

When Hope is Not Enough

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UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn

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I love you.

And because I love you, I want to remind us all,

That beautiful and terrible things are already happening, right now

In the world.

And you are not alone.

This past May, on unseasonably hot, 90 degree day

I sat on the edge of a dusty trench

In West Roxbury

Wearing a full suit, and sweating as I sat in the sun

With black socks on and an extra cardigan in a small bag over my shoulder

Because I knew the jail cell would probably be cold.

I sat with 15 other clergy

Wearing suits and stoles and collars and robes and tallits and kippas,

One person in full historical minuteman regalia

All singing refrains of “the tide is rising, and so are we”

And praying prayers for front line communities and future generations

And waiting to be arrested.

Many of you know that I was arrested twice in the spring and early summer

As part of protests around the construction of the West Roxbury Lateral Pipeline

Which runs in to Boston, despite protests from civilians as well as the state and local government.

The pipeline runs through West Roxbury, and right next to an active blasting quarry, leaving the surrounding neighborhoods at risk for explosions

And creating new fossil fuel infrastructure for fracked gas, when we know fossil fuels are contributing to climate change,

And when we know we have the technology to build cleaner energy infrastructure.

About 200 people were arrested over the past year, protesting this pipeline through nonviolent civil disobedience.

And so on Wednesday of this week, when I arrived at church,

I found (show picture) this newspaper clipping laying on my desk

From the Boston Globe.

Left for me, I assume, by one of you.

It's a picture of me sitting on the edge of the pipeline trench

Here you can see just a few words of the title “despite protests”

But I knew which article this came from.

It published last week in the Globe,

titled “West Roxbury Pipeline to open, despite protests”.

By the time I arrived to find this newspaper on my desk on Wednesday,
I had already known that the West Roxbury Lateral Pipeline had begun pumping it's
fracked gas,
Putting homes and families and our collective future at further risk
And the truth is, when I first heard the news, I wasn't totally surprised.
I honestly kind of had a (shrug), "eh, I figured" reaction.
I'm not sure I ever thought that we would really stop the pipeline
Even after the Keystone XL Pipeline was stopped.
I thought "too many fights, we don't win".
But I didn't doubt that I wanted to be part of the movement to resist it.
I heard, from an organizer colleague of mine,
That the CEO of Spectra Energy, the company building the pipeline, said something to
the effect of
"you know, we've never had a 5 mile length of pipeline so hard to build as in West
Roxbury" and another report that energy executives have warned each other about the
organized opposition in the Northeast.
Some wins in there, for sure.

But still, this month, fracked gas started running through the pipeline.
Beautiful and terrible things are happening.

Sing:

*Hold on, just a little while longer
Hold on, just a little while longer
Hold on, just a little while longer
Everything will be alright.*

And then I think of another pipeline, (you might have heard of it)
Running through North Dakota
The Dakota Access Pipeline
Another very controversial pipeline
The proposed plans are to run the pipeline through the Standing Rock Sioux Ancestral
and Treaty lands
And under the Missouri River, which will contaminate drinking water for millions of
people,
Threatening to break treaties that the US Government made with the Lakota, Nakota, and
Dakota nations in 1851.
As thousands have set up camp at Standing Rock, despite harsh weather conditions
And militarized police presence
And being tear gassed, and shot with rubber bullets, and treated in degrading ways upon
arrest, and sprayed with water cannons in November in sub-freezing temperatures.
Despite all of this, the water protectors and their allies declare:
Mni Wiconi. Lakota for, "Water is Life."

There have been calls to support Standing Rock

Made by the elders of the tribe.

And calls for more media attention, financial support, supplies, and pressure on government agencies to do what they can to reverse the situation.

And exactly a week ago, this past Sunday, the same day as the national day of prayer, The same day that thousands of US veterans and faith leaders arrived at Standing Rock to join the Water Protectors,

News broke that the Army Corps of Engineers

Which has been granting permits for this project,

Denied the final easement needed to build the pipeline through this ancestral land

And was suspending the project until an environmental study could be done.

