

# Simple Gifts

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Dec. 2008  
Vol. VI, Issue IV

## *The All Souls Journal*

### America's Hope

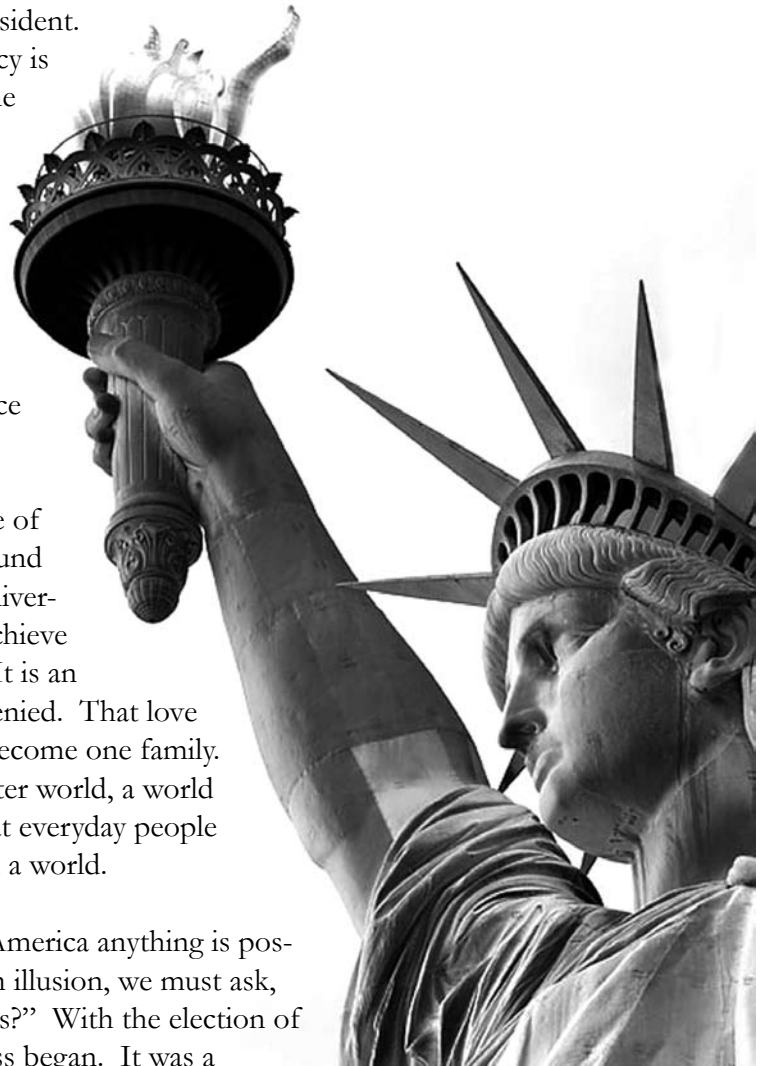
-by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister

Hope is resurgent in the world today in part because of what we have done in America in 2008. We have proved that a person who comes from little financial means, who is raised outside the streams of power and wealth, does have the chance to become our President.

We have demonstrated that the promise of democracy is real, when a biracial man of African heritage, with the middle name Hussein, can become the leader of the free world through peaceful means and the will of the people. Hopelessness fuels the recruitment of terrorists. It is a lot harder after November 4, 2008, for terrorists and detractors of America to make the case that our nation's democracy is a sham. We have sent a powerful signal that democracy and liberty promise real opportunity that violence and insurgency cannot.

As playwright Arthur Miller liked to say, "the essence of America is its promise." And it feels like we have found our story again! It's a story bound up in faith in a universal brotherhood and sisterhood which we strive to achieve step by step, stage by stage, albeit much too slowly. It is an affirmation that justice, in the long run, cannot be denied. That love is superior to hate. That humankind is destined to become one family. It is a faith that stirs dedication to the cause of a better world, a world more free, more just, and more united. It is faith that everyday people like you and I can and do participate in creating such a world.

Our recent presidential election offers hope that in America anything is possible. Of those who say that faith is a lie and hope an illusion, we must ask, "Then how is it that the march of progress continues?" With the election of George Washington in 1789, an ever-evolving process began. It was a



**December: Hope**

*Where Faith and Hope Abide † Christmas in July † Let Go and Live*

process grounded in hope, in faith in democracy, liberty, and in justice for all. The American Revolution had been founded on such a hope and faith. The Civil War was won with such hope and faith. And it was with such hope and faith that countless people endured mobs, and dogs, and fire-hoses, enslavement, and lynching of their fellows... days when it seemed the blood might never stop flowing. It was with faith and hope that almost defies imagination that African Americans have held fast to the promise that is America. But hold fast they have and now our first black president will enter the White House that was built in part by slaves on land given by two slaveholding states.

The victory of Barak Obama is much larger than a political triumph; it offers new hope for the growth of respect for the "other." And, respect for the "other" who is different from ourselves is critical today, because the time is coming soon when our only choices will be the kinship or the destruction of humanity.

Many people want to know the source of the faith and hope that allows people to dream and gives people the courage to fight through the night and die for what's right. The source is a living spirit that resides within the mystery of life, a spirit that has been called by many names yet is a mystery that transcends all our naming. In English this

powerful spirit of life is most commonly called God. But whatever its name, there is a spirit alive in the world which not even death can extinguish. It is a spirit which stirs the hearts of poets and resounds in great music and causes us to dream. It moves us to long for the impossible, and gives us the courage to attain it. It is of this spirit that hope is born, and faith endures. It is a spirit upon whose wings civilizations rise and great leaders are fashioned. It is of this spirit that America came to be through dreams and visions of yet unrealized possibilities. And it is this spirit of hope and faith, made real on earth, that America promises to the world.

