

Hope
October 2, 2016
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We are taking hope as our theme today, drawing from many different religious perspectives, because it is a quality that is needed in our world today. Of course, we might say that hope is always needed; and that is true. But the social-political atmosphere in our world today is filled with divisive voices, with loudly shouting voices. I am not looking at politics in this sermon, but at the social and cultural context of our lives, and how we express the Message of Sufism. The rhetoric of hate fills our ears, and it can be hard to know how to reply. Do we shout back? How do we meet the intense fear and blame? How can we have hope that things will be ok, that people will evolve and keep caring about each other, that we can create a future that is safe for all people and for the earth. When things sound so bad, and we are frightened, where is hope?

Certainly, we live in a time of technological change that effects humanity in many ways. One way it effects us is that it fills our minds with constant and distracting information, with “news” which often focuses on terrible, painful, and exciting stories. Our minds move from disaster to disaster, around the world, until we may feel both horrified and numb. We are frightened and search for the cause of these disasters; we look for the enemy. And politicians are eager to deliver an enemy, someone who is *other*: an-*other* religion, an-*other* race, an-*other* gender, an-*other* nation. And some religious groups focus on looking for an enemy to blame and to punish, for not being like them. When this happens, we have constricted our sense of identity to those who are “like” me, and who belong to my group. This is an easy solution that we have seen play out in

history. An easy way to develop a strong group is to have a common enemy. Psychologically, it is an early stage of cognitive development; children judge things as black and white, us and them, since children cannot yet hold complex, contradictory concepts in their minds. And, without education, there are many adults who hold to this kind of blaming, this black and white thinking.

But there are other ways to respond to fear. Some religious and spiritual traditions teach us to respond by trying to understand that which is *other*, learning to tolerate differences, listening to the language of another person, of another culture, and attempting to speak to others in their own languages. There is a wonderful saying of Inayat Khan, "A Sufi has two points of view; his or her own, and that of the other." This attitude can guide us as we cultivate our ability to hope.

Of course, existence is a constantly changing process. We have to learn how to look both above and below the rush of changing events, to overcome our mind's fear and distraction. So what does it mean to look above, metaphorically speaking? It means to look at a bigger picture. To look at our vision of God, of the One, of the Universe, of our God-Ideal, with whatever language we use to refer to the Absolute Divine. Of course, there are many names by which the Divine is known. Each of the religions represented on our altar table has its own language. Brahman, Atman, Buddha-nature, Nibbana, Ahura Mazda, Jahweh, Elohim, Jehovah, God the Father, Christ, Allah. In the Sufi prayer of Inayat Khan, we find these descriptions: "Praise be to Thee, Most Supreme God, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, All-Pervading, the Only Being..." Each name and description is different, but each name is only a finite image or concept that points us to the infinite, the unnamable. To that

which is above. Above our preoccupation with the changing details of our experience.

I've just come back from a Sufi Retreat in Ecuador. It was held in a Catholic Retreat Center. And there was such a lovely feeling among the people at the Retreat who had all been brought up Catholic. It was as though they really believed in God. The atmosphere of the Retreat held a feeling of the presence of God. And it has made me aware, coming back here to the United States, how often spirituality is presented in this culture as though it is a very sophisticated self-help program, whereby we will make ourselves better, relieve stress, and protect ourselves from any bad things ever happening to us. This secularized attitude is not what Sufism is about. The vision of Hazrat Inayat Khan is a vision of the Source of Being, essential being, which can be called by many different names because this essence is present throughout existence. Every name is a finite concept which expresses this essence, and no name can contain what this really is. All existence rests on this, on this essence. So that's what I mean when I say to look up, to look above, all the things we're so caught up in, things that happen day to day. That speech, that conversation, those political events. Do we really feel, do we experience, do we believe, that there is something? A purpose underlying all existence?

This brings us to our own personal concept of God. Each of us has a God-image, conscious or unconscious. There is a concept, a name, an image that we have for God. Often, for many people in the Sufi community, their God-concept is a rejection of what they were brought up with. "I'm very clear that I don't believe in that." So what do I believe in? When I used to talk with Unitarians a lot, they had a great term. They called themselves

“come-outters.” They have all come-out of another tradition. But saying that God is “not that” is still a concept of God.

