

## Hope for the Holidays

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard

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Hope is difficult to define. We all know how it feels and when we are in its presence or absence, but words may seem insufficient to capture its spirit. This morning I will explore the nature of hope, what it is, some factors that can undermine our sense of hope, and suggest some ways in which we can foster and find greater hope in our lives.

In preparing for today's service, I reread a book entitled "Agents of Hope." The author, Donald Capps is a professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. His premise is that one of the major roles of a pastor is to serve as an "agent of hope". As a minister, indeed I am privileged to offer and inspire hope through preaching, counseling, and teaching. However, it is also true that through the work of ministry, I encounter both the despair and joy of life with a great frequency and intensity. Oftentimes, the people who enter my life, who I am called to minister unto equally become "agents of hope" for me.

As I was reflecting on the nature and qualities of hope, a certain smiling face entered my mind's eye. As most of you know, I served as the Interim Minister here for one year right out of seminary. During that period of time, many people touched my life which is why it has been such a pleasure for me to return and reconnect with you.

One member who is no longer living but who was a very active member of this congregation during that Interim period was Pam Perry. Who here knew Pam? Well, on my very first Sunday, Pam greeted me with a warm smile. Her lovely accent instantly revealed her English heritage. An invitation soon followed to give me a tour of the island, which I gladly accepted. Pam had moved to Martha's Vineyard in the seventies with her family and so knew all sorts of hidden spots that I had never seen as day-tripper.

Pam picked me up in her little car and off we went! She was the one who first introduced me to Lambert's Cove Beach, one of my favorite spots on earth. That September afternoon as we walked upon the sand with our bare feet caressed by the waves, we discovered starfish cast up on the shore. Our conversation about personal,

local, and political issues was interrupted only by our encounters with these starfish. We would check to see if they were alive and returned several to the tidal pool. We ended up with several to carry home. A young boy bounded up the beach and stopped short when he saw our collection. “Wow! What’s that?” he exclaimed. Pam responded matching his enthusiasm, “They’re starfish.” Where I might have simply left it at that, pointed out where he might find his own or walked on, Pam simply handed hers to him “Here, it’s yours.”

Her generosity that day was no fluke. Over time, I grew to know more about this remarkable woman. In her life, Pam knew both joy and struggle. Her marriage had ended in divorce. In the eighties, one of her two sons was killed in a car accident. These losses were significant and continued to weigh heavy on her heart. And yet, when I think of “Hope”, it is Pam’s warm manner that comes to mind. The love and support she received when she lost her son inspired her to give back to the community. Pam Perry was instrumental in the founding of the local Food Pantry and served as its Director for fifteen years. The Pantry grew significantly under her direction. It was Pam who inspired my involvement with the Crop Walk Against Hunger both here and when I moved to Newport, RI. Pam was outraged at the increasing need and disparity. She once told me that her ambition was to put the Food Pantry out of business. Pam could have been resigned and hopeless but instead she turned her passion to action that became a lasting contribution to the quality of life on Martha’s Vineyard. She was not a strident person. People followed her example because her good nature showed us the way.

We so enjoyed our tour that over the course of the year we went on other expeditions to beaches, and wooded trails. One day her little car took us up the dirt road to Peaked Hill, the highest point on the Vineyard where the remains of her son had been scattered. We sat together on a rock looking out at the distant sea and shared memories and thoughts.

I would have liked many more days for Pam. A visit to the doctor revealed that she had acute Leukemia with only weeks or months left to live not months and years. She decided to allow the illness to take its natural course instead of undergoing radiation, which would have been painful and at her age of 78 had little chance of success. I share the story of her death with you because it demonstrates so much about her life, about who

Pam was and how she chose to live. I believe that because Pam continually enacted her values in her daily life, she was able to leave life without regret. During her illness, Pam said repeatedly that she felt “totally surrounded by love.” She had a team of caregivers, many from this congregation, perhaps some of you gathered here today. The flood of support was evidence of the many lives she touched.

Pam’s wishes were fulfilled. Her remains now overlook the ocean on Peaked Hill where her son’s remains were scattered so many years before. On the highest spot of her beloved Martha’s Vineyard, one is reminded of what Pam cherished: the beauty of the Earth, the flight of birds, and a place to stroll and chat with friends.