Nurturing the promise of America is not just the work of our nation; it is also the work of our church. We must provide an example of healthy faith based not in fear but in love and hope. Ours must be a faith that shuns exclusive claims and intolerance. Let us continue to hold up a beacon of hope and truth and freedom in the world. It is with this faith that we know for what we live and we know that life is worth living. We can create a better world than we have known today. Just having such hope and vision for our future changes the present. From ages past, we have witnessed so much promise fulfilled and so many dreams come true. And that assures us that our hope is not a deception and our faith is not a fantasy. †

**O**ur church program-year (September-May) is fashioned around nine theological themes. Each theme plays a part in the development of a well-grounded religious and spiritual life. The church's offerings each month are by no means limited to the themes. However, these topics provide an axis around which many elements of church life gain more meaning and depth. They provide us with a set of common stories and ideas that become elements of an ongoing community conversation. Be warned: Seriously engaging these themes could transform your life!

*September - Faith*  
*October - Death*  
*November - Forgiveness*  
*December - Hope*  
*January - Justice*  
*February - Love*  
*March - Brokenness*  
*April - Transformation*  
*May - Transcendence*

# Where Faith and Hope Abide

-by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister



How do we find hope when there is no rational reason for believing the world will be different tomorrow than it is today? When all of the evidence is anecdotal, perhaps having hope is unreasonable.

In a poem called *Origami Emotion*, American poet Elizabeth Bar-

rette writes:

“Hope is  
folding paper cranes  
even when your hands get cramped  
and your eyes tired,  
working past blisters and  
paper cuts, ....”

Hope is being awake to the depth of the pain of our experience and acting anyway. The evidence of hope can look very different to each of us. Under the weight of profound suffering, hope can look like just getting out of bed, getting dressed, and simply showing up. One person’s routine can be another’s triumph.

I have been both blessed and cursed by serving as a chaplain at a prison and at a major university hospital. I would spend eight to ten hours behind the walls of a maximum security men’s prison, where everything was gray - the walls, the floor, the mood; where people were no longer treated as human beings; where some men were bitter and unremorseful but others wrote poetry or created incredible artwork.

At the end of my day as a prison chaplain, I would come home to the stark contrast of my ordinary life to cook dinner, do my homework, and take out the trash. Often when I ended my shift as a chaplain at the hospital, I would leave the bedside of someone who likely would not be living when I returned the next day.

It can be a heavy burden to know that there is such sadness, such grief, so many lost souls, people who go hungry, who live life unloved. The feeling can be overwhelming. All of us who have been touched by suffering have experienced the feelings

that I am talking about. How dare we go on with the banalities of our lives in the face of such tragedy?

Hope is seeing the complexity of the situation and choosing to go on, to act anyway, to love anyway, to be vulnerable anyway. Hope is both insistent and evasive, persistent and illusive.

What do we do with our awareness when we are awake to both the beauty and the tragedy in this world? We tell our story as we have been doing for centuries, so that we can know that we are not alone. The stories of humankind defying all the odds are everywhere. They resonate with our spirit. They remind us that we can survive tragedy. We seek the company of those who will accept the invitation to stand in the fire with us. Through these stories we are reminded that it is better to be awake than asleep to life’s complexities.

In 2004, Barak Obama spoke of his vision of hope for America and the kind of hope I believe in: “...not...blind optimism,...something more substantial,...Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope.”

I am not talking about Hallmark Card hope. I am talking about any conscious action, any conscious response to the world and our condition. Hope is an affirmation of our humanity. It is a refusal to merely react, to be swept along by the current unaware of the intense beauty and tragedy of our human existence. It is choosing to be present and awake, choosing how to live, and what to fight for. And, it is joining with others who do the same.

I see hope as a spiritual practice. I see hope as a duty, and a moral obligation stemming from my religious beliefs. As religious liberals, we carry with us the burden of right relationship and the joy of knowing that we are not alone. We stand on the shoulders of generations that have come before us and struggled to grant us this place in history. We stand beside those who walk with us in the struggle, who renew our spirit, and who share in the vision of a world where dignity is a given and the illusion of separateness is no more.

We stand where faith and hope abide. †

# Christmas in July

-by Rev. Debra Garfinkel, Minister of Pastoral Care



Once, a long time ago, there were two sisters: Big Sis and Lil Sis. They lived with their mother and father in a nice little house, in a nice little neighborhood, in a nice little town. Father worked very hard – he had three jobs. Mother worked very hard – she had a gazillion jobs, taking care of the family and the house. Big Sis and Lil Sis had jobs, too, but they wanted to do more.

One day Father said to them, “Girls, you know how you keep saying that you want to earn some of your own money? I’ve found a job that you can do.”

“Really?” they asked, their faces glowing with hope. “What is it?”

Father answered, “Selling Christmas cards and other greeting cards.”

“Wow!” said Big Sis.

“How do we do it?” asked Lil Sis. (She was much more practical.)

So, Father showed them the information in a magazine. Together, the family read about the Happy Card Company. Big Sis and Lil Sis were excited. “We can earn money and be our own bosses!” “It will be hard work, selling Christmas cards in July,” Father pointed out. “But if you are cheerful, dress for business, and pay attention to the customer, you could do very well.”

The girls were filled with expectation and pride and hope. They began practicing their sales pitch before the card samples arrived. They went to their bedroom to make plans. Big Sis and Lil Sis thought of what they would need to know and how people might act when they answered their doorbells. (You see, the girls planned to sell cards door-to-door in their neighborhood.) They were ready for adventure. Little did they know that they would be messengers of hope.