So, how do we imagine God? Do we imagine a God who chooses one people, one opinion, against others, and seeks to punish those who see things differently? I think we know that there are many people who do imagine God in this way. Another possibility is to imagine God as consciousness: the purpose of existence, the goal of existence, always present in each moment of existence, within which existence resides? A God who cherishes every blade of grass, every flower, every hair on your head. Can we imagine this God? Is this a God in whom we can have hope?

The Hindu reading from the Upanishads talks about memory, in that lovely way that the Upanishads do, “Well, teacher, what is the answer?” “Ah, memory is the answer.” “Well, memory is a very good thing. Is there something beyond memory?” “Well, yes, now that you’ve asked. There is hope.” Now in the Hindu experience, you have to keep asking. If you stop asking, the teacher will stop saying anything. Why? Because at each stage of evolution there are different questions and different ways of describing the answers. In this passage we move from memory, which is about the past, to hope, which is about the future. We have to keep asking, as our consciousness evolves, so that we can understand more, we can see from a bigger perspective. Do we imagine that we can keep asking more of God, of our Ideal, and have hope that God is more than our limited concept, and will respond; inspiring and sustaining us?

As we reflect upon our God-image, is this ‘God’ that I feel, that I experience, the source and goal of existence? Do we think that life is progressive, that life has a goal, that everything is evolving toward a purpose? Do I individually have a purpose, a

purpose for my life? This is a belief, a faith, a feeling-knowing, that is the ground for hope. A purpose calls from the future to the present. It calls us into the future. Every real desire or heart-wish is a future reality that calls to us in the present.

Inayat Khan says:

For it is natural that no one will desire what is not possible, and where there is a natural desire the possibility of its fulfillment is already there. If there were no possibility, there would be no desire.

If we really consider this, we can find the ground of hope.

For hope is always about the future. It is the movement of life into the future. Hope is about the possible. Hope is a way of knowing, knowing through imagining, that opens the future. Imagination is a way of knowing, of knowing what is possible but not yet actual. If I can imagine something, then I can hope for it. We hope for what we do not know. Not for what we already know. Hope calls us into the future. Hope is not about facts. (And modern secular culture worships facts, or those opinions which are deemed 'facts'.) We hope for what we do not know, not for what we already think we know.

As the Christian text says, "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?" (Romans 8:24) And in Hebrews 11:1 we find, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Imagination is the way of knowing that shows us whether our minds are filled with hope or despair. As an attitude of hope opens the mind, and can lead to faith; the attitude of despair, of disappointment, of hopelessness, closes down our minds. We feel cut off and isolated. We think that things will always be as we think they are. Hope opens the doors so that we can think

more freely. Hope gives us strength and courage to imagine the future that we desire, and to find the ways to make it a reality.

The second thing is, can we look below? Below the flurry of constantly changing experiences. When we look below, we look into our own minds and hearts, into the fixed attitudes of feelings and thoughts, that were formed in our past experience, and condition what we experience now. We discover those attitudes that we call “my personality.” If we have suffered too much disappointment and frustration as small children or as younger adults, we begin to tell ourselves, “this is the way it always is.” Then we pay attention (consciously and unconsciously) to other disappointments and frustrations that happen, until we weave a narrative about what is real and what is possible.

In my psychotherapy work with people, one of the most difficult problems is when a person has been very disappointed. I sometimes imagine disappointment, in emotional development, as around the age of 5. Before the age of 5, when you don't get what you want, you can't remember long enough to be too upset about it for very long. By the time you are 5, you can think about it and you can hope for it, and if the people around you don't listen to you, and are very frustrating to you, then the disappointment overwhelms the heart. It shuts down the heart. It's so painful. So if we have a narrative like that which says, “oh, nothing ever works out for me; I never get what I want; nobody really listens” then this narrative shuts down what we can imagine and therefore what we can hope for. Then, it feels like hope is unrealistic. It feels like hope is only for dreamers who don't understand what life is really about.

The Buddhist tradition talks about the importance of “seeing things as they are,” not as I think they are. Our personal narratives of who we think we are, and how we think life is, are often an illusion – a delusion that limits my perception and experience. The Buddhist scripture speaks of the importance of Right Effort – one of the steps of the Eightfold Path, the path that leads to enlightenment. Right Effort is the effort one makes to arouse the will, to arouse energy to prevent the arising of unwholesome mental-emotional states and to overcome those unwholesome states which are present; the energy needed to strive to maintain wholesome mental emotional states and to strengthen them. I’ve always thought of Right Effort as being your Mother’s best advice. If you’re doing something that’s bad, and you shouldn’t, stop it. If you’re not doing something that’s bad, don’t start. If you’re not doing something that’s good, start it. And if you’re doing something that’s good, keep doing it.

