"HOPE"

Reverend Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Church North
Sunday, April 20, 2025

Easter Sunday

READING BEFORE THE SERMON:

This morning's reading ***"The Judgement of the Birds"*** comes from the writings of American naturalist Loren Eisley. He is describing a powerful scene he once witnessed (one summer day) while hiking deep in a forest glen…

[PICTURE OF FOREST GLADE PROJECTED UP ON CHANCEL SCREEN]



I had slogged through fern and pine needles for half a long day, and that on the edge of a little glade, I had sat down to rest with my back against a stump. Through accident I was concealed from the glade, although I could see into it perfectly.

The sun was warm there, and the murmurs of forest life blurred softly away into my sleep. When I awoke, dimly aware of some commotion and

outcry in the clearing, the light was slanting down through the pines in such a way that the glade was lit like some vast cathedral. I could see the dust motes of wood pollen in the long shaft of light, and there on the extended branch sat an enormous raven with a red and squirming nestling in his beak.

The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestling's parents, who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The sleek black monster was indifferent to them. He gulped, whetted his beak on the dead branch a moment, and sat still. Up to that point the little tragedy had followed the usual pattern. But suddenly, out of all that area of woodland, a soft sound of

complaint began to rise. Into the glade fluttered small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents.

No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and the unbereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. There was a dim intangible ethic he had violated, that they knew. He was a bird of death.

And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unmoving, unperturbed, untouchable.

The sighing died. It was then I saw

the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In

simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death.

THE SERMON

Well, dear friends, as the whole world knows, it's **Easter Sunday** ... the happy/ light-hearted/cheerful day we set aside (in the long spiritual calendar of the year) to focus on the glory that is the return of spring ... and on new life and hope wherever it is found. It's easy (on Easter Sunday) with the natural world FINALLY (FOR SPRING HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY SLOW THIS YEAR) joyfully bursting forth in fresh exuberance -- the trees budding forth again in tender, new green ... the flowers bursting forth in such a wild chorus of color and fragrance ... …the brook gurgling with fresh spring run-off…the birds filling the treetops with their exultant singing ... and all of creation seemingly conspiring to uplift us and make us glad -- it's easy (on Easter Sunday) to focus our hearts exclusively upon how wonderful and beautiful life on

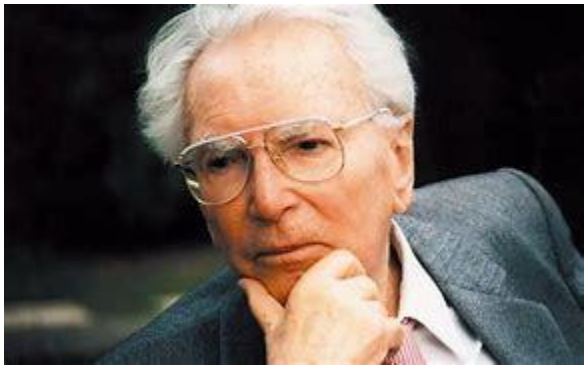
this planet can be.

But today I want to begin by going a bit deeper (and a bit quieter). I want to begin this Easter Sunday (as I just did in the Reading before the Sermon, sharing the story of the murderous raven) by first acknowledging the powerful truth of ***"Good Friday."*** I am passionately persuaded that before we can truly arrive at the bright hope and affirmation of **Easter Sunday** we must first visit the dark truth of **Good Friday** -- because (in spiritual fact) the only way we can really arrive at hope which will sustain us (on this day, and the rest of the year) is by first and fully and fearlessly facing life's very real tragedies, its very real sorrows, negations, and pain.

I want to begin talking about hope this morning by taking you to **the last place on earth** that you would ever expect to find any ... in the concentration camps of Nazi

Germany. Now, surely everyone in the room is familiar with the dehumanizing horrors of these camps. The cruelty and depravity of Hitler's attempted extermination of the Jews of Europe has been thoroughly documented and described in countless books, plays, and movies and so I need not spell out to you this morning the systematic, spirit-crushing darkness of the concentration camps. I want to talk instead about how human hope stayed alive there, how human hope survived despite the Nazis' systematic effort to destroy it.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF VICTOR FRANKL GOES UP ON SCREEN]



Victor Frankl

"Man's Search for Meaning"

One of the most famous (and, I think, inspiring) books written about the Holocaust, ***Man's Search For Meaning,*** was written by Dr. Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist, who survived three brutal years at Auschwitz (and other Nazi camps). In his book Frankl tries to understand how he (and so many of his fellow prisoners) managed to **keep hope and meaning** in their lives (how they psychologically and spiritually **kept their humanity alive**, if you

will) despite the inhuman conditions in those horrible camps. Listen to Frankl's own words:

> ***The experiences of [death] camp life show that [men and women do] <u>have a choice of action</u>.... [We human beings] can <u>preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom</u>, of <u>independence of mind</u>, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.... [We can retain] <u>our human dignity</u> even in a concentration camp ... <u>the last inner freedom</u> cannot be lost.***
>
> ***We who lived in concentrations camps can remember [those special] men [and women] who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they***

offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from [a human being] but one thing: <u>the last of the human freedoms</u> -- <u>to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances</u>, <u>to choose one's own way</u>. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which <u>determined whether you would or would not submit</u> to those powers which threatened to rob you of <u>your very self, your inner freedom</u>, which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity.... Any[one], even under such [terrible] circumstances, can decide what shall become of [him or

herself] mentally and spiritually. It is this <u>spiritual freedom</u>, which cannot be taken away, that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

[PICTURE OF VICTOR FRANKL COMES DOWN OFF SCREEN]

What Frankl was saying (based on his first-hand experience in one of the most horrible and hopeless situations a human being can face) -- and what I am similarly affirming spiritually about HUMAN HOPE to you this bright and effervescent Easter Sunday morning -- what Frankl was saying is that **hope** (whenever we human beings face true adversity, loss, or sorrow in our lives), **hope is the refusal to surrender what the philosophers call your <u>HUMAN</u> (or existential) "<u>AGENCY</u>."**

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

Hope is the refusal to surrender what the philosophers call your <u>HUMAN</u> (or existential) "<u>*AGENCY*</u>"….the freedom you have to act…to choose…to find your own way in any set of human circumstances

Hope is the refusal to surrender THE FREEDOM YOU HAVE (as a human being) to **<u>act</u>**, to **<u>choose</u>**, and to **<u>find your own way</u>** to purpose and meaning, no matter how challenging, sorrowful, or difficult the outward circumstance.

That is what the little song birds did (in that heartbroken glen which naturalist Loren Eisley described). After the dark raven brought death into their midst, those birds refused (in the face of the raven's nest-robbing violence) to surrender (if you will) their "SONG-BIRDNESS." They held onto their PRECIOUS SPIRITUAL AGENCY AS BIRDS and chose to continue to affirm life.

> ***There in that clearing,*** *[Eisley recounts]* ***the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush.... [Then] another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another ... till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing.... They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven ... for they were the singers of life, and not of death.***

That, dear friends, is what we human beings do whenever we decide (by sheer force of heart and will and soul) to hold on to **our precious human agency** whenever we are threatened by adversity or loss. It is what we do when we choose to stay in relationship with life ... and continue to

choose to live in the ways that allow us to make meaning and find purpose for ourselves, even in extremely difficult situations where our choices are greatly reduced…**TO BE SINGERS OF LIFE, EVEN INN THE FACE OF DEATH!**

[PAUSE…]

Dear God, for as long as I live, I will never forget a brave and beautiful young man I met in Memphis, Tennessee, some 50 years ago now. His name was Joe Russo, and I met him when I was (as a brand new minister) staff chaplain for a demanding year at the West Tennessee Chest Disease Hospital…

[PICTURE OF HOSPITAL IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]



THE WEST TENNESSEE CHEST DISEASE HOSPITAL in 1972

a dark, run-down, 7-STORY hospital in downtown Memphis (torn down years ago now), mostly filled with patients dying from lung cancer, tuberculosis, emphysema, and other terrible diseases of the lung. It was not -- as you might imagine -- a very cheerful or hopeful place…

Except for one room -- Joe Russo's room on

the 4th floor, near the corner of the building.

[PICTURE OF HOSPITAL ROOM WITH FAMILY IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS



I can still see it in my mind's eye, an ordinary, small patient room which (by **the sheer soul force** of Joe and his large extended family) became the large and expansive spiritual and emotional center of the hospital, a place of remarkable light ... and affirmation ... and humanity -- **a place of indefatigable human agency and hope**.

[PICTURE OF HOSPITAL ROOM COMES DOWN OFF SCREEN]

Before he came to the hospital, Joe (who was a strapping young man in his mid-twenties) pushed garbage for a living ... literally. He was a bulldozer operator at the Memphis city dump, until one morning when he unexpectedly collapsed while showering, never to walk again. Joe had been paralyzed by a terribly rare and aggressive neurological disorder, and (when I met him) he lived trapped on a respirator in that little 4th-floor room of the hospital, with no hope of physical recovery ... no hope that he would ever walk or breathe (or even go home again) on his own. It was – on the surface of it -- as hopeless and tragic a medical situation as I have ever encountered.