Big Sis and Lil Sis hoped to make enough money to buy Father some handsome handkerchiefs with his initials embroidered on them. (Every businessman had handkerchiefs like that.) They wanted to

buy Mother some fancy perfume called Channel No. 7. (They thought it was funny to name perfume after a television channel.) Then, if they had money left over, they thought of things they might want. Father said, “It’s good to set a goal to work toward. Just don’t set it too high.”

When Big Sis and Lil Sis received their sample boxes of cards from the Happy Card Company, they set to work. After they made three calls on three different neighbors, they began to understand what Father meant. “We’ve only sold two boxes of cards. We’re hot and tired,” they said as they plopped down at the kitchen table.

Mother said, “Here’s some of your favorite fruit juice. Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

And that’s how it went. Big Sis and Lil Sis mostly had fun. They met some new neighbors. While Big Sis and Lil Sis showed the card samples, they listened carefully. They heard great stories and some sad stories, too. Almost always, the people were happier by the time the girls left than when they first arrived.

One day, in their room, Big Sis and Lil Sis talked about how their business was doing and how much fun they were having. “I think we’ve met everybody in our neighborhood. We should start going farther away,” Big Sis said.

“No, we haven’t and you know it,” Lil Sis replied. “We still haven’t met Mrs. Jones.”

“Well, we’ve tried,” Big Sis looked down at her shoes.

“We knocked on the door and then we left,” Lil Sis corrected. “What’s the matter? Are you scared?”

Now, Big Sis didn’t want to admit that she was afraid of anyone or anything. “I’m not scared,” she shot back. “But I’ve heard stories about Mrs. Jones. She doesn’t like children. She yells at them for walking on her grass or for riding their bikes in her driveway.”

“So, you are scared,” Lil Sis challenged her. “Am not. But I’m the oldest. I’ve got to protect you.”

Just then, Mother knocked on their door and walked in. “What’s up girls?”

“We were talking about Mrs. Jones – whether we should call on her,” they spoke at the same time.

“I see,” said Mother. “Tell me more.”

The girls told their mother about the stories they’d heard. They also talked about what it was like to be invited into people’s homes and to hear their stories.

“You know, girls, Mrs. Jones has stories, too. Maybe she’s lonely and sad,” Mother spoke softly.

“Well, if she is, why does she yell at kids?” Big Sis asked.

“I don’t know, Sweetheart. But I do know that you won’t find out until you knock and she answers.”

Big Sis and Lil Sis decided to give it one more try. They went across the street. They walked up the front porch steps. They knocked on the door. They waited. And waited. And waited. “I think I saw the curtains move at the window,” Big Sis whispered.

“Yeah,” agreed Lil Sis. “I think she’s checking us out.” Then, the door opened. There stood Mrs. Jones. She appeared shorter than they imagined and not at all scary.

Big Sis spoke up. “Hello, Mrs. Jones. I’m Big Sis and this is Lil Sis. We live across the street.”

Mrs. Jones nodded. “It’s very nice to meet you, girls,” she said. After hearing their sales pitch, Mrs. Jones smiled a small smile and invited them into her house.

Big Sis and Lil Sis were there a long time. When they were finished they went straight home. “Mother! Mother! Guess what? Mrs. Jones is really nice, like you said. Did you know that Mr. Jones died three years ago? Did you know that she keeps all the curtains closed? It was kind of dark in there. Did you know that she doesn’t have any children? And she doesn’t go to church?”

“My goodness, girls. It sounds as if you had a good visit,” Mother smiled.

“Yes!” they both exclaimed. “And she ordered three boxes of the most expensive Christmas cards and two more of the all-occasion cards – the ones with the Bible verses and glitter,” reported Lil Sis.

“And,” said Big Sis with emphasis, “she gave us homemade chocolate chip cookies!”

Two weeks later, the cards arrived for delivery to the customers. Big Sis and Lil Sis saved Mrs. Jones’ delivery for the last. They had a delightful visit. Mrs. Jones seemed happier. The curtains were pulled back and the house felt lighter. “This time we had gingerbread cookies,” they later happily shared with their mother.

Three days afterwards, a card arrived in the mail. It was addressed to Big Sis and Lil Sis. They were excited. They hardly ever received mail. “Oh, look!” exclaimed Big Sis. “It’s from Mrs. Jones.”

“It’s a Thinking of You card,” noted Lil Sis. Here’s what Mrs. Jones wrote inside:

Dear Big Sis and Lil Sis,

Thank you so much for bringing joy and laughter – and light – into my life again. I hope to be a better neighbor.

With love, Mrs. Jones

The girls showed the card to Mother and Father. “Well, you never know what’s going to happen until you try,” Father said.

“Girls, we are so proud of you,” said Mother. “You brought hope and friendship into a lonely person’s life.”

“Yes,” said Lil Sis thoughtfully, “and we made money.”

“Yes, you did, Honey,” Father said. “And that’s more hope for our family.” He winked.

Big Sis had been very quiet – an unusual thing. “I think Mrs. Jones gave me some hope, too.” “How’s that?” Mother and Father asked. “She gave me hope that even when people are mean, they can be good. Maybe they’ve forgotten how. That happens to me a lot,” Big Sis said softly.

“Great!” cheered Lil Sis. “That means there’s hope for me, too – when you’re mean to me!” She grinned at Big Sis playfully.

And so, the family continued to live – hope-fully – in their nice little house, in their nice little neighborhood, in their nice little town. And their hope spread from person to person and house to house – just as it does to this very day. †

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*In this season of darkness and light, may you and your best beloveds be well and happy. And may you feel the grace of knowing that you are indeed a blessing. Thank you for spreading hope.*

# The Right Indoor Equipment

-by Kate Starr, Youth Director



When my good friend Mya Selph turned 30, she went alone to hike the canyons of Utah. Her mom was undergoing chemotherapy, her boyfriend was dealing with commitment issues, and she was reckoning with a ticking biological clock.

