a soda can thrown from the group of protestors. It whirled by my right eye as I ducked out of the way.

Flash forward to two years later. I am still living in Rochester, New York, city typically known for its welcoming and progressive community. But our community has been beset with hate crimes. As legislators weighed debates over gay marriage, local politics began to heat up. Our congregation just outside the city limits decides to put up a banner "We are standing on the side of love." Not longer after its installation, it is

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vandalized, torn in half; hanging from the church it becomes a beacon of our despair and worst fears. After much debate and prayer, our congregation decides to march in the Pride Parade and buy a new banner. We will not be stopped by hate. Imagine that.

I still have the image of the soda can flying in my head as I agree to march in the parade, carrying our broken banner behind the newly purchased one through the streets of Rochester. It is a gray day, remarkably cold for the summer time. As we march along the streets carrying our banner we begin singing “We are standing on the side of love, hands held together with hearts beat as one. Emboldened by faith---

We approach a corner full of protestors. I’m on the outside of our group, holding one end of a very long banner. My hands start to get shaky and I begin think about that soda can flying at my head. I’ve stopped singing. I think I stopped walking. A member of our congregation, well into her seventies, puts her hand on my shoulder and whispers in my ear, “Just keep singing.” Emboldened by faith, we dare to proclaim we are standing on the side of love.

Just keep singing. Imagine that.

It was an “Oh yeah” moment for me. One of those quiet revelations that you still begin to unpack years later. November 5th was another “Oh yeah” moment for me. Oh yeah, no matter the results of the election or whom you voted for, our work as people of faith has just begun.

I think I’ve been relying upon what Bruce Marshall would characterize as optimism. In this morning’s reading Marshall writes, “Optimism, as I understand it, is an attitude of expectation that a particular result will occur—that a person will recover from an illness, that we will achieve a specific goal, that the Publisher’s Clearing house will pick my number from among the billions submitted.”

Hope, in contrast, is less specific. Hope looks at the broader perspective, beyond the particular event, the particular poll, the particular proposition. In Hebrews 11:1-3 the biblical writer asserts, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand the world were prepared for the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”

I’ve been relying on the visible, measurable things. Polling reports, I-witness accounts, exit polls. Flying soda cans. I think anxiety and fear is behind my obsession with the polls. Fear and anxiety of what my country might do in the privacy of the voting booth, but I no longer want to live in this anxiety.

I want to believe that we are more than Republicans and Democrats, more than the that which divides us.

I read a Newsweek cartoon that made me think twice about my over-reliance on exit polls and optimism. It shows Barack Obama’s advisor greeting the president-elect. His advisor smiles and says, “The good news is it looks like you’re going to be president

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for the next four years.” Obama smiles broadly and replies, “Great! And the bad news?” “It looks like you are going to be president for the next four years.”

Despite who you voted, or what outcome you expected in the election, the struggle for peace and justice is far from over. No president-elect can solve all our problems. We the people have to step up to the plate.

But what keeps us going in the face of a mounting economic recession, two wars fought in different lands, and a crumbling healthcare system?

Optimism relies upon the effect of or resolution of any of these problems, but hope begs us to keep on singing. It so much easier for me, personally to rely on optimism. I can see the results. It’s a tangible loss or victory but at least it doesn’t require me to take that big and scary leap of faith.

So, why hope? There is no great rational for living as a people of hope. We hope because we hope. Sufficient evidence in the world supports either hope or despair, either choosing good or evil, either settling for injustice or seeking justice. It is a choice of the soul, yet if we are grounded in our faith, we find the courage to keep on singing.

But hope alone, as a passive noun, a wish is not enough. It’s not enough to quietly hope the world into change. Hope rooted in faith draws upon the Spirit of Creation within each of us and calls us to birth into being that which we once only dared to dream.

The Spirit of Creation, of which I speak, is best analogous to what we Unitarian Universalists call the Spirit of Life.

This concept of hope as verb instead of noun is captured in Emily Dickinson’s poem “Hope Is the Thing With Feathers”

Hope

Hope is the thing with feathers □That perches in the soul, □

And sings the tune--without the words, □And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;

□And sore must be the storm □That could abash the little bird □That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land, □And on the strangest sea;

□

Yet, never, in extremity, □It asked a crumb of me.”

Dickinson highlights the beauty in hope. We only asked to take the leap, but within the soul hope requires no justification, no rational evidence. Hope is a force that continues to create, continues to grant us the grace to continue with no payment required.

The creative force, the Spirit of Creation, is concept taken up by Henry Wieman in his classic “The Source of Human Good.” Wieman was a Presbyterian minister in dual fellowship with the Unitarian Association. He taught at the University of Chicago, where

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he was greatly influenced by the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead and the empiricism of John Dewey. It was there that he took up the project of the creative spirit.

Wieman refutes the concept of a transcendent supernatural God, arguing that God is distinctively present in the world in the creative act. Truth, ethics and morals in this world, according to Wieman, are dependent upon the creative forces at play. The world is always constructing and deconstructing, built upon a legacy of change.

Wieman argues that the creative event is evidenced even in human communication when we recreate meaning, relationship and possibility. Wieman writes, "The several parts of life are connected in mutual support, vivifying and enhancing one another in the creation of a more inclusive unity of events and possibilities," (*The Source of Human Good*, 56).

The Spirit of Creation connects us to all that has preceded this moment and all that will follow. We stand in a line of an evolution behind our wildest imaginings.

As surely as the Spirit of Creation connects us to the goodness of humanity, we also stand upon the back of a history that has faced and created great evil. Just as we see the historic event of the election of our first African American president, we recognize the unjust realities that many African Americans continue to live in today. Racism has hardly been dealt its deathblow.

And yet it is a beginning. Proposition 8 in California and the prohibitions in other states are also just beginnings. Deep in my heart, amidst my despair and fear I hear the words of Julian of Norwich calling to me. "All shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." This is not to say that I will not stick my head in the sand, but rather I choose to keep on marching in the parade, and to keep on singing even when I am afraid, even when I really don't see how one little step or one little song makes a difference.

History is full of great imaginers who saved our country, and helping birth into being peace and justice. It's easy enough to rattle off the names. John Lennon who beseeched us to imagine all the people living life in peace. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed, "I have a dream." Our founding fathers and mothers rightly placed the burden upon our shoulders, by beginning the constitution with "We the people."

With hope that is flowing from the Spirit of Creation, we can go beyond the rules. We can refuse to accept that human rights are something we vote upon. Love is not to be legislated.

Hope is bigger than one week, one election, even one lifetime. It reaches out in time and space connecting us to the wisdom of the ages and the promise of the future. We the people are called to look upon the world with the Spirit of Creation. To imagine is a holy act. Imagine that!

May hope be so. It must be so. It will be so.
 Amen.