

“Good News!”
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This morning I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first? I think I’ll start with the bad news, and I promise we won’t spend too much time on it, since we’re all too familiar with it already!

Life is sometimes difficult. And more than that, the society in which we live is broken. People around us – and we, ourselves – suffer on account of this brokenness every day, some of us more than others. Many people are in pain. Some are even in despair.

Why?

According to a clinical psychologist and author named Bruce Levine, it is largely because – and I am quoting directly here:

“We are ruled by so many ‘industrial complexes’ – military, financial, energy, food, pharmaceutical, prison, and so on – that it is almost impossible to stay on top of every way we are getting screwed.”¹

Wow. That is straight to the point. But how do those complexes manifest in our lives day to day? Our world is being stripped haphazardly of resources, and our environment is being polluted. The cost of living is on the rise. Our financial futures are uncertain, and for some of us that is true in the very short term. Many of us are feeling the strain of that. Medical and drug costs are going up. Wars are being fought. Whole municipalities are going broke. Services are being slashed.

All of that contributes to making life hard, and it is on top of - and both complicates and exacerbates - the normal life struggles that we all experience anyway...aging, illness, parenting struggles, work frustrations, relationship issues, caregiving for elderly parents. Life can be hard at times. And as Levine goes on to say,

“There are a great many Americans who have been so worn down by decades of personal and political defeats, financial struggles, social isolation and daily interaction with impersonal and inhuman institutions that they no longer have the energy” to do very much, if anything, about it.

“...Many of us have given up hope...”

That’s it for the bad news; now for the good news!

¹ Levine, Bruce E., “3 Things that Must Happen for Us to Rise Up and Defeat the Corporatocracy.”

Levine insists that things can get better, but he says we'd need three things to happen. First, we'd need to really understand what's happening, why we're hurting, in all of its complexity. That would require both that we desire to know and that we persist in discovering the truth of what is. And that, in turn, would require that we both think critically and reason carefully.

But that kind of understanding – that kind of knowledge – isn't enough to motivate change all on its own, for sometimes knowledge can actually cause us to despair. Knowledge is power, as they say, but sometimes knowledge alone can be very disempowering and can result in our feeling helpless.

And so the second thing that must happen, according to Levine, for us to make things better is that we must develop “pragmatic tactics, strategies and solutions.” This also requires reason and critical thinking. And creativity, of course.

But even that is not enough without thing number three: “the energy to do battle.” And that energy comes, according to Levine from two important “psychological and cultural building blocks,” which he calls “individual self-respect” and “collective self-confidence.” This is, essentially, the confidence that people, working together, can make change.

“Without individual self-respect, people do not believe that they are worthy of power or capable of utilizing power wisely, and they accept as their role being a subject of power. Without collective self-confidence, people do not believe they can succeed in wresting power away from their rulers.

I should mention here that Bruce Levine is writing these words in an essay titled, “Three Things that Must Happen for Us to Rise Up and Defeat the Corporatocracy.” His concern really is these “industrial complexes” that I named earlier. He is concerned about the concentration of power in the hands of a very few wealthy corporations and the ways that results in a poorer quality of life for the many.

But in reading his words, I couldn't help but think that his “three things” apply also to other kinds of tyrannies...to those other things that oppress our souls. You know what I mean...you know – and perhaps only you know – what tyrannical influences exercise power over your life, what undue hardship daily threatens to crush your spirit. Alcoholism or addiction, perhaps? Mental illness? An abusive relationship? Depression? Those are just a few possibilities.

In any case, if we are to rise up and defeat these oppressors, we first need to understand our circumstance and its causes. Then we need to plan. And then we need to have hope that things can actually change and that we – and/or others like us – can change them.

All of which brings me to the Good News of Unitarian Universalism! For in reading Levine's essay this week, I couldn't help but see the parallels between who we have been historically as a religious tradition and what he says we need in order to get out of this mess – whatever this mess is.