She needed Mother Nature to nurture her.

At Zion Canyon, Mya asked someone to drop her at one end of a 13-mile trail and leave her rental car at the other. By her calculation, the hike would take the better part of an afternoon. She was a religious power walker, and estimated that at a leisurely three-mile-an-hour pace, with time out for lunch, she'd need a total of five hours, give or take.

She set out before noon with a journal, snacks, a large bottle of Evian, and a Swiss Army knife. The views were breathtaking; the silence a balm. It brought her to tears. And laughter. She sang out loud and quietly wrote poetry. She made notes in her journal about the unusual color combinations in this strange land that might spice up her drab wardrobe. She ate and drank and meditated. Mya reached deep into and beyond herself.

After four hours, she felt she had accomplished what needed to be done. Feeling at peace, grounded, and re-connected, Mya prepared for the completion of her solitary sojourn when she came upon a mile marker. Carved into a wooden post was the number four. It had been four hours, and she had walked four miles. Apparently hiking the mountains in Utah was somewhat slower than power walking the flatlands of Oklahoma.

Only a little of the water remained. Her mind went into super-survival mode when serendipity struck.

Next to the trail she spotted a prickly pear. People in the desert survive by sucking the moisture from cactus, and Mya decided to experiment. She picked a pad and her hand became host to hundreds of tiny needles barely visible to the naked eye. Using her teeth as pliers, Mya began to pluck the spines from her thumb. Now her lips shared the same misery as her fingers.

With her good hand, Mya rifled through the day pack and found tweezers in the Swiss Army knife and an old tube of Clinique's Pink Chocolate lipstick with a shiny silver cap she could use as a mirror. "Life is like a tube of Pink Chocolate," she said in her best Forrest Gump accent. "You never know in what form a savior will come."



Proud of her resourcefulness, my friend redoubled her resolve and resumed the hike, at times crying, sometimes laughing, and all the while praying she would see her mother again, and, if so, promising to let her boyfriend off the marriage hook.

At twilight, three miles from the end, the man who had dropped Mya at the trailhead more than nine hours earlier came toward her, carrying a flashlight in one hand and a canteen of water in the other. Dehydrated, hungry, and tired, Mya linked her arm in his as they hiked back to her car.

Besides accurately estimating the amount of time it actually takes to hike in mountainous terrain, another thing Mya didn't do was succumb to resignation, which happens a lot in wilderness adventure. People have reportedly sat down mere miles from civilization and literally died while waiting to be rescued. And that kind of resignation doesn't just happen in the wilderness, but to college freshmen who don't do well their first semester, in marriages at the first sign of trouble, and to people diagnosed

with a serious illness. It's victim mentality.

But Mya's life up to that point had taught her to be a survivor. In his book, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why*, author Laurence Gonzales says that people who have never had to struggle in their lives are at the greatest risk in a wilderness accident – or a misfortune of any kind.

Mya also prayed – singing, bargaining, cursing, and begging. Psychologists have long observed that survivors pray (even if they don't believe in God). A positive mental attitude and living for something greater than yourself are key ingredients in survival.

## Let Go and Live

What do I need? What do I really need? The upcoming garage sale at All Souls inspired me to clean out closets and clear the clutter. So, on a recent “staycation,” it was time to get busy. I divided things into the typical categories, 1) take to All Souls for the upcoming garage sale; 2) take to Goodwill; 3) toss.

During the process, words from a class “Letting Go,” recently offered by Rev. Debra Garfinkel and Cathey Edwards, kept spinning in my head:

A poem of letting go from the Tao Te Ching:

This is a path of letting go  
so there will be room to live.

If we hold on to our opinions,  
our minds will become dull and useless.  
Let go of opinions.

If we hold on to possessions,  
we will always be at risk.  
Let go of possessions.

If we hold on to ego,  
we will continue to suffer.  
Let go of ego.

And, Mya maintained a sense of humor. Foxhole and gallows humor are well known among soldiers and emergency room doctors. It is vital. Having the right kind of indoor equipment is as important as having the right outdoor equipment when you're lost in the woods – or flunking out of college, in the middle of a divorce, or enduring the death of a loved one.

Risk and fear and pain are inevitable, but survivors like Mya Selph have a sincere attitude of hope that they will be able to manage whatever comes their way.

Do you? †

-by Reatha Oliver

Working without thought of praise or blame  
is the way of true contentment.

This is a path of letting go  
so there will be room to live.

With all the clearing and thinking about letting go, I couldn't help but think about Christmas, knowing that more stuff is in my future. For the last several years, in lieu of exchanging gifts with my department mates, we have chosen to give to LIFE Senior Services and Youth Services. We are employed. We are fortunate. What else do we need?

Images of exchanging gifts with friends danced in my head. And then it came to me. This year, I will extend the office tradition to include friends. I approached them with the idea and they loved it. Through LIFE Senior Services, we have adopted older people for gift giving. My friends and I will spend time together shopping for those who have real needs and then will enjoy a meal together.

What do I need? What do I really need? Giving and sharing, in the Christmas spirit. †



**FIRST**  
WHEN IT'S TIME TO LIGHT  
CHRISTMAS CANDLES.

*All  
Souls*  
FIRST IN OUR LIVES.  
FIRST IN OUR GIVING.

# All Souls

FIRST IN OUR LIVES,  
FIRST IN OUR GIVING.