But Energy Transfer Partners, the company behind the pipeline

says that they are committed to opening the pipeline

They have investors counting on them, after all.

I don't know what will happen next at Standing Rock

I do know that the camps are celebrating this as a victory

And are also staying where they are until the construction equipment has gone home

Until they are assured that their ancestral burial grounds will not be dug up

Because they know that the fight continues,

That the pipeline could still get built, and Energy Transfer Partners will only be fined.

Energy Transfer Partners might decide that the cost of fines,

if they disregard the permit, are just the cost of doing business.

It hasn't happened yet, but it's possible.

And so, the Water Protectors ask:

"Will you continue to fight and pray with us?"

And yet, they celebrate victories along the way, and continue to pray.

Sing:

Pray on, just a little while longer

Pray on, just a little while longer

Pray on, just a little while longer

Everything will be alright.

People love to quote Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who said

That the "arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice".

This weekend I was at a conference where someone bravely admitted that she didn't know if that was true or not

And tears sprung to my eyes, because it was so vulnerable, and real, and those words spoke a truth to me.

What if the arc of the universe doesn't bend toward justice?

And I look around me,

And I see so much evidence that could support either claim

The bending or the not bending.

Beautiful and terrible things are happening, right now, in the world.

In these apocalyptic—meaning uncovered—times.
After the election, I was finishing re-reading the Harry Potter series
And I found them so comforting, as I kept telling people “I’m just going to keep reading
these books,
because at least I know evil doesn’t win in the end.”
And by evil I do not mean a specific person, to be quite clear,
But the evil that is white supremacy in the white house
And evil that is misogyny normalized
And evil that is Islamophobic notes sent this week to our Muslim siblings in faith
in Wayland and in Boston
And hateful notes and swastikas drawn on bathroom doors
And spray painted on buildings
And children telling other children that they hope they get deported
(Even though we know that no one leaves home
Unless home is the mouth of a shark)
And evil that is children afraid that their parents will be gone, disappeared, when they get
home from school.

What if the arc of the universe isn’t bending toward justice?
What I struggle with in that quote is that it leaves space for us to believe that the arc will
bend of it’s own volition.
That it will happen regardless of what we do.
That it’s predetermined.
I don’t know whether the arc is really bending or not, because it is long and I cannot see
over the horizon,
But I do know that the systems and ideologies of “better than” and “power over”
Are so strong, and so rigid
That the arc will not bend unless our love and strength is stronger and better organized
than the ideologies of evil.
It is not a given.

Sing:

March on, just a little while longer
March on, just a little while longer
March on, just a little while longer
Everything will be alright.

Vaclav Havel says that “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism.
It is not the conviction”, he says,
“that something will turn out well,
but the certainty that something makes sense,
regardless of how it turns out.
It is also this hope, above all,
which gives us the strength to live and continually try new things,
even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.”

And Rev. Dr. Miguel de la Torre, a Latin American Liberation Theologian and professor of Social Ethics, takes a different approach, and says,
“If it’s totally hopeless and nothing will change,
you do what you do,
not because you know you’re going to win,
but because you have no other choice.
I do what I do because it defines my very humanity.”

de la Torre notes that hope can be used by those with privilege
to excuse inaction,
and believes that embracing hopelessness,
becoming “grounded in hopelessness”,
as my friend Elizabeth would say,
allows us to decouple the worthiness of our actions and our calling
from the likelihood of success.

De la Torre’s words again:

“To embrace hopelessness
means accepting the reality that sin, evil and death trumps our hope for utopias —
especially accepting the reality of how white hatred manifests itself
among the oppressed and marginalized.
To embrace hopelessness means engaging in survival praxis,
knowing the battle may be lost,
but fighting anyway because there exists no other choice.
To embrace hopelessness means regardless of how the story ends,
the struggle for justice is what defines our very humanity.”