We are historically the religious champions of truth: searching for it, accepting it, persuading others of it (rather than coercing them). Our forefathers and foremothers stood up for, were persecuted for, and sometimes died for the search for truth that we still hold dear today. We believe that such a search is everyone's right – and everyone's responsibility.

We have historically valued reason and critical thinking, more perhaps than any other Western religious tradition; and those are necessary to developing tactics, strategies, and solutions. We have never taken “Just Trust Me and Do As I Say,” as a valid statement to be heeded blindly. We have always believed that if God – or someone or something else – gave us brains for figuring out complex things, then by God we should use them!

And finally, we have historically valued the inherent worth of the individual – what Levine calls “individual self-respect.” And we have historically been an optimistic religious people regarding the progress of humankind, which Levine refers to as “collective self-confidence.” “Onward and upward forever and ever,” as our 19th century Unitarian brothers and sisters used to say.

Many other religious traditions wrote people off long ago as sinful and depraved and not worthy. They have taught that the established authority – the church – is the body to which the people must look to have their needs met, including their need to commune with God. They have fostered an unhealthy dependence on authority and, by extension, and unhappy dependence on circumstance. And when the people have fallen prey to believing overly much in their dependence, they have also tended to lose faith in their ability to make a difference or that things can change.

So, my friends. Here is this clinical psychologist, as far as I know, not a Unitarian Universalist, who might have to concede that we actually have in our tradition what it would take to overcome adversity, hardship, oppression, even “corporatocracy.” He would say we have to prepare ourselves by doing these things, by living and spreading these values, every day. And we do! Or at least, we aim to.

As Dana McLean Greeley, minister in Concord during the 1970's and 80's, and founding President of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961, said in the piece that was our reading this morning:

Our job is to bear witness to the truth, and to advance doctrines and principles which will enhance human dignity and upon the foundation of which democracy can prosper instead of passing into history.

...the liberal church is created to discover and emphasize and enlarge their faith in human reason and in themselves and in each other. ... The liberal church is an attempt to institutionalize [the love of God and neighbor] and to give it vitality.²

As far as that hope, that optimism, that is so much a part of who we are, UU Theologian, Gene Reeves, once wrote:

² Greeley, Dana McLean, “Why a Liberal Church?” March 12, 1978.

“Far from having nothing to say, religious liberals have to proclaim, over and over again, against both religious and secular adversaries, the good news that the future remains open and the Fates are not in control.”³

This piece of our good news – this hopeful vision – needs proclaiming in this world today – as much today has it ever has. For ours is a hope that things can get better – not in a future state of existence after death, but in this world. It is a hope that things can get better - not because someone supernatural - or real and powerful, politically or otherwise - will save us, but because regular people, despite all of our flaws, have the potential to make things right.

As the contemporary journalist Chris Hedges has written,

“Hope is not trusting in the ultimate goodness [of anyone in power to save us]. It is not having a positive attitude or pretending that happy thoughts and false optimism will make the world better.”

“Hope is not comfortable or easy. Hope requires personal risk... Hope is not about peace of mind. Hope is an action. Hope is doing something...”

“If we resist and carry out acts, no matter how small, of open defiance [of whatever is oppressing us in body or soul], hope will not be extinguished. If all we accomplish is to assure [someone who is suffering, physically or emotionally] that he or she is not alone, our resistance will be successful.”⁴

I think Chris Hedges has unwittingly lifted up another piece of what has traditionally been our Unitarian Universalist good news. For we have never been people who’ve believed, so much as we’ve been people who have acted. Ours has always been a faith of “deeds, not creeds.” That is quintessential to who we are as a religious people.

Although sometimes, I’m afraid we forget it. Sometimes I’m afraid we’re as likely as the next guy or gal to fall into the trap of wishful thinking – of hoping that things will change for us without our having to do the work of changing them (which sometimes requires first changing ourselves). Hope and deeds and hopeful deeds have always been part of our tradition, but sometimes unfortunately and unintentionally we have neglected both.