MONTHLY GIVING GUIDE			
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME	10% PER MONTH	5% PER MONTH	3% PER MONTH
\$ 20,000	\$167	\$83	\$50
\$ 30,000	\$250	\$125	\$75
\$ 40,000	\$333	\$167	\$100
\$ 50,000	\$417	\$208	\$125
\$ 60,000	\$500	\$250	\$150
\$ 70,000	\$583	\$292	\$175
\$ 80,000	\$667	\$333	\$200
\$ 100,000	\$833	\$417	\$250
\$ 125,000	\$1042	\$521	\$313
\$ 150,000	\$1250	\$625	\$375
\$ 250,000	\$2083	\$1042	\$625

AUTOMATIC DEDUCTION FROM CHECKING OR SAVINGS

(PLEASE ATTACH A VOIDED CHECK OR DEPOSIT SLIP)

PLEDGE AMOUNT TO BE DRAFTED PER MONTH \$ \_\_\_\_\_

MONTH TO START DRAFTING \_\_\_\_\_

(TRANSFER TAKES PLACE AROUND THE 20TH OF THE MONTH)

AUTHORIZATION FOR CREDIT CARD PAYMENT

CARD NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ VISA \_\_\_ MasterCard EXPIRATION DATE \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

PLEDGE AMOUNT TO BE DRAFTED PER MONTH \$ \_\_\_\_\_

DOES YOUR EMPLOYER PROVIDE A DONATION MATCHING PROGRAM? \_\_\_ YES \_\_\_ NO

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NAME(S): \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

HOME PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

ALTERNATE PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

MY/OUR 2009 PLEDGE IS \$ \_\_\_\_\_ PER MONTH OR \$ \_\_\_\_\_ PER YEAR

WE PLAN TO PAY: \_\_\_ MONTHLY \_\_\_ QUARTERLY \_\_\_ ANNUALLY

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**Monday, Dec. 1**

“Hope” is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul / And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all. -Emily Dickinson

**Tuesday, Dec. 2**

Hope is a song in a weary throat. -Pauli Murray

**Wednesday, Dec. 3**

[Hope is] music played in the resurrection ashes. -Nelly Sachs

**Thursday, Dec. 4**

Hope...is not a feeling; it is something you do. -Katherine Paterson

**Friday, Dec. 5**

Hope is a talent like any other. -Storm Jameson

**Saturday, Dec. 6**

Hope does not necessarily have to take an object. -Gail Goodwin

**Sunday, Dec. 7**

Hope is the feeling we have that the feeling we have is not permanent. -Mignon McLaughlin

**Monday, Dec. 8**

The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. -Barbara Kingsolver

**Tuesday, Dec. 9**

To hope for Paradise is to live in Paradise, a very different thing from actually getting there. -Vita Sackville-West

**Wednesday, Dec. 10**

Hope costs nothing. -Colette

**Thursday, Dec. 11**

Take hope from the heart of man, and you make him a beast of prey. -Ouida

**Friday, Dec. 12**

To eat bread without hope is still slowly to starve to death. -Pearl S. Buck

**Saturday, Dec. 13**

Hope is slowly extinguished and quickly revived. -Sophia Lee

**Sunday, Dec. 14**

Rage for the world as it is / but for what it may be / more love now than last year. -Muriel Rukeyser

**Monday, Dec. 15**

We all hope for a - must I say the word - recipe, we all believe, however much we know we shouldn't, that maybe somebody's got the recipe and can show us how not to be sick, suffer and die. -Nan Shin

**Tuesday, Dec. 16**

Nothing is hopeless; we must hope for everything. -Euripides

**Wednesday, Dec. 17**

Hope is a memory of the future.

-Gabriel Marcel

**Thursday, Dec. 18**

In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.

-Albert Camus

**Friday, Dec. 19**

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

-Oscar Wilde

**Saturday, Dec. 20**

Hope, unlike optimism, is rooted in unalloyed reality...Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see - in the mind's eye - a path to a better future. Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path. True hope has no room for delusion.

-Jerome Groopman

**Sunday, Dec. 21**

We know in our bones that hope is everything. In the back of our minds, we suspect that it is nothing at all.

-Maurice Lamm

**Monday, Dec. 22**

Because stimulants and depressants are so available, we've fallen far into the realm of false optimism and false control. Drug use is a sad diversion of the natural biology of hope.

-Lionel Tiger

**Tuesday, Dec. 23**

He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything.

-Arabic proverb

**Wednesday, Dec. 24**

The grand essentials of happiness are: something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.

-Allan K. Chalmers

**Thursday, Dec. 25**

If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

-Antoine de Saint-Exupery

**Friday, Dec. 26**

Not only is another world possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

-Arundhati Roy

**Saturday, Dec. 27**

We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope. But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope.

-Barack Obama

**Sunday, Dec. 28**

Once you choose hope, anything's possible.

-Christopher Reeve

**Monday, Dec. 29**

Sanity may be madness but the maddest of all is to see life as it is and not as it should be.

-Don Quixote

**Tuesday, Dec. 30**

The inability to open up to hope is what blocks trust, and blocked out trust is the reason for blighted dreams.

-Elizabeth Gilbert

**Wednesday, Dec. 31**

Hope is both the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. If life is to be sustained hope must remain, even where confidence is wounded, trust impaired.

-Erik H. Erikson

# A Storm of Hope

-by Andy Wheeler

*Hope springs eternal in the human breast;  
Man never Is, but always To be blest:  
The soul, uneasy and confind'd from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.  
-Alexander Pope (1733)*

A year ago we were digging out from that ice storem. It sucked a lot of fun out of those holidays. It's difficult to roast chestnuts when downed power lines set your house on fire. But those who had electricity shared it. And those who got it back sooner than others brought friends and family in to make the best of a bad situation (I know some familial bonds that are still strained from the ordeal, but that is a story for another time).