But that room was nonetheless always filled with hope and humanity. It was filled with hope and humanity because Joe -- facing just about the worse fates any young

human being can imagine -- refused to surrender his **human agency** in the world. He insisted on choosing life and meaning in the face of the death that was slowly closing in around him. He had decided (in the face of an illness no one would have blamed him giving into with despair) to **remain a fully engaged, vibrant, and caring human being** -- in close and caring relationship with the life that was within and around him. He was no longer able to move his limbs or his lungs, but he was more than capable of staying alive ... more than capable of BEING FULLY HUMAN ... of moving his eyes, laughing with a good joke, of expressing his heart, of giving voice to his active and interesting mind.

Joe (his world tragically reduced to four/tight/white hospital room walls) was more than capable of being **a purposeful presence** in that hospital, where his

paralyzed body was held captive. He was more than capable of caring actively for life and persons around him. I can't tell you the number of times that year Joe (the paralyzed patient lying flat on his back) inquired after how **I was feeling** (after I had suffered some minor tennis injury or sinus infection) when I was there to inquire after **him**. I saw Joe almost every day for a year, and I will not try to tell you that things were always blessing and light in that room. Joe (and the loving, extended family which hovered near him) had their down and difficult and discouraging days, to be sure. But, week in and week out, that little cluttered room (filled with bright cards and weird stuffed animals) was **THE PLACE TO GO** (in the ***West Tennessee Chest Disease Hospital***) if you wanted to hear the latest joke ... debate the week's politics or the fragile state of the world ... listen to Mozart

... share a good poem, or a tear, or a belly laugh (with other visitors) that could be heard all the way down the sterile hallways. That tiny room was always a large hall filled with humanity and hope -- the humanity and hope which Joe and his family chose to create in the face of death itself, the humanity and hope that can only happen when human beings (facing adversity) refuse to submit their human freedom and agency.

Again, the words of Viktor Frankl,
"Everything can be taken from [a human being] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's own attitude in any given set of circumstances ... to choose one's own way."

Now, these two stories -- about Viktor Frankl (and other brave souls finding a way to survive with hope and meaning in Auschwitz) and about big-hearted Joe Russo

(building a rich and expansive and caring world in his tiny room in the ***West Tennessee Chest Disease Hospital***) -- these two stories are (to me at least) terribly moving and inspiring stories of human freedom, courage, and intentionality. But what do they have to do with you and me, sitting quietly in this safe and warm room on this Easter Sunday? Well…[***SCOTT LOWERS HIS VOICE]*** quietly now…I will tell you. While these two examples of **HUMAN HOPE KEPT ALIVE AMIDST ADVERSITY** are as dramatic as they are horrible, the fact is that all of us (over our lifetimes) will face similar challenges to **the human FREEDOM AND AGENCY that lies at the very center of who we are as mortal creatures on this planet**. Over our lifetimes, you and I inevitably face our share of ***"Good Fridays"*** of the heart, mind, body or soul -- those painful and difficult times (that come,

sooner or later, to all human beings) when we feel our humanity and our joy constrained, diminished, or threatened by harsh circumstance.

You all know what I am talking about. While life is most certainly ***NOT*** hostile to us (for this creation -- as difficult as it can be -- is clearly NOT somehow "out to get us") nonetheless, to live in this fluid and mortal creation of ours is to face (at various times and ways in our lives) the existential challenges of disease and death, of disability and diminishment, of despair and disappointment, of disheartened dejection. At various times in our lives, we all feel our lives darkly closing in on us, making it harder and harder for us to find joy and fullness of purpose and being. That's just the way life is on this unpredictable planet.

And the ***"SPIRITUAL KEY"*** -- it seems to me -- the spiritual key to successfully finding

your way through such difficult times is to have a heart that refuses to submit your human agency, a heart that continues to choose life over death, meaning over despair. I take it on faith that **what makes you and me fully and finely human is the freedom we have (when faced with life's unwelcome challenges and constraints) TO CHOOSE HOPE ... to stay vibrant in our fundamental relationships (with life and others) and find meaning and purpose in that continued, chosen engagement ... despite the crush of outward circumstances that threaten to diminish us (and our days).**

And choosing **the kind of existential hope** that I am describing this Easter Sunday is somewhat different than simply being **OPTIMISTIC**, an important distinction which my colleague Bruce Marshall writes about. Here are his words:

A friend whose wife is undergoing treatment for a serious illness told me that their physician advised them to approach [this medical crisis] with hope, not optimism ... [and this] makes sense to me.

