

Faith in Possibility

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 26, 2026

An elderly farmer lay on her deathbed, considering the future of her three daughters. These young women quarreled night and day. She attempted to reconcile through engaging in conversation, emphasizing forgiving, forgetting, and living in peace. Her daughters ignored this wise advice and grew more bitter by the day. As the old woman's health deteriorated, she called her three daughters to her bedside. She requested they bring with them a bundle of sticks. She offered the bundle to each daughter in turn. "I want you to break these sticks in two," she instructed. Each daughter followed her orders, and none of them could do so – the bundle of sticks remained whole and intact. "Now," offered the ailing farmer, "take only one, and try to break it." The daughters each held a lone stick, and easily snapped it in two. "See?" the farmer offered. "You are like these sticks. Held together, no one person, no one event, can harm you. Yet, divided, you are easily destroyed."¹

This story was told by Aesop, an ancient, wise, and learned man, who regularly told simple stories imbued with insight. Acting as one, we are forever stronger than alone. In our pursuit of justice, activism, and lives of faith, we are more resilient when we are united. We find strength in unity, and we find faith in possibility. Forever unified we are able to create a world grounded in integrity and shared values, to help shape the future we now imagine.

My friends, we are in a time of emergency, leaving the masses destitute. Widespread economic uncertainty looms. Our planet cries out as we take advantage of her many resources. Food insecurity grows. Structures that keep us safe, whether democracy or global security, are threatened. Authoritarianism and fascism are stronger by the day. ICE tears apart communities and families. What does the future hold? Let us resist despair. There are no certainties, but there is possibility.

¹ *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearman "The Bundle of Sticks" pg. 23

Rebecca Solnit, American author and activist, articulates the trials, tribulations, and likewise the assurances of this turbulent and trying time. When we think of an emergency, we may reflect upon house fires, natural disasters, and imminent violence – a crisis that requires an urgent response. We are in such an emergency now but, as Solnit writes, “it is not too late because the emergency is not over. The outcome is not decided. We are deciding now.”² What will I do – what will we each do – in the impending days, months, and years ahead? Do not lament nor give up hope as our country and our world are veiled in violence and a dark uncertainty, for nothing is yet decided. None of us can foresee what awaits us, but we can hold as truth that what lies ahead is dependent on what we do now. “An emergency can involve terrible loss, or it can bring about magnificent transformation,”³ Solnit writes. I do not believe that this dichotomy is absolute. But I hear the whispers of transformation. This terrifying moment can bring about a deeper sense of compassion, a stronger sense of solidarity. This moment allows us to grasp a deeper clarity of our own humanity. This moment can teach us the power of collective action. It strengthens our resilience as it fosters spiritual growth. This is the power of transformation.

We heard poet and activist Amanda Gorman’s lament of the murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti. “They say she is no more,” she poignantly writes, “That there her absence roars, blood blown like a rose.”⁴ She further observes, “Our country shooting us in the back is not just brutality, but it’s a jarring betrayal; not enforcement, but execution.”⁵ I offer, do we see these discrepancies of what should be versus the stark reality of what is? And yet Gorman does not close herself off to hope - to what is possible. She guides her audience towards an enduring strength. Gorman offers us, “Know that to care intensively, united, is to carry both pain-dark horror for today and a profound, daring hope for tomorrow.”⁶ May we awaken to that deep and abiding hope for enduring love. For restoration and repair. For beloved community that

² "Difficult is Not the Same as Impossible," by Rebecca Solnit

³ Ibid

⁴ “For Renee Nicole Good Killed by I.C.E. on January 7, 2026” by Amanda Gorman

⁵ “For Alex Jeffrey Pretti Murdered by I.C.E. January 24, 2026” by Amanda Gorman

⁶ Ibid

transcends time and space. Today we know horror. We know violence and greed and deprivation. Tomorrow, may we know hope. Yet, the poet offers a gentle caveat and compassionate response: “if we ever lose hope, may we never lose our humanity.”⁷ Hope may sometimes waver as we watch the news, listen to the rhetoric of politicians. Nevertheless, may we remain rooted in our shared humanity, expressed through enduring empathy, compassion, and love. Hope returns. Gorman lifts up the insight that change is possible if we meet the bitterness and the anger of those who surround us with an everlasting and enduring love. That we counter hate and violence with, quote, the “better angels of our nature,”⁸ that quiet yet persistent voice gently guiding us towards enduring love, justice, and mercy – even when our instincts may call us towards fear and retreat.

And we see this work throughout history. Mahatma Gandhi was a well-known and influential leader, recognized for guiding India’s struggle against British colonial rule. Gandhi devoted his life toward this liberating justice work, remaining rooted in non-violent resistance promoting the dignity of every blessed life in this forever finite realm. I lift up words often attributed to Gandhi, reflecting his enduring belief that, quote, “when I despair, I remember that all throughout history, the way of truth and love has always won.” This is especially powerful coming from a man who liberated a nation, not through violence, but through a revolution rooted in truth and love, inspired by earlier thinkers and movements for justice. These truths do not mean that justice is a quick endeavor. This does not negate the lasting harm of violence. It offers, instead, that violent power is temporary. That we continue to endure both morally and spiritually. That truth and love continue, again and again, to resurface, inspire, and reshape entire societies.