As the late UU minister Forrest Church once wrote,

Right-wing fundamentalists marshal far more energy, money, and talent to advance their narrow creed, than we do to transform the world according to our Unitarian and Universalist vision. Our slogan, ‘deeds not creeds,’ thus becomes a mockery. Too often we have neither, while they have both.

³ Quoted in “Mind and Spirit” by John Buehrens in *Our Chosen Faith*.

⁴ Hedges, Chris, “Real Hope is About Doing Something”

“In face of this, we are left with two choices. One is to climb off our moral high horse; the other is to learn how to ride. ... only the latter represents the promise and fulfillment of our faith.”⁵

There is hope in the doing. As Church says elsewhere,

“Every sacrifice (the word means to render sacred), every work of love, or selfless deed of praise, is redemptive both for ourselves and for others. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by a sense of insignificance and powerlessness, we lose ourselves, together with our ineffectual fretfulness, in the concrete work of the commonwealth of God, the work of justice being done and love being shared, the work of healing and wholeness, the saving work.”⁶

We in this Unitarian Universalist congregation have been doing more and more things lately to act hopefully and to ride our high horse. And our hopeful actions have been making a difference in the lives of more and more people in our communities, most of whom we may never know. Not too long ago, we received a letter from the director of WHEAT, the agency in Clinton whose food pantry and community meals program we support. That letter read as follows:

“The kindness, compassion and commitment you express by your very lives is a sign of great hope and encouragement to all of us at WHEAT. Your actions have an impact far beyond what you may ever realize.”

That is an example of us sharing our good news!

Now, I can't let you go this morning without talking about Stewardship. And this is what I want to say. First of all, remember, a steward is one who takes care of something – the property, the finances – of another...of the owner, in the owner's absence. You might ask, who is this absentee owner? You might, after all, feel like you are one of the owners, that we are the owners. In a sense that is true, but it is a very narrow sense, really.

It is more true to say that the owners are the ones who, over time, built this church and maintained it – and also the ones who will inherit it from us. It is ours only for this time, but it really belongs to a long line of people, many generations, of which we are merely one.

But I also need to remind you that we are not merely stewards of this church – of the physical buildings and the budget. We are – even more importantly – the stewards of its Good News, its vision of a world made fair and all its people one! People long before us struggled to keep this Good News alive for us. As UU minister, Harry Joyner has said,

“Our story is rich with the personalities of those who have suffered, bled, and died that we might inherit a legacy of freedom and promise. Our cause is for the enhancement of

⁵ Church, Forrest, “Deeds Not Creeds,” in *Our Chosen Faith*, pp. 50-51.

⁶ Church, Forrest, “Neighborhood,” in *Our Chosen Faith*, pp. 131-2.

human dignity and for creating inclusive circles of love. That is our gospel. That is our good news.”⁷

It is up to us to tend and to share this Good News. And the best way to do that is to practice it. In our everyday lives. In our everyday settings. In our homes, our workplaces, our schools. And in the public square. As Bruce Levine says,

“...we must prepare ourselves by battling each day in all our activities to regain individual self-respect, collective self-confidence, determination, courage, and solidarity.”

That, really, is what it means to be good stewards. To keep that hope alive. Things can get better. Working together, we can make it so.

In closing, I'll simply share with you these words of Robert Karnan, the late minister of the South Church in Portsmouth, NH:

“The quality of the love and goodness we expose from our sometimes reluctant hearts will change the world. Our task is not to make more UU's or to make bigger congregations or to raise great gobs of money. It is to heal and to inspire, to open and to remake, and thus to change what is sorry to what is a joy...

“May our vision so soar that no budget is possible to contain it, may our love of justice be so genuine that no community can thwart its cleansing healing goodness, may our courage overcome all fear and set the spirit free.”⁸

So may it be. Amen. And Blessed Be.

⁷ Joyner, Harvey, “The Bold Witness,” in *Salted With Fire*, p. 74.

⁸ Karnan, Robert, “Inclusive Evangelism,” in *Salted With Fire*, p. 145.