

**Invitation to Hope**  
**Rev. DC Fortune**  
**UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley**  
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I love the story of Pandora's box. There is so much complexity and subtlety and irony wrapped up in that tale, that it sometimes reads like an episode of Norman Lear's "All in the Family." And like that classic television program, many people miss the biting commentary contained within.

This is ancient Greek culture's version of the human creation story. I find this fascinating, because the Hebrew Bible has a similar story: God created a mate for Adam, but with strings attached: "I give you this paradise and this companion and the only catch is don't eat the fruit from this tree."

Eve, like Pandora, is curious and cannot resist the allure of the unknown. It is Eve's curiosity and Pandora's curiosity that unleash all the troubles of the world in both versions of that old story.

I remember seeing former Texas governor Ann Richards speak at a conference one time. She was absolute TNT packed into a teeny, little frame with the perfect hair and makeup and fingernails that befits a fine lady from Texas. Governor Richards spoke on the double standard applied to women in US culture. Newt Gingrich had launched his "Contract On America" in those days and Ann had some opinions about that.

"If a woman decides not to have children and earn a living to support herself, she is selfish and ambitious," said Richards. "If she has children and stays home to take care of them then she is lazy, but if she goes to work and puts her children in childcare then she is heartless and an unfit mother. Not since Adam said, 'Eve made me do it,' have women taken so much blame for the world's troubles."

But I digress. It's still worth noting that when men write history, women get the blame for anything that the men don't like.

A different view of that old story might note that the men's lack of curiosity would have permitted the world's history to be filled with uninteresting

stories and no advancement or learning. The status quo was comfortable for them, so why change it?

In an episode of Star Trek: Next Generation called “The Masterpiece Society,” the crew of the Starship Enterprise encounter Moab IV, a reclusive colony that originally left Earth in an effort to create a perfect society through genetic engineering. They created a world without scarcity, without poverty or prejudice or discrimination. There was no disability or disease: a perfect existence. This is a clear reference to eugenics (Gene Roddenberry was not known for subtlety).

The planet was at risk of being struck and destroyed by a stellar core fragment spinning through space and headed for them. The technology of the planet’s genetically engineered culture was unable to contend with this kind of threat, and the people were willing to accept help from the Enterprise crew, despite them being quite imperfect.

There is discussion in the episode about the VISOR technology worn by Commander Jordi LaForge, who was born blind. The VISOR does more than simply permit LaForge to see; it enables him to see the full spectrum of colors – including infrared and ultraviolet and whatever other spectrums might exist beyond our ability to extrapolate or comprehend. On this planet, he would not have been permitted to live, or even be born, with such a disability.

It was precisely the lack of adversity that prevented this culture from developing the kind of science necessary to solve problems, or to enable folks who have differing levels of ability to participate fully as valued, productive members of society. And it was the technology behind LaForge’s visor that was key to Moab IV’s salvation: with LaForge’s visor and his technological brilliance, they were able to bust the power of the tractor beam necessary to save the planet from destruction by the chunk of space flotsam that threatened to destroy them.

The Starship Enterprise’s Captain Picard denounces genetic engineering as removing uncertainty from life, and as such, stifles things like wonder, curiosity, and creativity.

The episode ends with some number of the Moabites seeking refuge on the Enterprise to explore the universe around them, while presumably, those who remained on Moab IV were left to grapple with the knowledge that their efforts to create a perfect society had instead created a society that lags behind much of the rest of the universe in technology, philosophy, and the arts.

Last week, I spoke about inviting *joy* into our lives. Today, we are talking about *hope*.

A person's ability to hope often relies upon one's understanding of humanity: is it inherently good, or bad? Will good things happen, or are pain and difficulty our lot in life?

For me, the answer to that question is "yes."

People are inherently good. In some way, shape or form, each of us deserves love, deserves joy, deserves salvation and compassion and grace.

AND pain and difficulty happen. Our world is NOT genetically engineered, and so there is uncertainty, there are challenges, and yes, there are truly terrible things that happen, and people who allow – or even *cause* – them to happen. That is one of the down sides to having free will. Some will misuse it and that abuse means pain for others.

In much of Christianity there is this perverse notion that all suffering is to teach some kind of deep or grand lesson. Pain teaches us patience, it teaches us how to rely on others, it teaches us lessons in resilience and all manner of traits we consider desirable in human beings.

That's toxic theology. Suffering is not how we get closer to God. Suffering is suffering. It is universal. It is unfair. It is bad. Nobody is picked out by the universe for torture or subjugation, although humans do that to each other at an alarming rate.

Trauma is not a gift that teaches us deep life lessons. No. It messes with our brain chemistry and gives us weird coping skills that don't work in normal situations.

Betrayal is not an opportunity to develop trust or forgiveness. Betrayal is betrayal: it is painful and disappointing and sad.

These things are part of the lived experience, however, and religions down through the ages have sought to explain them in myriad ways.

I have heard people say about a friend's cancer diagnosis "This is meant to teach us something."

No it isn't. This hardship is hardship. Cancer is cancer. It is horrible and painful and awful in a thousand ways. If you develop skills or behaviors that help you survive it, that's great, but that was not the purpose of cancer: to teach us some grand piece of serene wisdom.

