



CONNECTIONS

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere, I'm the minister of this congregation. We begin each Sunday at this time with Connections. This is a time of community and contemplation, where we share the joys and the sorrows going on in our lives. This is not a time for announcements, political statements or expressions of personal anger, but a time of deep sharing, where we are reminded that we are all human beings and we're all in this together.

Enjoy the experience of sitting in restorative silence until you are moved to speak. Please allow a breath of silence after each person speaks, so that we may focus our attention on what has been said.

Let us pause to dwell inward. Spirit of Life, please meet us where we are, in the struggles we choose for ourselves; in the ways we move forward in our lives, and bring our world forward with us. It is right that we pause to remember those who need love and support; who are ill or in pain, either in body or in spirit; who are lonely or have been wronged. Let us open our minds and hearts to a place of quiet, to a silent prayer for the healing of pain, and the soft, gentle coming of love. In this time of silence let our thoughts be with those who have spoken or been spoken about this morning. Amen and Blessed Be.

I ask you now to rise and greet your neighbors at the door. Please welcome them into the sanctuary with a hand of warmth and a smile.

HYMN 55, Dark of Winter

Hope Ain't All That Hard
A Worship Service by the REV. JEFF BRIERE
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga
December 14, 2008

David. I'm David Reed and I serve on the Board of Trustees. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right, now is the time to put your cell phone in Worship Mode, childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery, after the service today, please join us for coffee and conversation in the fellowship area behind you. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

You may have noticed **the red box** in the fellowship area. It has a sign in front of it and a slot on top. Donations found in that box will be directed to those families in our church community who are facing hard times this holiday season. Thanks for your generosity.

I remind you of our **Christmas Eve service.** It begins at 5 pm and we will use our new screen and projector for the first time that night. This is an inter-generational service, so please bring all the children you can find. I think they will enjoy this service.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin and is available on our web site. The best way to find out what's going on around here is to sign up for a weekly e-mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

PRELUDE: Dreams of Syrinx

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

In the light of truth and the warmth of love,
we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

NARRATOR JEFF. Abu L'Hssein, the fox, had always patronized Raven, who was ostensibly his friend. He thought she was dim-witted and often made jokes at her expense in order to inflate his own self-image.

NARRATOR KATE. One day, Abu was trotting along the trail when he saw Raven perched in a tree.

ABU L'HSSEIN. Raven! Long time! What's happenin' babe?"

RAVEN. Why, hello, Abu. I'm winging well, thank you. How are you?

ABU L'HSSEIN. I'm doin' fine, fine. Say! You ain't seen my new crib! Howsabout you & me havin' dinner tonight?

RAVEN. How thoroughly thoughtful of you. What time?

ABU L'HSSEIN. Why don't you drop by about 7, eh? You know that big flat rock in front of my den? I'll meet you there.

RAVEN. Shall I bring something? Say a carafe of Napa Valley Chardonnay?

ABU L'HSSEIN. Naaah. My treat.

NARRATOR KATE. Once he arrived at his den, Abu l'Hssein began to prepare a super soup and a sumptuous supper for his friend.

NARRATOR JEFF. He made a delicious soup with low-salt, no-fat bouillon, bits of soy protein, vivacious vegetables and savory seasonings. All day long, his soup simmered and smelled spicy, smoky and sinfully scrumptious. Raven arrived promptly at 7.

RAVEN. What is that fabulous fragrance, Abu?

ABU L'HSSEIN. Tonight, we'll forage in my famous forest soup. Eat well, my friend. I made this just for you.

NARRATOR KATE. And with a flourish, Abu l'Hssein poured the soup onto the large flat rock in front of his den.

NARRATOR JEFF. Raven pecked at the soup, which covered the rock to a depth of about a millimeter. She pecked and pecked, but was unable to eat, for her bill was meant to crush nuts and grab fruit, but not eat soup, especially soup poured out onto a flat surface. She became very frustrated as she watched Abu l'Hssein lap up the delicious dinner.

RAVEN. Who does Abu l'Hssein think I am? I can't eat this! Soup on a stone? Really!

NARRATOR JEFF. Raven folded her napkin and gazed over the rock at Abu.

RAVEN. Abu l'Hssein, you have outdone yourself with this splendiferous supper. I simply *must* repay your hospitality. Please visit me tomorrow evening for dinner. I will share with you some delectable dates from my tree.

