

**“Hope in a Time of Numbness”**  
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I am a soccer fan. Anyone else? Long any sports culture, there are elaborate rituals and cultural justifications for fans to manage their emotions. And they can be strong, even too strong. Look at our city of brotherly love, Philadelphia. Greasing lampposts is no standard practice the night that the Eagles, 76ers, Phillies or Flyers play a championship game to dissuade people from scaling them.

In the UK, for football, what we call soccer, the seasons of not winning can stretch decades or even more than a century given the age of the sport there. Fun fact: soccer is not a random word we invented to annoy the rest of the football-playing and saying world. Soccer comes from England. See, they have associations of teams and a long time ago, to signify an association match from rugby football, they started calling it “association football” which got shortened to “ ‘socciation football” and then just add –“er” and you get soccer. Like a word hermit crab that is a living fossil, soccer in the US stuck around. And we of course took rugby and turned it into American football.

Anyway, caring as a sports fan, or as a fan of anything where you watch, including political campaigns, means creating space in your heart to be sad. To be crushed. And, after season after season after season of being crushed, you get superstitious. You get afraid to care anymore. You end up with the common phrase in England about caring, about hoping. “It isn’t losing that hurts, it is the *hope* that kills.” It is the hope that kills. Not literally of course. But it kills the spirit. It leads one to watch dispassionately. To sit back and feel smug to the rubes about you who are naïve enough to care, to dare hope.

US sports culture has a different ritualistic phrase. In the 1980 winter Olympics, a plucky team of amateur US hockey players were in the final against the mighty Soviet Union. See, in those days, since the Olympics quaintly held to the notion that the Olympics were only for amateur athletes, the soviet union’s players were essentially state employees who never left and competed in professional leagues. They had won 5 of the previous 6 Olympic golds, a span of 24 years. In the depth of the frigid cold war, these American Dsavids beat the mighty soviet Goliath. The announcer, Al Michaels, swept up in the moment, in the last seconds, captured the spirit of the moment with this now iconic line. “Do you believe in miracles? Yes!”

It is the hope that kills you. Do you believe in miracles?

Ted Lasso, a show that ran on Apple TV from 2020-2022, brought these two moments together. The show, by the way, is only vaguely about sports. It is mostly about kindness,

caring, and people trying to be better. It's roaring success in the world of pop entertainment shocked everyone. Anyway, the coach, a fish out of water American named Ted Lasso who is coaching a pathetic English team, on the eve of a big match his team will play against their Goliath, Manchester City, chats with two fans in the local pub the eve of the match. They are nonplussed and explain it is because they have learned now you know... not to hope for a win because it is the hope that kills you. Our plucky and optimistic American coach then uses that to rally his locker room team by invoking the idea of miracles. Coach Ted asks his team "do you believe in miracles?" Now this works better because his first act as coach was to make a ratty sign and tape it in the shiny, polished locker room that simply says "Believe."

A miracle of course, is something that defies rational, or in our era, scientific explanation. It has a zero probability. A Jewish carpenter and radical grassroots leader rising from the dead being one such example. Our Unitarian predecessors also couldn't accept zero probability miracles as literal events. Coach Lasso is clever. He tells them they don't need to say if they believe in miracles. He asks them "Do you believe in miracles?" And before we get into a sharing circle of near misses and astounding coincidences, he says, that if they believe, to join him in the sacred team huddle. See, it is not the outcome that matters. It is the simple act of belief, as he says, "I disagree, you know? I think it's the lack of hope that comes and gets you. See, I believe in hope. I believe in belief."

Is that enough? The clever writing skips past miracles. And the consequences of winning and losing.

This is actually a sermon about hope in a time of numbness. That is the best way I can describe these very, very dark times when our country is in the throes of a struggle between an American fascism led by our own puffed chest tin pot dictator, I mean Donald Trump.

Since my own evolution from movement activist to political campaign volunteer in 2004, questions of hope, belief, and winning and losing and the very real, very damning results of those losses have dominated my own thoughts.

The show's artful writers dodge the consequence of losing, of the allure of not caring to hope, because it is a show. It is pop art. Ted Lasso's sunny message is ultimately about believing in each other, in believing in trying. He rallies his team around believing in hope.

Can we?

I feel like this is the moment when I am supposed to describe all the reasons to care about politics. To enumerate the shockingly awful acts of this government led by this president. A Trump beach resort in a Gaza empty of Palestinians. Food banks overrun with Snap-deprived hungry Americans. Fishing boats burning in the Caribbean. A preacher in Chicago shot in the

head by a pepper ball. And on and on and on....

I and I just can't. I feel so numb. And I can tell you that is part of the strategy. That every day's outrages and lies and assaults on our sense of decency is part of the clever, clever strategy to distract and bait-n-switch from the robbing of our public goods and the draining of our reserves of good will. But, I am just so beaten down. I am so numb.