Optimism, as I understand it, is an attitude of expectation that a particular [favorable] result will occur -- that a person will recover from an illness, that we will achieve a specific goal, that the Publisher's Clearinghouse will pick my number from among the billions submitted. The dictionary defines optimism as "an inclination to anticipate the best possible outcome." [But] optimism often leads to disappointment; when the best possible outcome does not occur, we are let down and may

feel betrayed.

Hope [on the other hand] is more resilient, more enduring, more helpful. Hope is less specific. [Hope] is an attitude that looks for POSSIBILITY in whatever life deals us. Hope does not anticipate a particular outcome, but keeps before us THE POSSIBILITY THAT SOMETHING USEFUL will come from this. Hope advises us to look squarely at the realities that confront us, while remaining aware of the possibilities [that remain].

My friend Joe in Memphis lived with **hope**, not **optimism**. He was not optimistically counting (wildly) on some miracle cure. He was rather hoping (simply, from **the stubborn, resilient,**

> **and brave heart**) to live a meaningful life within the four very real walls that were his. Hope (in the face of human difficulty) is not the assurance that everything will return to you just as you want it. Hope is rather **a verb of brave human being**: Hope is a choice of the heart ... hope is you believing that (despite life's diminishments) there is **meaningful life** yet to be lived ... **purpose and joy** yet to be discovered ... relationships and connections yet to be built ... and songs yet to be sung, even beneath the brooding shadow of the raven.

[PAUSE…]

I have **one, last, true story about hope and human agency** to tell you on this beautiful Easter Sunday.

Very early in the HIV/AIDS epidemic -- which swept through the gay male world in the

early eighties with such ferocity, swiftly taking so many of my friends and acquaintances ... dear God, how I remember all those losses –

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF REV. MARK DEWOLFE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]



The Rev. Mark Moser DeWolfe

1953-1988

But very early in the epidemic a young colleague and dear friend of mine, the Reverend Mark DeWolfe, became seriously

ill with the disease before there were any effective treatments. Mark was an indefatigable spirit -- a kind and intelligent young man with an irrepressible appetite for persons and life. The last time I saw him was at the 1988 General Assembly in June in Palm Springs, California. He was very thin and was clearly very sick, and, in fact, he would be gone just four months later. But for that Assembly he was moving around from event to event ... wearing a tee-shirt, just like this one

[SCOTT HOLDS UP THE TEE SHIRT]

with **three great big letters** emblazoned across it, **N.D.Y**. Can anyone guess what **N-D-Y** stands for?

No, not **NORTH DAKOTA YOUTH**; it stood for "**NOT DEAD YET**." The reason Mark had this tee-shirt custom made for himself was that (in those early days of the epidemic) there were many people (even sensitive and

enlightened UUs) who had not yet personally known someone with the disease, and they were very nervous about Mark and his HIV/AIDS status. As a result, they were unintentionally awkward around him…not quite knowing what to say or do. So Mark, ever the activist with a dry sense of humor, moved around that assembly in this tee-shirt. And whenever somebody would inevitably ask, ***"N.D.Y. What's that?"*** Mark would cheerfully exclaim, **"NOT DEAD YET. I'M NOT DEAD YET!"**

And, By God…in spiritual fact…he was **NOT DEAD YET**. Mark, clearly sick yet ever grateful for the gift of life, was **not** done living. He was **not** done working with the congregation (in suburban Toronto) he so loved. He was **not** done sharing the pleasures and challenges of everyday life with his partner Jim and their dogs. He was **not** done traveling (near and far to see the

many marvels of this planet). He was **not** done being a human being -- fully living, caring, fighting, sharing, and loving. **Mark lived his life (all the way to its end) with hope, purpose and humanity.** In the face of HIV/AIDS, he refused to submit his human agency, his freedom to choose, his opportunity to live, and live well. For as long as he had breath, he kept choosing **life over death**. Even in diminishment, he lived every day he had with a fullness of purpose and meaning. He chose HOPE. He chose LIFE.

[PAUSE…]

This Easter morning, dear friends, **Here is the "Good News" news I bring you..**

This day, this simple spring day, has been GIVEN TO US in possibility, richness, meaning and splendor. You are here…you are alive…you are a full and free human being who can choose to live this day with purpose, promise and possibility. You are a

human being ... with PROFOUND FREEDOM… PROFOUND AGENCY AND OPPORTUNITY.. You can (THIS DAY) chose hope over despair…life over death. You can (as those birds in Eisley's forest glen OR MY FRIENDS Joe and Mark) be a ***"Singer of Life"***

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

AMEN.