

Sermon: Hope is the thing with feathers
By the Rev. Claire MacDonald - June 2021

Active hope. Active Hope. Why active hope?

Some of you may know that I was going to join you last year, 15 March 2020. I was in New York and Dorothy and I were passing emails back and forth in the first week of March, still imagining it might be possible and then, everything changed. Instead of being with you I sent my sermon -- on 'Radical Happiness'. In that address I said that 'Radical happiness is always potentially present, even in uncertain times.' I talked about the sociologist Lynne Segal whose book, *Radical Happiness*, is a response to social unease and uncertainty. She suggests that we can find happiness in our utopian dreams and our shared creativity creatively imagining ourselves into a world we want to be in -- a world not ruled by economic rules but made in imagination and love -- 'through community, through sharing and giving, through compassion and connection.'

Last year feels very different from today, of course it does but those words ring in my ears and they are connected today to what I now want to talk to you about -- the practice of active hope, its place in community, and its synergy with Unitarian values and commitments.

As Barack Obama has said: 'Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it. Hope is the belief that destiny will not be written for us, but by us, by the men and women who are not content to settle for the world as it is, who have the courage to remake the world as it should be.'

Active hope. I've been interested in hope as it happens for a long time -- like all of you I have my own personal hope history, my times of need, my times of needing hope beyond hope too. I've been through times in need of social hope -- Aids, threats of nuclear war -- I was in Poland during Chernobyl when it seemed to us there then that the world was really ending. I've turned to old stories of hope at times of need and I've turned to them to assure myself that even though our times are unique to us, others have been there before us and put down footprints in the form of helpful stories.

Take Pandora's box. She marries Epimetheus and she is given a chest and told never to open it. And so finally, she does -- I would too, I guess that's the point, we always do, and while all the ills of the world fly out, hope does not, she, for hope is a 'she', remains in the box, in the care of the people, available for service.

Emily Dickinson pictured hope as a bird,

the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,

perched but not flying, ready -- and perched in the soul no less. These images of a captured perched flying thing are *animistic* -- votive, non-human energies, certainly not under human control.

In this past strange, unusual, hopefully unique, year I have also become interested in other images of hope -- images that connect very much to Lynne Segal's radical proposition that our very happiness -- our deepest well-being -- is found in community, in exchange, in sharing, in giving and giving back -- and especially, images and practices of hope that meet us where we are in our lives -- and all of us have found ourselves in the past year in a place we certainly did not choose or wish for, at times uncertain, at times afraid, and at times, for some of us, in sorrow. I've become interested in hope not as a small flying creature we might catch if we can -- but as something that emerges in us and from us, in crisis, and that we can tend into active good through our engagement with it.

Jan Richardson's hope is like this. Jan is a poet whose work you heard earlier -- her husband and co-creative partner, musician Gary Doles died suddenly on December 2nd 2013, sending her into a maelstrom of grief and sorrow -- but recently she wrote this in her newsletter:

'it came really clear to me that for all I wish that Gary were here, this is not a lesser life; it's not the life I have to live in spite of his absence. This is the life that I get to live—unexpected and unsought but still deeply rich because of the extraordinary gifts that came, and still come, through the life we have shared.'

This is a life sustained by stubborn hope -- sitting with grief, and actively engaging in repair -- it's as if hope is not a *thing* any more at all -- but a loose weave of practices and engagements that enable us to process and remake what Jan Richardson calls 'that which is continually falling apart' Those acts of mending without outcome if you like -- constitute active hope. Joanna Macy's active hope looks like this too.

I first came across Joanna Macy in an interview she gave to Krista Tippett, the theologian and presenter of On Being, the American NPR (National Public Radio) programme on spiritual activism, when I was living in the US. Ecologist, Buddhist, poet and translator of Rilke she is now in her 90s and still active. She said something on that programme that struck me deeply and I

have often probably misquoted -- it goes something like this. We live in unprecedented times, critical, challenging times for the future flourishing of our earth, and our species, but no despair about the future can lessen our passionate care for the world in which we live, now. We will always have the present, and this is where we are, here, now, passionately committed to and caring about our home the earth and our lives here. She said this in the knowledge that we have huge responsibilities towards the future, in times in which we face the inheritance of injustice and the twin crises of earth care and people care. Of late, our times have become critical, they have been critical before, but these critical times are *our* critical times and we face particular emergencies.

Thirty years ago, Joanna Macy took her recognition of the rising ecological crisis and its effects on personal spiritual well-being and turned it into an ecophilosophy grounded *not* in the urgent cry that if we don't act now we are lost, but a movement committed to hope -- in which 'hope becomes something we do rather than have' and in which our part in making a contribution to more sustainable, compassionate, equitable human flourishing opens us to 'discover new strengths, open to a wider network of allies and experience a deepening of our aliveness.'

The movement that began to grow from her work and her connection to others led to a community of networks and activism called *The Work that Reconnects*, based in her philosophy of co-creating tools that enable people to address these unprecedented times through gratitude, honouring the pain and grief that critical times generate, seeing with new eyes and going forth into activism. She expresses that journey as a spiral -- Here is a link to an image <https://workthatreconnects.org/spiral/> - that expresses the journey of active hope. From roots in gratitude, the work moves through honouring pain, towards seeing with new eyes and going forth. What was new to me was that passage through grief and pain -- and while Joanna Macy dreamed this work up if you like, thirty years ago, it seems especially relevant to this past year. We cannot do the work of change without honouring the grief of loss and the discomfort and pain of injustice.

Recently, Macy teamed up with former GP and community leader Chris Johnstone to write the book *Active Hope*, a hand-book and resource for The Work that Reconnects and the networks it has generated. I trained with Active Hope London <https://www.activehope.london> and at Lewisham Unity we have commissioned artist activists to run the training, for which we also teamed up with Common Street, spiritual and activist centre in Natick, Mass. <https://commonstreet.org>
From this, we hope to co-create and run together active hope work this fall.

And here's a thing. Active Hope's tools and approach share much with Unitarian values and ethics -- that there is a spiritual dimension to our lives, that it is in a continuous process of revelation, unfinished and always changing; that what we do together is more than what we do apart; that our relationships with one another are founded in free consent, that a better way is possible, that freedom is grounded in the connection between individual and community. James Luther Adams said that we must put our trust in a creative narrative that is re-creative, each generation finding 'insight into the nature of human existence and spiritual values.' The writer Ursula Le Guin, in her brilliant philosophical fictional series *Earthsea*, says that 'The dance is always danced above the hollow place, above the terrible abyss.'

Active hope is a conscious response to the existential crisis in which we find ourselves. As I engage with it and we bring it in to our Lewisham congregation, so our Unitarian values are enriched and deepen for the times in which we find ourselves. At Lewisham Unity now we talk about the space where sacred meets social -- 'the growing edge' as Howard Thurman called it, a place we occupy in full recognition of the danger we are in as a species, of our finite lives, and of the beauty and joy of our existence. The growing edge. There we dance, play, build for the future, love and die. And we dance the dance of active hope.

I like to think now that hope is a form of dance rather than a bird captured or about to fly -- it isn't something we catch hold of as it wings past us -- it is something we learn to do and grow together, as we dance above the abyss, and in the space between the sacred and the social.
Amen