Some others had no choice but to wait it out. All were dependent on the kindness of others in some way. Infinite small miracles grew out of that disaster.

I managed to meet my neighbors at an informal meeting convened in the middle of a darkened, tree-blocked street. It is a better neighborhood because of it. I suspect many others are as well.

Thousands of perfectly sane individuals, contrary to anything resembling logical reasoning, woke up the morning after the "Falling of the Branches" and almost simultaneously chopped, hacked, sawed, and piled branch upon rotten branch in their yards. Then, get a load of this, repeated the same laborious task all over town for their neighbors, friends, and relatives! Why? There was no clarion call issued. There wasn't even a clarion text.

Hope.

The word "hope" did not even exist as we know it until the 12th century. The ancient Greeks knew it (*Elpis*) as some ambiguous future, without any quality, good or bad. Just a bit late in escaping from Pandora's Box, it gave humanity relief from the world's evils. Early Christian theologians said there were three virtues: faith, charity, and hope. They were hopeful (a "fervent desire" or "confident expectation") for the return of Jesus Christ as judge of the living and the dead. But sometimes all you hope for is a nice day or a double play.

After spending time with all sorts of that destruction of our beautiful trees, loss of cherished property, the shorter days, and the cold dark nights, some became less hopeful. Others were completely drained of it.

Then the calendar told us there was family to visit and friends to see. We managed to find a moment to share and commiserate about our misfortunes despite our melancholy. We broke bread. We shared a drink (or two). We even managed to start laughing again. Nearly everyone had a funny story. It just took some longer to find it.

We can get lost in the minutia of a pile of broken branches. That's the easy part. Hope gives us the ability to see life's grandeur beyond a cluttered front yard. Hope is why we cleared homes from the destruction of a storm. We hoped for a view of the sidewalk.

Once something hoped for has been attained, it becomes a possession and within a few weeks, most had wrested control of their lives from that storm. After you possess something you hoped for, you can hope for something else. The moments that we shared with those we care about helped us see hope again. Whether it was hoping a child does not crack his head open with his new skateboard or hoping that an elder's health improves, or hoping that your mom forgets the sweet potatoes are still in the oven, it helped fill the reservoir of hope and the inausicious start to winter quickly drained. You can start with the small stuff and then hope for something bigger.

In the end, whether we celebrate Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Christmas, Yule, Winter Solstice, or just a few days off, these connections among us and the communities that we belong to might be all we have or ever really own. They are the connections to the things one can lose sight of so quickly.

When your life seems to be falling down or exploding around you, community can help you find hope and hope makes the heartbreak and tragedies a little more enduring. You can *always* find hope for something more.

I hear people wishing we kept the holiday spirit year round. I hope Home Depot quits moving all of the power tools in September to make room for fake plastic trees and decorations, though. †

# Forgiveness Personified

-by Kate Starr, Youth Director, & Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister

Hope comes from a long line of eternal optimists. Despite her modest income, she dresses to the nines in colorful outfits, her hair piled high atop her head. Even without make-up, she is beautiful. Guided by positive thinking, Hope is animated and enthusiastic, a joy to be around, if you like that sort of thing. Raised in tent revivals and kin to snake charmers, Hope was taught to believe that despite all evidence to the contrary, whatever one can perceive, she can achieve. God will provide.

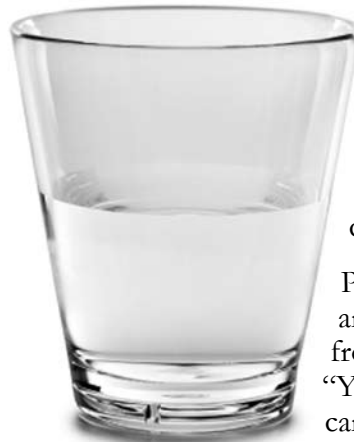
Her heart was broken, then, when prayer didn't save the astounding number of children who died from abuse that year in her city. When positive thinking didn't diminish the fact that of all the births in her county, almost half were to teen-agers. When laying on of hands didn't keep her cigarette-smoking friend from dying of cancer. Yet, she still chose to see the glass as half full.

On the other hand, Gratitude's thoughts tended more toward reality than fantasy, he always said. A tall man in black slacks and pressed white shirt, Gratitude was a debater, raised on logic and reason, difficult to be around, unless you like that sort of thing. He had an appreciation for pragmatism and self-reliance. He was indebted to the laws of nature that governed him and the world. The universe is complex and disaster to be expected. A person has to look out for himself, rely on his own wits and grit. His mind was blown, then, when his friend's son chose to end his own life.

He was confused that the boy couldn't reason his way out of the addiction that drove him to despair. And it didn't make sense so many people went to bed hungry every day when there was plenty of food on the planet. Or how many people have died in the name of some God. He saw the glass as half empty But chose to be thankful for the water.

Hope and Gratitude signed up separately for a systems theory workshop, both seeking answers to the same questions but asked from different perspectives. Hope wanted to find more ways to show others that the glass is half full. Gratitude sought evidence for the water, the air, and the glass. Hope and Gratitude were randomly assigned as a working pair. It wasn't easy, but Hope and Gratitude eventually began to see that life is not in balance. That change means growth and stasis stagnation. They both began to see the opportunity in crisis, the renewal that comes from destruction, the growth derived from adversity. That everything seems to move in a Good Orderly Direction.

