

Homily—Imagining Our Future

Rev. Dr. Rita Capezzi—UUFM 1 24 21

When our children were quite young, we began taking them hiking, not too far but certainly on trails with shifting terrain and elevation. Yet, our daughter, so young and small, was often taxed, no matter how easy the rest of us perceived the hike or how much we slowed down our pace. In order that she did not lag far behind, especially when hiking uphill, I constructed little scenarios to keep her climbing. Little scenarios like—"ooh, look, I see some mushrooms under the tree root up ahead." Or, "ooh, is that a fairy standing on that branch, do you see her?" Or, "I see a caterpillar in the middle of the road. Let's catch it!" The purpose of these little scenarios was to tap into her imagination and what mattered to her, to keep her focused on the hill we were climbing as a family, even when our girl did not want to climb.

I have felt, and I believe many of you have too, that we have been climbing uphill for some time now. It has been a hard road. As we grow more and more weary of the pandemic, of isolation and restriction, the disease morphs and changes, with so very little done to lessen its spread. The number of infections is always higher than the number of reported infections, since many people have the disease without symptoms, and so the silent spread makes us wary of each other. I work hard to control emotional reactivity when I encounter a person unmasked, even as I look restlessly for ways to put lots of physical space between us.

We witnessed unprecedented attacks on our democratic processes, especially the integrity of our elections. We watched helplessly as the unthinkable unfolded before our eyes. Who here had ever before watched the day that the United States Congress certified the Electoral Votes? I certainly had never done. Yet this year, who could not watch, and watch in horror as our Capitol was stormed by the lawless and the deceived. This last year, I have grown so weary of my head whipping around in shock and dismay. I have grown so weary of outrage, or lethargy as I have tried to give myself some peace from all the political strife. Vigilance takes a toll, all that watching and waiting, fearful of the worst and unsure of what to do about any of it.

We have been climbing a hill, friends, climbing a hill. Yes, and aren't we always climbing a hill? Isn't that simply the way of the world, our human reality? In our individual lives and in our collective life as American people. As individuals, we experience our unique psychic and physical and emotional pain. We all bear these. And as Americans, "We've learned that quiet isn't always peace, and the norms and notions of what 'just' is isn't always justice. [. . .] We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it. Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy. This effort very nearly succeeded."

Here in the Midwest, in Minnesota, we may be inclined to greet these individual and collective pangs with a spirit of Stoicism, an acceptance of loss and pain as givens without display of feelings or complaint. Stoicism teaches that our happiness is bound up in accepting reality as it presents itself, by using our intelligent minds to understand the world as it is, and not allowing ourselves to be controlled

by the desire for pleasure or by the fear of pain. Heartbreaking reality is the hill we climb all the time, and it is best to see it so. And at the same time, may we not cry out for people taken away, for lands lost in conflicts among indigenous and settler people, for the fragility of democracy? May we not lament, may we not give voice to the suffering that infuses this uphill reality even as we accept it as real?

In such times, what would I do, what would we all do, without the inspiration of the artists—of the poets like the extraordinary Amanda Gorman, and musicians and songwriters like IZ and Lea Morris? They offer visions of how our imaginations can make for a new world, one we must be, we must embody, a new world in which we all thrive. In lamentation, in the cry itself, we find the strength of resilience. In the acknowledgement of the pain of loss and fear, we find the tools to build the possibility of future goodness. It is not easy friends, to build a life, to build a democracy, to build a community, for the building is truly endless. All of our reality—personal, national, congregational—all our reality is unfinished, not broken, but not yet what it could be. All these aspects of our lives, they “are far from polished, far from pristine.” But what is it we see up the road, what might we envision up that hill we are always climbing?

More than five years ago, this Fellowship took a leap of faith and aimed for full-time called ministry. Almost three years ago, you did call me, and we began to dream a future together. In faith and dreaming together, we continually ask: Can the UUFM sustain this course? Do we have the human and financial resources needed to live into the reality we dream for ourselves? How might the Fellowship serve its people, those we know and those we can only imagine? How might our religious community reach into the larger community, seeking common cause and working together to unfold a life of fairness and justice for all? We do not know all the issues, we don’t have all the answers, and so we make our way with humility, with curiosity for the possibilities that can unfold when we seek to bring our values into reality. We strive not for the perfect but to creatively live with purpose, to boldly live into our values and to live them out loud, lifting “our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us,” laying “down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.” Life is, has been, and perhaps always will be a hard uphill road. Yet it is full of beauty and amazement as well. “[T]here is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it,” if “we’re brave enough to be it.”

And so, what shall we do, what must we do to be the light? “We breathe. We look within. We listen. We reach out.” We hold hope as a gift we cannot destroy, the heartbeat always stirring within us, the imagination awakening to us to possibility, the unfolding of faith in action. Here, as UUFM—as the people who make the place—may we feel gratitude for the community that we inherit and powerfully co-create by our presence and our presents, our gifts. In joy and wonder for the gift of life, may we greet this journey, our own uphill hike, with hope that we have the drive and the imagination to do what is necessary. May we sustain our faith that our journey to manifest Unitarian Universalism as a vital force—life-giving and life-sustaining—is exactly what our world, what our corner of the world, what all our hearts need, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together “Amen.”