We can draw hope and inspiration from the popular genre of apocalyptic literature. I think of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, a terrifying journey of father and son traveling through a ravaged country, trying to find safety. Two characters struggling to survive, facing starvation and

⁷ “For Alex Jeffrey Pretti Murdered by I.C.E. January 24, 2026” by Amanda Gorman

⁸ “For Renee Nicole Good Killed by I.C.E. on January 7, 2026” by Amanda Gorman

unpredictable, terrifying violence, while preserving their humanity and love. I think of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, a dystopian novel following a young woman traversing an exceptionally dangerous societal collapse, creating her own faith in a God of whom she defines as the power of change. Author, minister, and theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber compares apocalyptic literature to the events of today – authoritarianism, fascism, violence, war. She notes that we often think of apocalyptic narratives as those of enduring punishment and doom. However, originally, she offers, apocalyptic narratives served to proclaim the hope that, quote, "Dominant powers are not ultimate powers! Empires fall. Tyrants fade. Systems die." We see this as protagonists again and again persevere against the detrimental evils at hand. It is the same impermanence of Gandhi, the same hope of Gorman, applicable to a dystopian, apocalyptic society, rooted in the possibility for all that can be. Weber finishes her reflection with this affirmation: "God's still around."⁹ What does this theology mean to us as Unitarian Universalists? Nature abounds, and always will. Nobody can rob us of natural beauty, wonder, and awe. There is an eternal essence of divine love that cannot be destroyed. There is still an underlying and inherent goodness in humanity; an awe at the improbability of existence; the web that binds us all together. This can never be lost. It endures.

In these reflections I think of St. Benedict of Nursia, a Christian monk, alive during 500 CE when the Roman Empire fell. In the midst of a falling empire, he maintained hope for the world at hand. As an act of resistance, he invited individuals into a monastic lifestyle, joining for shared labor, prayer, and a deep care for the vulnerable among them. The monasteries he resided over did not prevent the empire's collapse, but they preserved the humanity of those within their walls. It was a preservation guided by an enduring Christian faith. In the midst of failing morality, inhabitants learned, fed the poor, and maintained dignity. These teachings – these lessons, this way of life – they matter to us today. Rev. Cameron Trimble writes of this extensively. We live in a time that draws us toward disconnection, and toward the feeling that nothing we do matters. And yet this Christian wisdom teaches us otherwise. It highlights that how we live in the midst of societal breakdown impacts what is possible when the devastation

⁹ "Welcome to the Apocalypse | Have a Little Faith" by Nadia Bolz-Weber

is over. This wisdom is a call to remain human. To tell the truth and to care for one another. To care for those on the margins among us, and practice restraint instead of revenge. Rev. Trimble writes, “we become carriers of a different future, even if we never see its fullness.”¹⁰

So how can we resist—and in doing so, shape a different future? The reflection I offer is based on a second article by Rev. Cameron Trimble examining authoritarian responses to the murder of Alex Pretti – the attempts to strip him of his humanity, to cover the act with lies, to take over the ordinary lives of the masses to paint their elaborate web of falsehoods. Rev. Trimble offers a litany of practices used by authoritarian leaders as they ascend to power and manipulate the masses. Let us reflect upon the power of our collective response to these evils. Authoritarianism repeats falsehoods until they are accepted as truth. Through this repetition, people grow uncertain of what they know to be true and weary of insisting upon it. So, what do we do as a people of faith? We literally stop listening to this repetition and hold on to the certainty of the words and events we have witnessed. Authoritarianism attempts to rid the public of its deeply held morals. What do we do as a people of truth? We intentionally hold fast and true to our honesty, integrity, and responsibility. We will not be stripped of our values of compassion, fairness, or justice. Do not tolerate the lies offered in abundance and do not repeat these detrimental falsehoods for that is the collapse of society. If we learn to live without shared truth, we disintegrate. And we do things collectively, as a people of faith.¹¹

As a faith community, we are a bundle of sticks, bound together and made stronger in our unity. Our values are the twine. So how do we as Unitarian Universalists move forward and resist when we are part of a larger community bound by lies, violence, and a thirst for power? How do we move forward—together, as one? We practice pluralism: we are each a sacred being and we are all blessedly diverse, in culture, experience, and theology. Instead of using these identities to divide us, we celebrate the diversity among us as a true and precious gift. We

¹⁰ “When the World Is Burning, Stay” by Rev. Cameron Trimble

¹¹ Trust Your Eyes, Not the Lies, Rev. Cameron Trimble

work toward justice in building a beloved community where no one is merely tolerated, but where all are fully welcomed and empowered to thrive. This is in direct response to isolation, anger, and falsehoods stoked by those in power. We honor our interdependence by acknowledging the web that binds us together in justice and integrity and as such work so that none of our siblings get lost in lies, hate, or manipulation. Furthermore, we practice equity. This inherent worthiness and dignity of each and every blessed being in this forever finite realm, none to be forgotten or ignored, none lost in a web of lies and falsehoods but held forever in a universal love. We are a faith grounded in persistent hope and in gratitude for a life well lived, a faith of transformation that grows and changes alongside the world, promoting goodness, decency, compassion, and love.

So may we embark on this journey as one united whole – stronger and more resilient for it. May our actions be bound by our shared and abiding faith and all that we hold divine. May our conduct not be guided by lies but held, always, in a web of integrity and truth. For lies divide us; manipulation divides us. So may our shared humanity be paramount as we traverse together this one wild and fleeting life. May we know the beauty that forever remains – the pink magnolias and towering redwoods, the eternal essence of divine love – and may we find strength in its persistence, for true wonder cannot be destroyed. The emergency is not over. Nothing has been decided. So may our actions today and the next day and the next be grounded in justice, compassion, and equity for each wonderfully diverse inhabitant in this forever broken yet beautiful world. May we not only survive but thrive in a world where justice prevails and equity reigns. May we live. May we love. May we know the strength of unity and the power of possibility. May we know truth, integrity, and morality in each of our forever finite days.

May it be so, and Amen