Hope or belief as a fervent belief, as a passionately held emotion does not lead me from the numbness.

## SERIOUS PART

Hope

Imagine an opening scene in a movie where the camera is like a small insect or drone flying from person to person. The scene is barely a year ago. It's the day after the election that put Donald Trump back in the white house.

We see one person reads the whole paper cover to cover, hoping for a fragment of better news.

Another doomscrolls on Twitter or Tiktok or Instagram hoping to find the great "gotcha" or instant karma that puts a MAGA nut in their place.

Another argues with their friends about how much it was Biden's fault while another blames the low turn-out of young Black men from 22-24 who listen to rap and don't like pringles. Why didn't they turn out? They both hope they are right.

Another starts re-reading the constitution hoping to find a magical phrase that means he really did try to coup his way into the White House and hence is disqualified.

Another starts obsessing about the voting records of each supreme court justice hoping to find evidence they will stop the cruel executive orders.

You hear an idea whispered here and there: this is not us. This is not America. We will wake up and the nightmare will vanish. We sure hope so. The election is a reflection of the choices of our fellow Americans. Right now it is one horribly ugly reflection. We hope others are also horrified by the brutality. This is not America, is it?

This .is. America. The same America that elected Barack Obama elected Donald Trump and also turned away from Kamala Harris. Squint, and you can see all the -isms. Racism. Classism. Sexism. Able-sim. And so on.

As a UU and as a progressive or liberal or lefty (pick your term), I love America.

Yes, an America born in colonizing, conquest and slave-trading. Yes, an America that is an unfinished poem of liberty for all. Yes, an America that is a bomb-dropping empire working for global fossil fuel companies. Well, I don't love that. I love the people who are giving at record rates to food banks. I love the home my immigrant, disabled father found here. I love the firm handshake and the friendly howdy said in 100 languages and accents.

There is a place for patriotism in our faith. We are not talking about a patriotism of blind loyalty, of a foolish, puppy-dog love of all things star-spangled and Uncle Sam. Our love of place and people, of country and constitution, is a mature love of demanding truth and honesty. In our own Pennsylvania history, we see the reprehensible in the Paxton Boys murdering dozens of Conestoga people in the 1750s alongside the righteousness of our 1776 constitution which granted the vote to all men regardless of color or property. We can hold both the reprehensible and the righteous in our minds and still chose to love

the ideals and aspirations that inspired our greatest moments of tearing down injustice so more of us can dance to the songs of freedom. And at UU justice PA, the path to that America of mad, dancing, and freer people is through what we can do in our own Commonwealth.

Even if we can find our patriotism, find the ideals and dreams that fuel imagining a better tomorrow, we are asked to hope. In the opening scene, all those people are hoping for a different, better America.

I suggest that the fervent wish to find someone, somehow doing something to stop the march of chaos, cruelty, and corruption is not real hope. Hope can be a noun. There is hope for better days. It can be an emotion. I hope there is coffee cake after the service.

The real hope we are stoking at UU justice PA is like what the modern-day organizer and abolitionist Mariame Kaba called a discipline. Hope is a discipline that one commits to and practices. And it is a discipline you do in a beloved community.

A few years ago, I saw her ideas circulating in an interview. She said:

**“hope doesn't preclude feeling sadness or frustration or anger or any other emotion that makes total sense. Hope isn't an emotion, you know? Hope is not optimism...**

**Hope is a discipline.**

**Because in the world we live in, it's easy to feel a sense of hope/lessness, that everything is all bad all the time, that there is nothing going to change ever, that people are evil and bad at the bottom. I understand why people feel that way. I just choose differently. I choose to think a different way and I choose to act in a different way.”**

UU Justice PA's mission is to advocate for our values in government and public life in Pennsylvania. That is why we exist. It does not say *how* we enact that mission.

We invite you to join us and become a hope junkie. Hope-as-a-discipline means doing something. Just. Do. Something. You can never know if this or that act “mattered” in some cause and effect or global way. Hope demands action, not analysis. Action is the antidote for despair, for paralysis due to over analysis, for feeling alone or adrift in these times. You can do a little or a lot. Every action, every moment of hope-in-action matters because they are moments when you are choosing differently.

What can you do?

Be with your friends, allies, and family. Talk about actions you will take because you chose to hope. Invite them to hope with you.

Host a coffee hour or other coming together. Ask people to do things, not take on roles. Don't worry about starting a committee until you need one.

Come to a virtual office hour and be in community with other UUs and allies where we will explore the discipline of hope.

Join a justice team and participate in their activities.

Money always helps.

But you accepting our invitation matters more: Become a disciple of hope.