ABU L'HSSEIN. Raven! How did you know that dates are my favorite? I ain't had a real date in so long, I can't remember what they look like. All I get are the rotten ones that everyone else leaves behind.

RAVEN. Shall we say 7? At the base of my tree? And don't bother to bring anything. Just your appetite.

NARRATOR JEFF. And with that, they parted and Raven flew home. Abu l'Hssein arrived promptly at 7 the following evening to find

Raven perched in her date tree, silhouetted against the orange glow of a warm setting sun.

RAVEN. These are the most divine dates. I've never tasted a sweeter fruit. Watch out, now. I'll knock some down for you. Catch them and you'll think you've died and gone to heaven.

NARRATOR JEFF. Raven knocked off a few dates for Abu l'Hssein, but not where he could catch them. She dropped them into the middle of a dense thorn brush. Abu, mad with hunger and crazed with visions of sweet dates, ran around the thorn bush, looking for a way in.

NARRATOR KATE. But no matter how he wriggled, squirmed, jumped or pounced, he could not reach the dates. Before long, his snout had a deep cut, his lips were red and swollen and his paws were raw and bleeding from reaching into the thorns.

But then Raven alighted near him. She used her hard beak to deftly reach into the thorns and grab a date for herself. After she had eaten it, she reached into the thorns with her scaly claws and grabbed another. For a hour or so, she stuffed herself with dates, at last holding her tummy and groaning with satisfaction.

NARRATOR JEFF. At that moment, Abu l'Hssein understood what Raven had done. Now, instead of looking on Raven as somewhat inferior, Abu came to appreciate her as an equal and he developed a deep respect for his friend.

CHILDREN'S RECESSINAL

We hold you in our love as you go, as you go
May your heart be at peace as you go
To nurture the spark of your precious life
We hold you in our love as you go.

OFFERTORY: *Sacha Huarimi's Blessing*

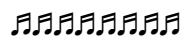
Have you ever heard of a one-handed economist? Harry Truman first called for one when he was President. He said "All my economists say, *On the one hand...But on the other hand...* Give me a one-handed economist!"

Economists can be a frustrating breed, for sure. As President Truman found out, they are impossible to pin down. And they can be unremittingly gloomy. During the panic and uncertainty of the early days of the Great Depression, a reporter interviewed the British economist, John Maynard Keynes. The reporter asked if anything like this had happened before. "Yes," said Keynes. "It was called the Dark Ages and it lasted four hundred years."

I am pretty sure that the current recession won't last four hundred years, although at times, it may seem like it. And it won't be so dark, either. There's plenty of light for everyone, as long as we don't cave in to fear. So I suppose that makes me a one-handed optimist.

We'll collect the offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. As always, the Wood-Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non-perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.



HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our

blessings every day and be thankful for them. Christina, please lead us in our *Hymn of Thanksgiving*. The words are in your program.

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

Our boogie-woogie choir has been hit with the boogie-woogie flu. Martha Berry is ill but Kate and I and Lee Adler have recovered. I continue to be concerned about how the economy will affect people. We'll get through this, I'm sure, but not without some pain. As is his custom every December, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. Bill Sinkford recently sent us a pastoral letter. These words are taken from that letter.

KAY. "As the winter days of this holiday season grow shorter, we light candles in the darkness. Outside there may be blustering wind and even snow, but inside our homes and congregations, we create warm sanctuaries. We celebrate the joys of the season and anticipate the return of the light.

"In this season of contrasts, I am reminded of the words of the Rev. Rebecca Parker: *Your gifts, whatever you discover them to be, can be used to bless or curse the world.*

"For many in the United States and around the world, this year's holiday season will be a challenging one, in which the continuing problems of war and poverty will be exacerbated by worldwide economic strains. Now, as much as ever, it is critical that we affirm the primacy of love and hope.

“I am heartened by the stories of Unitarian Universalist congregations that are practicing generosity this holiday season. I am proud to hear about our congregations that are collecting goods to keep struggling families warm, that are supporting food banks, that are resisting rampant consumerism and promoting ethical consumption, and that are advocating for a more just society.

“There are so many opportunities in this holiday season for each of us, and for our congregations, to shine the light of compassion. Even if we have meager resources and great challenges, we can still serve the larger good.

“My prayer is that we will continue to find ways to choose love. By affirming the human capacity for compassion, we can be a blessing to the world.”

