

The Impossible Will Take A Little While

Sermon given at
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
February 8, 2026

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As a rule, I try to make sure one of the first things I do when I wake up in the morning is look out the window. My bedroom faces east and from the east window, I look down to the roofline just below it and out across the sloping lawn to the water of the reservoir that stretches beyond the scope of my vision in either direction. On a sunny day, the water sparkles like millions of diamonds as the wind gently ripples the surface. Some mornings, particularly in the fall, swirls of fog spiral above the still water. This time of year its often frozen and snow covered or kind of silvery gray from the shallow layer of water covering the ice.

If this scene could speak in words I think it would speak the words of the mystic Julian of Norwich, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” This little ritual, which takes but a few minutes at the start of my day creates a memory that I can return to throughout my day as I inevitably encounter some way, often many ways, in which all is not well.

On the days I forget to do my little ritual I’m more likely to become frazzled, stressed, irritable, and even obsessive, particularly over distressing news. Simply put, when I forget my ritual, I can’t remember anything other than what is not well and what is not well and all manner of things that are not well.

Indeed, my experience confirms, for me, the words of our call to worship this morning, “Memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair.” (Walter Brueggemann)

Right now in our nation, from Minneapolis to Main and beyond, many are experiencing a soul wrenching despair. Citizens here watching in disbelief, disillusionment and anger as a cult of cruelty masquerading as a presidential administration and its toadies, face ever growing, legitimate concerns about its ability to govern morally and ethically, and indeed, even its belief in democratic principles and interest in the survival of our 250 year old nation. Activists and oppressed people risk becoming embittered by the apparent apathy of many to the plight of the suffering and the planet. And a broad swath of ordinary people, well meaning, even wanting to help, often find themselves immobilized by the sheer magnitude of the world’s troubles.

It is a common belief that the pathway out of despair is to leave the past behind and forge ahead into a new vision for the future. Now, it is true...vision is important. The ability to imagine a tomorrow greater than today lies at the heart of every reform and social justice movement however great or small. “I have a dream”, proclaimed the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Without that dream, even as it remains as yet unfulfilled, things would be different here in America and our kids wouldn’t have had a day off from school in mid-January (MLK Day).

Still, Dr. King did not imagine that vision for the future, nor forge ahead in pursuit of it without first looking back and deeply into the memory bank of human history. As an ordained minister, Dr. King, not surprisingly looked to the Bible, and in particular, the words of the Hebrew prophets and the teachings of Jesus. And he studied and engaged the founding documents of this nation as well as the words and deeds of people like Abraham Lincoln, Henry David Thoreau, Gandhi, and Leo Tolstoy.

Dr. King’s dream and the path he took in pursuit of it began as memory. Memory which connected him to the past, grounded him in the present, and inspired hope for the future.

Indeed, one of Dr. King’s most hopeful and inspiring quotes, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”, is itself a memory...a summary of words by the 19th C. Unitarian minister Theodore Parker who said,

“Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

It bends because we bend it. Something we forget in the midst of despair. Indeed, along with despair, another “affliction amnesia brings”, according to Brueggemann, “is a lack of examples of positive change, of popular power, evidence that we can do it and have done it” [before].

So often I hear in the face of despair that only big, bold actions that produce immediate results really matter. All else is futile. I hear this a lot. People seem to burnout or not even begin something when they labor under the unfortunate belief that their actions are too insignificant to make any difference.

Now it is true visions can be too small. - I once heard on a podcast of OnBeing, that one of the problems of our current age is we are walking in shoes that are too small for us as a nation.

Still, every step we take toward something get us closer to it.

And here again, memory serves to rekindle the flame of hope. “Great ideas, it has been said”, wrote Albert Camus, “come into the world as gently as doves.” Mass movements or protests have often provided the final push to topple some longstanding obstacle to justice, but memory reminds us, these movements most often started small, with a handful of people, sometimes just a single individual “whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history.”

Back when I was serving as minister in Brookfield, MA, a woman named Linda Lloyd called and asked to meet with me. Lloyd was troubled by the crisis of food insecurity for school aged-children in the area and so she started a program called Angels and Backpacks to alleviate hunger. Our church RE (religious exploration) program in Brookfield supported her effort by having an Easter tuna hunt in lieu of the a traditional egg hunt, resulting in the donation of dozens of cans of tuna to the program.