Or, in the words of Lin-Manuel Miranda,

for all you Hamilton fans:

“I may not live to see our glory,
But I will gladly join the fight.”

Regardless of how the story ends,
The struggle for justice is what defines our very humanity.
Struggle anyway.

I heard Brene Brown, who researches vulnerability,
Speak last week,

And she said something to the effect

That religious leaders—meaning all of us— are often compelled to tell people,
“it’s going to be okay, we have the right answers, just follow us this way.”

Certainty is easy, she says. It doesn’t require much vulnerability.

It’s much harder, she says, for leaders to say,

“I don’t have the answers. I don’t know how this story ends.

But I’ll invite you into the mystery and the darkness and the questions and the fear
and I’ll walk with you in it.”

And I think this is a message for all of us
Not just those of us who preach on Sundays.
We are all called to be prophets and healers of this world
We are all called to say to one another
“I don’t have all the answers.
I don’t know how the story ends.
But I’ll walk with you in the mystery and the struggle”.

Sing:

*Walk on, just a little while longer
Walk on, just a little while longer
Walk on, just a little while longer
Everything will be alright.*

Friends, have you heard or used the phrase “love wins”?
It is a Universalist message made popular by Rob Bell
I know I say this sometimes, too.
I’m wondering these days if love doesn’t always win, though.
Maybe love does win spiritually,
But not always in ways that matter to people’s material lives
Sometimes hate takes away people’s rights,
or separates children from their parents,
or deports our siblings who got into legal trouble that they might never have been
prosecuted for in the first place, if they were white,
or literally kills people because of the color of their skin.

“Love wins” and “the arc bends toward justice” sometimes feels too optimistic.
Without action, these phrases embody the sin of ahistorical optimism.
Erasing the history of thousands of years of cultural devastation, colonialism, genocide,
Committed largely by people whose skin looks like mine.
Love doesn’t always win.
Things don’t always end okay.

These days, I am feeling tired of people telling me that I should remember that the arc of
history,
the arc of the universe, will bend toward justice
Right now I am tired of hearing progressive people optimistically cite some wins without
recognizing that our world is still—today—in a dire state,
That hate still wants to take hold. That hate is still fighting hard to win.
Friends, I’m tired, and I’m scared.
I’m scared of all the hate that has been uncovered and given license and I’m scared about
what comes next.
I don’t have all the answers to fixing this mess.
But we can walk together in the darkness.

Friends, we are in a time when hope is not enough.
Hope alone has never been enough.
And I would love to listen to your hope,
but only if you promise that you will also tell me:
What are you going to *DO* with that hope?"

So please, in the receiving line,
Do not simply tell me what you hope for.
Do not tell me what you believe about the trends of history.
Instead, tell me about the ways in which you are fighting harder with love.
Tell me about the commitments you have made in the last month.
I want to hear what you are *doing*, what you are *willing to do* to make those commitments happen.
I want to hear how you have answered the call,
How you have been more brave than you thought you could ever be.
How you have done what you were scared to do because you knew it was the right thing
I want to hear how you have held on to your humanity even when the odds seemed against you.
How you have felt called to a purpose that is larger than yourself.
Don't tell me that you believe in the arc, tell me how you are shaping the arc.
These are the things I want to hear.

Call it active hope
Or call it being grounded in hopelessness,
What I want to know is this:
Will you walk with me in the struggle and in the not knowing how the story ends?
Will you struggle for justice, not because we are assured of the win, but because it defines our very humanity?
And will you put all of your weight behind bending the arc?

Because friends, I believe that there is another truth:
Look around. Love is still here, here in the room with us, here in the world,
after all this time and against all the odds.
And so we are called to choose love
Even if it might not win.
Even when the odds are against it,
Because our souls will wither without it.

So let us act on our love and our humanity, even when it means surrendering our hope for the outcomes.
And in doing so, may we breathe hope into being.
Because we aren't about optimistic outcomes, and we might be about hope when it compels us to act,
But we are, for sure, about acting in ways that define our humanity.
May it be so, and amen.