And, that opposites attract. Their first born son, Possibility, infinitely challenges their long-held assumptions. He always pushes the envelope. Takes risks. Lately, Possibility's been trying to organize two communities in his city.



"Do you really believe one person can solve a problem that's been building for so long?"

"Do you think that you, that we, can make a difference?"

Possibility looks lovingly at Hope and Gratitude from whom he is born, and smiles. "Yes we can," he says. "Yes we can." †

## Reason: Still the Voice of Hope

-by Phil Haney



To have lived in Europe during the last half of the 17th century one must have felt he was witnessing the end of the world. The church's grip on political power was absolute, not unlike the recent Taliban period in Afghanistan. Because strict conformity to religious authority was mandated, the simple expression of an idea contrary to church doctrine was an act of great courage, as it risked execution, which was usually by fire in public before throngs of cheering believers. By all accounts this was a dark period. Yet from this crucible of intolerance came voices of hope giving rise to the Renaissance.

Benedict (Hebrew prename Baruch) de Spinoza (1632-1677), seen by many as the harbinger of enlightened modernity, defied the odds. He saw hope and understood the relevance of hope in humanity during one of the dimmest times. Spinoza was the first philosopher to assert that the individual's capacity to reason gives each of us potential dignity and compassion, distinguishing humans as worthy of ethical consideration. Suggesting such treatment could be a law of nature instead of divine revelation caused Spinoza to be denounced as a godless immoralist. At 23 he was excommunicated from the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam for his teachings. Banished, Spinoza was labeled an atheist and a heretic. The founder of free thought and human ethics would live only 20 more years, spending much of this time studying religious intolerance.

What a legacy of enlightenment and hope Spinoza left. Although he published a limited work, Spinoza's *oeuvre* made its mark on many scholars and philosophers. His life in exile was quietly devoted to the study of reason and individual choice. Spinoza addressed human ethics as an academic discipline, enabling this study to grow through others and remain relevant. Today Spinoza is seen as a hero of his time.

reason free of sectarian encumbrance (passion). He recognized the human tendency toward seeing truth that favors the circumstances into which we've been born. Self-aggrandizement, according to Spinoza, is fueled by religion, politics, or ideology – the forces of passion. Spinoza encouraged the enlightened to resist these invisible influences. He recognized that individuals think they are free only because they are conscious of their own actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. Spinoza saw 'free-will' as a delusion of man, indicating that if we had any idea of our actions, we would recognize this folly.

Human capacity for reason enables individuals to develop protection against thinking they're somehow important or privileged, according to Spinoza's teachings. His chief argument was that if humans remain rational they're virtually identical. This is the essence of free thought and the basis of hope. Hope is best described by Spinoza's work as the expression of an innate desire for fulfillment. Rationality also encourages tolerance – more thought for hope. Spinoza's utopia was free of authority and full of reason, science, tolerance, and hope.

Spinoza's faith in reason as our only hope and in redemption through the exercise of reason was remarkable thinking in his day. These precepts have become the basis of modern ethics. The philosophy is as controversial today as it was in the 1600s; after all, Spinoza said man should resist ceding the ability to reason to any authority, including church or state. How timely is this issue? Boiled down, it sounds a lot like Unitarians arguing about politics. But is our *weltanschauung* one of hope?

Note the relevant language from the preface to Spinoza's 1673 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*:

“Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set

rules, or if they were always favored by fortune: but being frequently driven into straits where rules are useless, and being often kept fluctuating pitably between hope and fear by the uncertainty of fortune's greedily coveted favours, they are consequently, for the most part, very prone to credulity. The human mind is readily swayed this way or that in times of doubt, especially when hope and fear are struggling for the mastery, though usually it is boastful, over-confident, and vain.

“This is a general fact I suppose everyone knows, though few, I believe, know their own nature; no one can have lived in the world without observing that most people, when in prosperity, are so over-brimming with wisdom (however inexperienced they may be), that they take every offer or advice as a personal insult, whereas in adversity they know not where to turn, but beg and pray for counsel from every passer-by...”

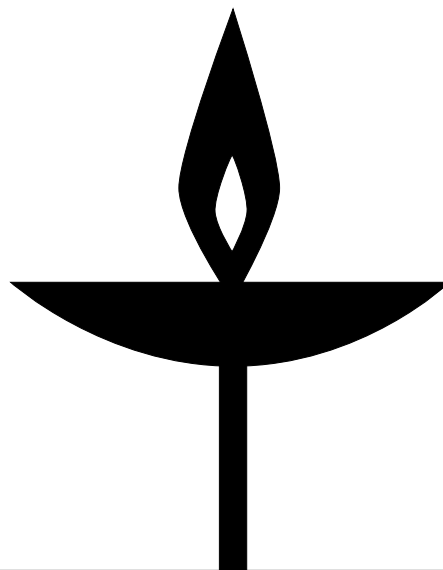
Arguing for a life of reason over passion, conceding that reason dictates a striving for greater perfection in man, seeking what is useful to him and what will preserve his being, Spinoza drew a blueprint for ethical living. To live this life, said Spinoza, is virtuous. In fact, Spinoza argued that when one attains the serenity that comes from freedom from passion, one achieves wisdom. A society governed exclusively by reason requires no political authority to restrict action. Authority is needed, however, when action is influenced by passion. Authority becomes absolute, and dangerous, when passions prevail.

Spinoza conceded that life is difficult, that humans never escape the influence of passions. Spinoza was aware of the dynamic of hope and despair; he recognized that hope sometimes controls the human heart, other times doesn't. He offered hope to those who lead virtuous lives, saying 'all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.' These words were written in 1660, when hope was barely

alive. Times have changed; science has advanced, and there should be reason for hope. Does today's *zeitgeist* encourage hope?