The words of the Rev. Bill Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

JEFF. Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May your presence be with us,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us to forgive the mistakes of others
As we hope our own mistakes will be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.

May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment,
in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

In these moments of silence, let us remember always to be grateful

to be alive on this marvelous earth and let us pray for those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. Dona Nobis Pacem.

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

SERMON: Hope Ain't All That Hard

Today I am preaching about hope and the title of my sermon is “Hope Ain’t All That Hard.” Hope may not be all that hard, but writing this sermon was hellacious. But it was worth it, because you are the fortunate recipients of one of the top ten most intriguing sermons preached in Chattanooga this morning. The rest of the gang were honored in yesterday’s Times Free-Press.

I’ve never begun a sermon with an announcement of its title; I figure that if I’m writing and speaking well, it ought to be self-evident. And besides, it’s printed in the bulletin.

But this week, having finally kicked the remnants of a common cold and uncommon bronchitis, I came down with a big case of writer’s block. I couldn’t think of what I wanted to say. I just could not begin writing. I must have walked around the house a hundred times, looking for my muse. Usually, once I get started, once I put the first sentence or paragraph down, the rest will come readily. Being unable to begin, I resorted to a true confession of my shortcomings in hopes that it would stimulate the rest of the sermon. Thus I begin with the title and pray that you will derive some benefit from my ramblings.

I gave myself the title a month ago because I was thinking about hope and I thought the phrase was clever and true. I believe it. I thought that within a few weeks, I'd have something to say about it.

“That’s weird,” you may think. “He gave himself the title before he knew what he would say.” Sometimes it happens that way. From all I understand about composing music or poetry or songs, the way I write prose is similar. I’ll have an idea—or more likely part of an idea—and I flesh it out in preaching. In this case it was my conviction that hope is not all that hard an exercise for your spirit. And I came up with a cute slang-sounding expression of it. Meanwhile Wendy wanted a sermon title for the newsletter, so I gave it to her in its half-baked form.

A month ago a title is all I had and that’s still all I had until Friday, when I squeezed the first words out of my fingertips. And boy, was Kate happy about that. When I finished, she immediately put me to work cleaning up for the open house.

I was thinking about hope because I had settled on that concept as a unifying theme for all the services of this church year. I have tried—and sometimes succeeded—to tie this year’s services to some aspect of hope. But to speak about hope directly, without reference to an event or a person or a thing, to speak about hope in the generic sense frustrated me.

I mean, what can you say about hope? Is there any debate about it? Hope seems innocuous, doesn’t it? Could it be harmful to us or could it be critical to life? Should it be cultivated or avoided?

We can find plenty of hopeful characters in myth and fiction. Sleeping Beauty, I assume, had hopeful dreams in which she would be awakened with a kiss from a hottie prince. King Lear hopes against hope for loyal daughters. Lancelot hopes to distinguish himself in a quest. Frodo hopes to keep the ring safe from Sauron.

Exemplary characters with hope are plentiful, and that is, I think, because everyone has it. Everyone has hope—to some degree. Like anything else, hope is best enjoyed in moderation. Those who dial it up can easily become naïve and those who dial it down can easily become cynical. Hope ought to be balanced with reason.

It’s not reasonable to hope that you’ll lose 20 pounds just by switching to low-fat peanut butter. It’s not reasonable to hope he’ll look like George Clooney or she’ll look like Jennifer Anniston. It’s not reasonable to hope you’ll get a B when you did C work.

Everyone has hope; everyone knows how to hope and everyone hopes at some time for something. I think it’s part of human nature. But hope is not simple desire.

Everyone has desires, that’s part of human nature as well. It seems to me that desires have as their object something in the here and now, something material, perhaps, something close at hand, either in time or in space. This is in the realm of wishing. We wish to be successful. We wish for rain or that it weren’t so cold. We wish gasoline weren’t so expensive. Hey! Our wish came true!

Dictionaries differentiate hope from desire by including with hope the expectation that our hopes will be fulfilled, whereas the objects of desires and wishes are unknown entities. That is, hope is the desire for something along with the expectation of obtaining it. It’s the longing for something that may require effort to achieve, yet is possible of attainment. Hope is not casual wishing nor mere wants. Although we use the word everyday—I hope Tennessee wins! I hope I hit the jackpot! I hope the stewardship campaign is successful!—although we casually toss the word around, hope points to something deeper.

