

When Courage Fails and Faith Burns Low

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It was a Sunday, a little more than a week before Christmas. I had just completed one of my periodic sermonic jeremiads. Using mythic symbolism attached to the great Winter Festival, I had devoted the sermon to detailing my growing concern over the economic policies which seem to be working their way through the Congress--policies which I believe would impoverish millions of helpless children, policies which I believe would beggar the working poor in order to benefit the rich and the near rich. I had questioned the morality of those proposals and I had urged the congregation to contact their elected officials and express concern for the welfare of those who have little voice in and little access to the public arena. The response in the discussion following the sermon had been spirited and a number of people had expressed a willingness to act on the challenge I had presented.

As they filed out of the church at the end of the service, several people took the opportunity to extend the conversation with a brief comment or question. One member of the congregation, shaking my hand, looked me in the eye and said, "After a sermon like this one, there is a topic I need to hear you discuss. How do you keep going when things seem to go from bad to worse? How do you hold on to hope, how do you keep your faith when your dreams are not realized? That's a sermon I need to hear some time!"

I thanked her for her suggestion and promised that I would tuck it away in the back of my head and see what, if anything developed in response to her question. What I did not realize was that her question would not stay tucked away in the back of my head. Rather, it would push its way to the forefront of my thinking again and again, demanding a response.

As I thought about that question at odd moments during the intervening weeks, I began to hear another voice in the corner of my mind. It was the voice of A. Powell Davies, who had been minister of this congregation from 1933 to 1944. Sometime in the late fifties, someone had given me a LP record of sermons Davies had delivered at All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. In one of those sermons, Dr. Davies had quoted a verse from an old hymn. In the back of my mind, I was hearing his richly accented voice intoning: "When courage fails and faith burns low and men are timid grown, hold fast thy loyalty and know that truth still moveth on."

The two voices have called back and forth in my mind for weeks now: The voice of a member of the congregation asking, "How do you hold on to hope; how to you keep faith when things seem to go from bad to worse?" and the voice of A. Powell Davies,

challenging me to "hold fast my loyalty and know that truth still moveth on?" In the interplay between those two voices I have found two different questions emerging.

The first of these concerns the assumption that things are truly going from bad to worse. I find myself asking whether that is a valid description of the times in which we live. And I must confess that much of the time the evidence around me drives me to answer yes. The media is full of stories which, if taken together, seem to suggest that we find ourselves in a time of massive economic restructuring--a restructuring which promises to be at least as far-reaching and long-lasting in its consequences as the transition to the industrial era--a time when common lands were enclosed, families were driven from their homes and delivered up to vast, centralized industries as an exploitable labor pool. That economic shift, as chronicled by the Unitarian novelist, Charles Dickens, resulted in enormous misery, suffering, social disruption, crime and violence as the distance between the poor and the rich grew to vast proportions.

The economic shift through which we are living seems also to offer a similar panorama of misery, suffering, social disruption, crime and violence. In his book, *THE TWILIGHT OF COMMON DREAMS*, Todd Gitlin points out

The shrinkage of real per capita income that began in the early 1970s has now continued for more than two decades. Average real wages fell by 18.8 percent between 1973 and 1994. While the wealthiest one-fifth of the population improved its economic position during the 1980s, the rest of the middle-class...plunged into insecurity....The percentage of *full-time* workers who earn what the Commerce Department defines as a less than a living wage rose from 12 percent in 1979 to 16 percent in 1992. Since 1973, the number of American children living in poverty has increased by half, to 22 percent of the total. [From Gitlin, Todd, *THE TWILIGHT OF COMMON DREAMS*, Metropolitan Books, 1995, p. 225.]

The living reality of these statistics can be found all around us. Men and women who once felt secure in their jobs have become the victims of what is euphemistically called "corporate downsizing"--a process in which corporations abandon any pretense of responsibility to or concern for individuals, and in the name of profits cut people off from their jobs, their careers, their futures as effectively as the enclosure movement in England at the beginning of the Industrial era drove people from their homes, their livelihoods, their expectations. As a consequences, few of us feel totally secure about our futures; few of us are convinced that our children or our grandchildren will know security in their lives; few of us can escape the sense of some imminent catastrophe just ahead of us.