How have we progressed toward ethical living in 350 years? A review of man's inhumanity to man throughout this period suggests there's little improvement. If anything, we've confirmed Spinoza's hypothesis that passion is inescapable and that our existence continues to be encumbered (perhaps led) by invisible sectarian influences. It seems we can't live without accepting as part of life the forces of passion.

And we have hope, indestructible hope. The most compelling argument for hope is in all things around us. One has only to compare the amenities and achievements of modernity to prehistoric times to see that hope has, despite everything, prevailed. We have planes, cars, movies, electricity, houses, computers, buildings, medicine, literature; everywhere we look are hard examples of hope. Put simply, we now have science. Instead of trying to understand nature using religious belief, we have the scientific method. But, while civilization has steadily advanced, now for the first time in history, a handful of fanatics can actually plunge the world back into the dark ages. This new reality must somewhat temper our hope.



## Spiritual Practices: Hope

-by Sarah Gettie Burks, Intern Minister



Hope is the thing with feathers that keeps our spirits light and our hearts soaring into infinity. Hope coaxes us out of bed in the morning, gives us energy, and keeps us looking forward to the days to come. We all need

hope. Without it our visions of our world become clouded, gray, and dreary. A friend recently told me depression sets in when we become unable to envision anything better for ourselves, when we become unable to look toward the future with excitement and curiosity. It's certainly not always easy to be hopeful, especially in times of loss and grief. But it is possible to cultivate hope instead of dread, vision rather than stagnation.

Here are some suggestions for cultivating hope and an optimistic attitude throughout our lives:

**Do some visioning work.** Our ministers and other leaders of the church are constantly casting visions for the church's mission in the world. You have a calling and a mission for your life too. Spend some time journaling about your own vision and calling. What are you most passionate about? What do you become most excited about when you consider work and the activities you enjoy? Where do your own interests and strengths intersect? Is there a class you would like to take, or a new skill you would like to learn? What do you hope for yourself? By asking yourself these questions and writing down your thoughts about them you will begin your own vision-casting. Then, ask yourself what it would take to make your visions become a reality. How might you take a new class or pick up a new volunteer activity? When we live into our calling, we live more fully for both ourselves and others. What would it take to align your life with your highest sense of calling? Create a vision for the future and begin considering how you can live

into that vision.

**Create a Wish Tree.** As we move into the holiday season, I am reminded of a "Wish" tree that stood in the main hallway of my international high school at Christmastime. Every winter, students from all over the world would jot down on a small piece of paper a wish they had for themselves and for the world in the coming year. They would then hang those wishes on the tree for all to see. Wishes for world peace, international understanding, love, and compassion would grace the branches of our

tree, along with wishes for good test scores or the health of a family member. As I passed the tree, I would often offer up those wishes as little prayers to the universe, and I'm sure many of my classmates did the same. With your own family this holiday season, create a wish

tree, hanging hopes for yourself, your family, or the world from the branches. This is an especially fulfilling practice for families with children, who can together name a wish each evening before going to bed. But we adults, too, can create reminders of what we hope for in the coming year. Let us offer up to the universe these gifts of hope and prayer this holiday season.

**Build Daily Hope.** Each morning, sit down and write out five 'hopes' for yourself in the coming day. These hopes shouldn't include tasks, such as 'I hope to go to the grocery store,' or 'I hope to give a good presentation.' Rather, write down hopes of how you wish to conduct yourself throughout the day. For instance, you can hope to move through your day with compassion, gentleness, love, gratitude, and confidence. All action begins with a thought and an intention. By naming these wishes for yourself at the start of your day, you are taking the time to be more intentional about how you live and move in this world. By planting the seeds, our hope can grow into reality. May hope perch in your soul and never stop at all. May it be so. ✦

**“Hope” is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all—**

excerpt from “*Hope is the Thing with Feathers*” by Emily Dickinson

## A Prayer of Hope and Peace

By Denis McGilvray

O joyful world!

We celebrate a new beginning, a new light shining in the dark,

A time of redemption and hope realized.

Let it be so! O, let it be so!

May we all, everyone of us, strive to be the change we want in the world,  
To move forward in love, to work together, to create a world of possibility.

May we allow each other the freedom to succeed and the comfort to fail.

May peace spread through our hearts and minds.

May peace spread through our families and friends.

May peace spread through our towns and nations.

May peace spread throughout the world.

May we find the courage to spread this peace,  
to share this love, and to create this world anew.



*Simple Gifts* is published monthly by All Souls Unitarian Church, 2952 S. Peoria, Tulsa, OK 74114 (918) 743-2363 info@AllSoulsChurch.org

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1) Submit your text electronically via email. Plain text is best.

2) Include your name and daytime number.

3) Not all submissions will be published. Submissions may be edited.

Questions?

Call Heather Hollingsworth at 743-2363.

# Dec. Highlights

Dec. 1	Tree Trimming and Hanging of the Greens
Dec. 5	Soulful Sundown: Hope
Dec. 6	All Soul Acoustic Coffeehouse: Peter Case
Dec. 7	KISS Sunday/Joining Sunday
Dec. 9	Program Council
Dec. 11	Day Alliance
Dec. 14	Congregational Meeting All Choir Holiday Concert
Dec. 16	Evening Alliance
Dec. 17	Holiday Memorial Chapel
Dec. 19	Parents Night Out
Dec. 24	Christmas Eve Candlelight Services 4:30 pm 6:00 pm 7:30 pm

Sunday Service Times:  
10:00, 11:30 am

Soulful Sundown:  
7:00 pm, First Friday

Wednesday Connections:  
Supper 5:15, Chapel 6:30, Classes 7:00 pm