I share this story with you because I believe that it is a story of Hope. Pam Perry is an inspiration to me in the embodiment of a hope-filled life. I am not suggesting that she was perfect or that “everything happens for a reason”. Hope is not wish-fulfillment. If it were, there would no longer be hunger on Martha’s Vineyard, and both Pam and her son would surely still be alive today. It is a story of hope because it brings to life the words of Susan’s reading this morning. Hear them again:

*“Kierkegaard wrote: ‘Hope becomes faith through love.’ By revealing the grace of connection no matter what is happening, love releases us from our efforts to control life. Love opens our hearts wide enough to admit the unknown, the ungovernable. That openness creates the space we need to step outside of our restrictive habits and come forward in faith.”*

The concepts of Faith, Hope, and Love are central to the Christian tradition. St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians reads “Faith, Hope and Love, these three but the greatest of these is Love.” These are the words to the conclusion of the same passage which is frequently read at weddings, I Corinthians 13, “Love is patient, love is kind. . . “ However, this biblical passage comes to us in translation from the original Greek. Biblical scholars clarify that the original meaning was not romantic love but “agape” or “God’s love”. Scholar Mary Daly explains, *“It is generous love, not appetitive in the sense that there is a need to satisfy that in oneself that is incomplete, not stimulated by or dependent upon that which is loved. It is an indifferent value, seeking to confer good,*

*rather than to obtain it. It is therefore spontaneous and creative, and it is rooted in abundance rather than poverty.”*

According to St. Paul this sort of generous love is the greatest virtue. However, Developmental Psychologist Erik Erikson asserts that Hope is the foundation of all other virtues. Hope is the anchor of all other virtues or inherent strengths. According to his psychoanalytic theory of life stages, the development of these virtues is deeply interrelated. He outlines a schedule in which these virtues or inherent strengths develop: Hope, Will, Purpose, and Competence being developed in childhood, Fidelity in adolescence, and Love, Care and Wisdom being the most mature qualities of adulthood.

What is Hope if it is the basis of all other strengths? As I mentioned, Hope is not simply wish fulfillment but exists independently from the realization of specific hopes. Hope is not blind optimism or a Pollyanna view of the world. Instead, it is an attitude or disposition towards life that exists as integral part of us. Hope is a steadfast belief that the future is open and holds possibility.

Psychoanalysts like Erikson assert that this sense of Hope is grounded in our early childhood experiences. Through relationships with our Mother, Father or primary Caregiver, as infants we learn to trust. Trust is a foundation for our sense of both autonomy and mutuality. We learn foundational lessons about the nature of life and our place in it.

Our relationships with our primary caregivers, could speak volumes about our views of life. Examining those foundational relationships can be a source of great healing and allow us to move forward from our secure or troubled past. Sometimes these memories are too painful or too complex to face on our own, in which case I recommend the guidance of a counselor or therapist. As many of you know, a troubled past can be a source of spiritual wisdom. It is possible to learn how to parent ourselves and to heal from painful memories.

Hope is an enduring belief despite the circumstances of life. Certainly the loss of a job, death of a loved one, a serious illness, victimization, addiction, and divorce are all circumstances that threaten our sense of hope. Each difficult chapter in our life can shake us to the core and call on us to find a new sense of meaning when our trust is wounded and confidence shaken.

When Hope is hard to find, it is important to remember that there is a religious impulse deep within the human soul. It is not just the glitter of a Christmas card or the sparkle of tinsel. All the winter holidays uphold the kindling of lights that glow in the darkness. Like in our responsive reading, “Impassioned Clay” by Unitarian Universalist minister Ralph Helverson: *“We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present, some self-respect beyond our failures. . . . We have religion when we look upon people with all their failings and still find in them good; when we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature and to the purpose in our own heart. We have religion when we have done all that we can, and then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves”*.

We can handle what life gives us by facing it directly and moving through. That is what it means to live a hope-filled life. Denial and fear is what leads to being stuck in despair and suffering. Know that you are never alone in the struggle. One of the ways to grow hope is to seek out other people and share your story. Friends, family members, teachers, colleagues, members of this congregation and myself are here for you.

Another way to grow hope is to embody agape or generous love. You can honor the spirit of Pam Perry by bringing non-perishable food to church volunteering to be a Friend of the Island Food Pantry collecting donations at a local market. Here at the UU Society, there are many opportunities for service: you can be a part of our Caring Network, teach children as a part of UU Explorers, join or start a small group. Being a part of a religious community in this way helps us “stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived.”

As well as entering into direct relationship with other people, we can grow hope through spiritual practice—this is a gift you can open not only at the holidays but all year through. Prayer, meditation, and time spent in Nature allows for connection to all of life. As it is written in Ecclesiastes 8:4 *“Anyone who is linked with all that live still has some hope.”* Through prayer and meditation we can “entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves” and ask for the strength and wisdom to see the possibilities before us. May each one of us be “Agents of Hope” for ourselves, our families, this congregation, and the world that surrounds and sustains us. Amen.