But if the times have grow bad for the middle-class, they have become an absolute disaster for the poor and the marginalized in our society. Quoting again from Todd Gitlin, "according to the most recent data available, males in Bangladesh have a better [From Gitlin, op. cit. p.29] chance of living past age forty than males in Harlem." And, increasingly, there seems to be less and less support for the notion that because we are one people, the welfare of each is the responsibility of all, that a major role of government is to ensure a just and equitable distribution of resources.

You have heard these kinds of statistics before--if not from this pulpit, then from a host of other sources. You have undoubtedly felt some of the seismic effects of ongoing economic shifts in your own lives--jobs lost, a nagging insecurity about the future, children struggling in marginal jobs, friends and neighbors living on the raw edge. And few of us can avoid a sense of guilt shading off into anger when we compare our worries and insecurities with those who are already homeless, jobless, without resources. Few of us are completely immune to the changes which are sweeping through our society, deepening and widening the gap between poor and rich. In many ways, things do seem to go from bad to worse, and I find myself feeling that any response I have the capacity to make is modest and doomed to be ineffective.

At the same time, I do keep preaching these sermons; I do write letters, and send modest checks to organizations and agencies which are attempting to preserve the frayed safety net for the poor. Somewhere, deep inside, there must be a conviction about what Davies referred to as loyalty to a truth which moveth on. And that evokes the second question: What allows us to hope in the face of momentous challenges and what enables us to do what little we can in the face of enormous, impersonal historical developments? What makes it possible to hold on to hope when things go from bad to worse?

I found this a profoundly difficult question to answer until last Sunday. Last Sunday, I had the privilege of visiting with the children in our Religious Education program in Unitarian House. Let me tell you, they are a remarkable group of young people. Beautiful and bright and inquisitive, they obviously feel at home in the world. They have a clear sense of self; they also have a growing moral sense which drives them to an emerging concern for the world around them and for others who share that world.

Sitting there, watching them and interacting with them, I found myself reflecting upon the hidden, undeveloped, unpredictable possibilities represented in these young lives. I came away from my meeting with our children more concerned than ever about the nature of the world they are going to inherit from our hands. I came away from my meeting with our children, wondering how we can help them develop the strength they will need to cope with the challenges they will confront. I came away from my Sunday with our children with a renewed conviction that though we may not be able to see a clear path to the future, and though we may not be able to resolve the all problems which plague our world, none of us can escape the obligation to do what we can do to wrestle with those problems. That is the very least we owe to our children and to their children.

Reflecting on this experience, I discover that while I am not optimistic, I am stubbornly hopeful. Optimism assumes that somehow things will work out for the best, that perhaps they are not as bad as they seem, or that perhaps our efforts will prove adequate to change them if they are as bad as they seem. When I look at our world and the challenges we face--the enormous unfairness, injustice, prejudice, rooted so deep in our history, I cannot make that assumption; I cannot tell you that I am sanguine about our ability to think or work our way out of the situation in which we find ourselves.

I simply do not know how to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. I simply do not know what to do about the mindless self-destructive violence which those who have been marginalized in our society regularly inflict upon themselves and each other. I simply do not know what to do about angry white men whose paranoia leads them to fantasize about bands of Gurka troops massed on the Canadian border, prepared to invade Montana, and who organize themselves into armed militia bands to threaten the lives of judges and forest rangers and other government workers and their families. [See Stern, Kenneth S., *A FORCE UPON THE PLAIN*, Simon and Schuster, 1996.] I simply do not know what to do about politicians who pander to paranoia and self-destructive fantasies. I simply do not know how to reframe the ancient dream of a beloved community which embraces all the children of the earth so that that dream may be seen as a viable alternative to the harsh, divisive destructive vision we so blindly serve. I do not see a clear path from the world as it is to the world I would have our children and our grandchildren inherit.

But though I am not an optimist; I am stubbornly hopeful. My hope rests upon a conviction that there are more forces at work in this world than I can understand or recognize or measure and that these forces interact with a complexity no one can chart. This is the truth that will not let me go, the faith in which my hope is rooted: We are part of a process which is larger than we can measure, more complex than we can fathom--a process which we do not control, a process in which we are carried along, but a process we can affect in significant ways, often in ways important beyond our ability to understand. This I do know and this I do believe with all my heart: History is not a closed book; it is an open-ended, non-linear system. History is not predetermined. It is one of those chaotic processes in which some minor change in the flow may produce vast and unexpected consequences. No one knows or can ever know the full consequence of a word spoken, a deed accomplished, an encouragement uttered, a moral judgment rendered. Deeds and words and choices which seem from our perspective to have no impact at all upon the environment in which we find ourselves, may prove to be the small change which moves the human community in a new and unexpected direction. And by the nature of things, the person responsible for that change rarely knows the consequences of his or her action.