Angels and Backpacks, began and remained, by most measures small. It won't solve world hunger, but until such time we as a society decide to take poverty seriously as a matter of national moral responsibility, it will keep some children in need from going hungry. And indeed, I have no doubt it changed lives in ways far greater than we might imagine or will ever know.

Likewise the belts and hats collected for the Homeless Hospitality Shelter in New London, your presence as a protest or rally, or even just kind smile to a frazzled store clerk can have more of an impact than we may realize.

Small, ordinary actions make a difference. Whenever I've talked to or heard legislators speak about issues, they almost invariably state that letters...physical paper letters...make an impact in forming their positions and deciding how they vote. Tempting as it may be cynicism serves no constructive purpose as a default response to the problems of the world.

On more than one occasion I've heard or read journalist David Brooks mention Dave Jolly, a veterinarian from Oregon who wrote to him concerning the impact our seemingly ordinary actions can have on the world, noting, “The heart cannot be taught in a classroom, or by a luncheon speaker. What a wise person says is the least of what they give. It is in the little habits of life, the daily acts of kindness and courage that were handed down to that person by a mentor a generation ago which were handed down by a mentor before – and stretched back into the dimness of time. “Never forget. The message is the person.”

“The message is the person.” An important reminder that our actions, how and with what intention we move through life, not the length or pace of our stride, matters most.

Those who know their actions...their steps, however small, matter, are also well aware, as Dr. King was, the arc is long...that is, the impossible is going to take a little while. Thus, they are sustained by mindfully focusing on the intention of their actions in the present rather than fierce attachment to the immediate achievement of the larger goal. As a teaching from the Jewish tradition exhorts, “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Which, lastly, leads us to another affliction of amnesia, which Brueggemann doesn’t mention, but Richard Gilbert reflects upon in our reading. And that is the notion that the path out of despair is a choice between choosing to either save or savor the world. As Gilbert comes to realize through the course of his reflection, to choose one over the other is not only to set oneself up for disappointment, but it is to deny a fundamental truth of our existence. A truth expressed in a core value of Unitarian Universalism, interdependence.

Dr. King, who was not a Unitarian Universalist, but knew us well, reminded the nation of the fallacy of a choice between savoring or saving the world, proclaiming,

“In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

Amnesia presents a false choice between saving or savoring the world, thus immobilizing us. Memory reveals, “The one will not stand without the other.” In the face of despair, memory is the spark that can illumine the light of hope to both sustain us and show us a way forward.

Author Paul Loeb speaks to the interconnectedness of saving and savoring the world beautifully. Recalling,

“I once heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak at a Los Angeles benefit for a South African project. He’d been fighting prostate cancer and was tired that evening...But when Tutu addressed the audience he became animated, expressing

amazement that his native country, with its shameful history of racial oppression...(also provided the world)...with an unforgettable lesson in reconciliation and hope....(Later)...a band from East L.A. took the stage....People starting moving to the music. Suddenly, I noticed Tutu dancing away in the middle of the crowd...Tutu, I realized, knows how to have a good time. Indeed it dawned on me that his ability to recognize and embrace life's pleasures helps him face its cruelties and disappointments, whether personal or political.”

Tutu, Loeb discovered, knew the answer to the question of whether to save or savor the world is not to choose one or the other, but simply, “yes.”

For myself, whether or not I take time to engage in my morning ritual of savoring the world by gazing out my window each day impacts my efforts, ability, and even interest in discovering and living in ways that might contribute toward saving anything, let alone the world.

And so, in these challenging times, let us find resilience by refusing to forget. Refusing to forget wisdom, refusing to forget heroes and heroines past and present, great and small, and refusing to forget the fundamental truth of our interdependent existence.

And may our memory, in these desperate times, as always, show us the way forward is forged not by passive adherence to naive optimism nor bitter pessimism, but the refusal to cede joy to oppressors and harbor doubt, in the words of Margaret Mead, “that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world...and... indeed, is the only thing that ever has.”

Amen and Blessed Be