Several years ago, I attended a retreat at Earth II Biosphere outside of Tucson, Arizona. Located in the desert, the biosphere is a giant geodesic dome made of glass panels. It was an experimental thing from decades ago to see how humans might survive in a sealed ... terrarium of sorts.

A team of scientists with a variety of useful life skills were sealed inside of this thing for a period of years. Their job was to cultivate their own food, grow enough plants to produce sufficient oxygen and nutrition to keep them all alive, and study how every living thing inside the dome behaved in that isolation. Scientists outside the dome monitored things like O<sub>2</sub> levels and temperature and the bio data of the researchers but did not interfere with how the people inside the dome were living.

There are volumes filled with the data collected from that experiment, but one of the biggest lessons I took away from touring that facility was from the trees.

Trees inside the dome grew to a particular height and then ... snapped off. They were unable to support their own weight because they did not have the strength that other trees developed from being exposed to the forces of nature – wind and rain and sun in different measures. Those things do more than feed the tree nutrients: it turns out that they force the tree to

develop strength to withstand the wind and sun and rain, even as those things nurture the plant. Without something to resist, the trees could not develop the strength they needed and grew tall but were as spindly and fragile as blades of grass.

Adversity is not always a bad thing.

This summer, we were reminded how important hope is to our mental and spiritual health.

Those of us on the liberal side of politics went into the summer feeling pretty low. We had a presidential candidate who was aging and clearly past his prime. We loved him, but there seemed to be no one who could explain to him that it was time for him to step away from his campaign for re-election.

July 21<sup>st</sup> changed all that. I left this building after preaching, feeling ok, if not great, about the service. I had given a half-hearted bit of support for this aging lion of liberal politics, but I didn't have much hope for the future. If I am to be honest, I was wondering how I might survive a fascist regime that seemed destined to take over.

When I got into my car and turned on the radio, all that changed. The aging candidate had dropped out of the race, and the Vice President would be endorsed within minutes.

When I say everything shifted, I mean *everything*. My brain got an initial blast of adrenaline at the shock, then wave after wave of dopamine flooded in as I allowed myself to imagine the future in a new way. No longer was I resolved to a grim fate, but there was something to hope for. All of those terrible things were out of the box and flying around, creating misery, but then there was this tiny little thing at the bottom, this battered, mangled, little sparkly butterfly of a fairy, like Tinkerbell, with feathers, as Emily Dickinson describes, that escaped and flew around in my brain spreading joy and hope.

Watching the nation react to that event, and to the outpouring of positive energy afterwards, I was aware how desperately this country needed *hope*.

We were starving for it. We needed that glimmer of hope far more than we could have imagined.

Suddenly things were possible that had seemed out of reach just hours before. There was a chance that the would-be dictator might not win. There was an opportunity for new ideas, new energy, new leadership.

There was an opportunity for Pandora's redemption. Yes, there is rotten stuff in the world, but don't forget that it was Pandora who brought forth the hope.

Zeus was a miserable god. Insecure and mean, he was a bully. He set up Pandora and all humans to suffer the evils contained in the box, but it was Pandora who allowed hope to escape her prison and take an edge off all of Zeus' cruelty.

Hope is not a state of unthinking positivity. It does not ignore the grim reality in its belief that something positive will come. Hope understands that life has ups and downs and that ups will come again. Hope knows that pain is not forever, that injustice will not stand, and that love will win in the end.

Hope also understands that change requires action on our part: we cannot expect change to come by simply sitting in the mire of our sadness and waiting for some miracle to happen. Hope requires us to fight back, to engage, to say "oh hell no, that's not going to happen here."

As much as I love Dickinson's idea of hope as a thing with feathers that comes to light upon us gently in the sunshine, I find another poet's description of hope to be a little more ... realistic. Or at least a bit more understandable to my Gen-X, cynical tendencies.

This is a piece from "My Broken Voice: Poetry From the Edge and Back" by Caitlin Seida, published in 2018. This piece is written in response to Dickinson's pastoral vision of hope.

### **Hope Is Not a Bird, Emily, It's a Sewer Rat**

by Caitlin Seida

Hope is not the thing with feathers  
That comes home to roost

When you need it most.

Hope is an ugly thing  
With teeth and claws and  
Patchy fur that's seen some shit.

It's what thrives in the discards  
And survives in the ugliest parts of our world,  
Able to find a way to go on  
When nothing else can even find a way in.

It's the gritty, nasty little carrier of such  
diseases as  
optimism, persistence,  
Perseverance and joy,  
Transmissible as it drags its tail across  
your path  
and  
bites you in the ass.

Hope is not some delicate, beautiful bird,  
Emily.  
It's a lowly little sewer rat  
That snorts pesticides like they were  
Lines of coke and still  
Shows up on time to work the next day  
Looking no worse for wear.

However it is that you view hope, I encourage you to embrace hope this week, and in the six weeks between now and the election. Invite hope in. Embrace it, hug it, buy it a drink and a sandwich. Nurture it, feed it, and then get to work with it, doing whatever it is you can to bring about the world we all so desperately want to be.

May hope be our practice and our prayer, today, tomorrow, and always.

Amen.