To live in hope, then, is not to be confident and certain and secure about the future, nor is it to know that your judgments are right, nor is it to be sure that your efforts will produce the results you are seeking. Rather, to live in hope is to trust the process and to be determined to do what you are called to do in loyalty to the truth which has grasped you, knowing that your action contributes to a larger, mysterious, complex, unpredictable pattern. What this means is that if we are to live in hope, we are required to remain engaged with the world, to understand ourselves as rooted in and part of a sacred process which brought us into being, which sustains us in being and which receives us at the end of being, and to seek to play our part in that on-going process. To live in hope also means to sustain a willingness to be surprised as the process of history often refuses us the things we want and graces us with gifts we were not wise enough to seek.

For me, this means that I cannot refuse to make moral judgments on the events of my time. I understand that sometimes--perhaps often--I am making judgments about things I do not fully understand. I understand that sometimes--more often than I would like--my judgments may prove to be wrong, mistaken, naive. But, you see, I am not required to be right. I am required to remain engaged in the life of our times, to be open to the evidence of my own experience, even when it challenges my basic assumptions, to do my best to judge the moral and ethical significance of the events which define the times in which we find ourselves, and then to act on those judgments. In this way, we introduce a moral and spiritual element into a social equation too often dominated by self-serving, short-term pragmatism.

I am required by my engagement in the process to speak for those who have been marginalized in our society, lest, because they are largely invisible they be not included in a social equation too often dominated by the loudest and the most powerful. I am required by my engagement in the process to affirm and celebrate the better angels of our natures, lest altruism and empathy which are precious gifts to us from our ancestors be left out of a social equation too often dominated by a cynical and disparaging estimate of human nature.

If you ask me at any moment whether I am optimistic that all of this will make a difference, I must be honest and say that I can't see how it will. But I remain stubbornly hopeful. Chaos theory teaches that in non-linear systems small efforts can produce dramatic differences. The classic illustration of this insight tells us that a butterfly flapping its wings over Beijing may initiate a process which results in a thunderstorm over Peoria. Certainly the butterfly has no way of knowing the significance of its efforts. It is simply attempting to fulfill its nature as butterfly. Nor can it know the consequences of its action--whether the storm is the event which breaks the terrible drought or bursts the dam and floods the land. But however it comes out, the world will never be the same again because a butterfly fulfilled its nature as butterfly.

By the same token, we are called to fulfill our nature as human beings. I believe that we are, by nature, moral beings, haunted by the distance between what is and what ought to be and that we are driven by our very nature to narrow that distance. Circumstances may not make us optimistic about our ability to accomplish that goal, but hope tells us that if we fulfill our nature as human beings, if we proclaim the truth as we see it, if we seek to live our lives by that truth, if we challenge others to include the moral dimension in their calculations, though we may not know the consequences, we need have no doubt that there will be consequences. And because I trust the process which creates and sustains us, I live in the hope that in ways I cannot always see or understand, the vision of a blessed community will be brought closer to a reality as a result of my service to the truth as I am given to see the truth, and my struggle to remain open to surprises and to the unexpected so that even I and my dreams may be transformed by the process.

"When courage fails and faith burns low, and men are timid grown, hold fast thy loyalty and know that truth still moveth on:" the words quoted so long ago by A. Powell Davies haunt me. They take on special meaning when I look into the faces of the children--the

children in Unitarian House, the children I see on the streets and in the malls, the children whose faces look out at me from magazines and television, all the children. What is the source of hope when things seem to go from bad to worse? It is a conviction rooted deep in human nature that each of us has an unending responsibility to those children who shall receive this world from our hands, and that if we cannot leave them a better world it must not be because we failed to try. What is the source of hope when things seem to go from bad to worse? It is a conviction that precisely because I cannot ever know the significance of what I do or leave undone and therefore it is imperative that I do what seems to me to be right, trusting the process to use my efforts in service to that which is truly right. What is the source of hope when things seem to go from bad to worse? Ultimately, it is a conviction that fulfillment of my own nature requires my engagement with the world in behalf of a moral and spiritual vision and while I am willing to be wrong, I am not willing to give up the struggle to become more fully human.