But what? I’m not sure exactly. I have always found that one way to understand the meanings of words is to examine where they come from and what other words come from the same place.

Hope has a curious etymology. Well, not the word hope; that's pretty straightforward. Hope comes from the Old English *hopian*, which means hope. Which ain't all that helpful.

What is helpful is the etymology of the *antonym* of hope, despair. Despair comes to us through French from the Latin word *spes*, meaning hope. Stick with me now, because this is where it gets interesting. *Spes* comes from an ancient word in a lost language spoken about 5000 years ago in the Middle East. In that proto-language it meant "to thrive." Our word prosper also comes from this root.

Modern English speaker use the Old English word hope, but the Romance languages—French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian—the Romance languages use *esperance*, or *esperanza*, or *spera*; words with a 5000 year old root meaning to thrive. So, really, hope has more to do with thriving than with wishing and desires.

Hope is a desire for something deeper, something about thriving, something about life and living, something about our human nature. Perhaps something about relationships.

In traditional Christian doctrine, hope is a virtue which has God as its object. That is, hope is the desire to live with God in heaven along with the expectation of going there. And that's why they make it a cardinal virtue alongside faith and charity, because it points directly to divinity. Now, I mention this not to encourage you to hope to be God or to hope to be with God, but to underscore my point that hope is more than desires and wishes. Hope is a desire for something deeper, something more profound.

With our Unitarian Universalist theology, which is different for every different person, divinity can be a useful concept—or not. So if you like the idea that hope points to divinity, you'll have to choose your divinity. I guess at least, you could imagine something bigger than yourself.

Perhaps that's the best Unitarian Universalist explanation of hope; that it is the desire for some reality larger than human existence along with the expectation of living that reality. In this sense, I think we can all get on board with hope. That is, of course, if you accept that there is something bigger than you.

Traditional Christian doctrine holds that, in the birth of Jesus, God became human in order to save humanity from itself. I like David Bumbaugh's take on this event. He said that God became human in order to understand why his creation was so perverse.

In any case, some Christians take the birth of Jesus as the primary hopeful event in the history of the world. They understand the arrival of God in human form as giving them hope that they may achieve eternal happiness in heaven.

For them, that's the something deeper that hope is all about. Me? I am not so concerned with happiness in the next world; I do what I can to make this world a better place. The something deeper that I hope for is that I will witness the betterment of the world in some small way.

My hope is that people will be released from the fears that separate them from each other. Because, you see, I imagine God is a homeless person. He usually lives in the little tiny space between people. When people make a connection, God has someplace to sleep at night. So I hope that people get together. Fear keeps people apart, so I hope that people are released from the fears that separate them from each other.

Using the word hope more casually, I hope that my daughter Erin has an easy pregnancy and an easy birth. I hope that the Lyme disease that my daughter Heather has goes into remission for the next 60 years. That ought to give her plenty of time.

I hope this church becomes what it can be. I hope Chattanooga and

Hamilton County and Tennessee continue their progress, which is at times, waaaaaay too slow for me. I hope the people of the United States weather the economic challenge of the coming months and years. I hope this world finds some balance, some point at which all the loonies and baddies and terrorists and conspiracy theorists and sore losers are counter-balanced by all the people hoping for a decent life and some good company at the end of the day.

People hoping for a decent life—desiring a decent life and expecting that it will happen. I suppose everyone has the first part of that—the desire. I guess fewer people have the second part—the expectation that it will happen. I hope they learn to have it, because the more people expect the world to be in balance, to be a better place, the sooner it *will* be.

And contrary to the title of my sermon, I think having the expectation that the world *will be a better place—well*, that may be hard. In the face of all the corruption and crime, all the decadence and depravity, in the face of all that is regrettable about life on earth, it might take a lot of mental, emotional and spiritual work to get yourself to the point where you expect improvement. Easy to wish it so; harder by a country mile to expect it.

But let's remember that hope is part of human nature. We have it within our capabilities to desire a better world *and* to expect that we will make it so. So hope may be hard but it ain't all *that* hard.

HYMN 224, Let Christmas Come

BENEDICTION

If, here, you have found freedom,
take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort,

go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams,
help one another, that they may come true.

If you have known love,
give some back to a bruised and hurting world.

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth
the warmth of this community
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

POSTLUDE: Ancient Faeryland