Ridding one’s mind and heart of deluding attitudes takes a lot of effort. Seeing things “as they are” requires work. Hope necessitates ongoing work. The kind of hope that I’m trying to arouse in our consciousness is not just a fantasy where we think, “oh, wouldn’t it be nice if that happened.” When we have this vision, this hope, it motivates us to get to work.

As the Zoroastrian scripture reminds us, great devotion is the way we reach “all whom Ahura Mazda recognizes.” The Qu’ran urges us to put our hope in the kindness and long-suffering nature of Allah, and in Allah’s forgiveness. The Psalm says that when I set Jehovah continually before me...”my heart rejoiceth, and my glory exulteth; and my flesh moreover shall dwell in hope.” Psalm 16:8-9 And in Romans we find the saying that since we are justified in faith, we have peace and access to grace, and “we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance...and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” Romans 5:1-5

These are all actions that require effort. Great devotion, keeping God’s presence continually before me, knowing that suffering produces endurance and character. From these actions, hope can be nurtured and strengthened.

So as we listen to the news on our computers and televisions, when we hear the hatred shouted about people of different religions, races, and genders, we know that this is not social or political discourse which will lead to real solutions of problems. There are real problems: income disparity that keeps becoming more severe, a global economy and culture that renders the last century’s ideas of national boundaries unworkable whether in terms of immigration or trade, changes in functional definitions of marriage and gender that are confusing and frightening to many people, conflicts over access to health care and to housing, and many, many more. Will more partisan shouting against those who disagree with me really help?

How do we bear witness to another way of solving problems, of listening to people’s sufferings, to anxiety about differences and people who are *other*? I think we must begin with hope, having hope, nurturing hope, working with hope. We cannot move forward without hope.

Murshid Inayat Khan says,
“Nothing is lost as long as your hope is not lost.”

Or to say it in a more poetic way,
“Riding on the horse of hope,
Holding in my hand the rein of courage,

Clad in the armor of patience,
And the helmet of endurance on my head,
I started on my journey to the land of love.”

HINDUISM

“The one who meditates on memory as Brahman, this one’s freedom will extend to the limits of the realm of memory, the one who meditates on memory as Brahman.”

“But, sir, is there anything greater than memory?”

“Yes, there is something greater than memory.”

“Then, please, sir, tell me about it.”

“Hope, verily, is greater than memory. For with hope enkindled, memory learns the sacred hymns and performs sacred action, desires children and cattle, this world and the other. Meditate on hope.

The one who meditates on hope as Brahman, all this one’s desires will be fulfilled through hope, this one’s prayers will not be in vain. This one’s freedom will extend to the limits of the realm of hope, the one who meditates on hope as Brahman.”

Chandogya Upanisad VII 13.2 – 14.2

BUDDHISM

“And what, monks, is Right Effort? Here, monks, a monk rouses one’s will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts one’s mind and strives to prevent the arising of unarisen evil unwholesome mental states.

One arouses one’s will... and strives to overcome evil unwholesome mental states that have arisen.

One arouses one’s will, makes an effort, stirs up energy, exerts the mind and strives to generate wholesome good mental states

One arouses one’s will...and strives to maintain wholesome mental states, not to let them fade away, to bring them to greater growth, to the full protection of development. This is called Right Effort.”

ZOROASTRIANISM

“All whom Ahura Mazda recognizes through the gifts of the ceremony are very useful to me. All of these who are in

existence or who have been, I praise by their name and I hope to reach them with great devotion.
Of one mind are Ye all in Your good will, in granting blessings unto all mankind.”

JUDAISM

“I have set Jehovah continually before me; because God is at my right hand. I shall not be moved.
Therefore my heart rejoiceth, and my glory exulteth; my flesh moreover shall dwell in hope.”
Psalm 16: 8-9

“On thee, O Lord, I fix my hope; thou wilt answer, O Lord my God.”
Psalm 38:15

CHRISTIANITY

“...in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”
Romans 8:24-25

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
Hebrews 11:1

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, And endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

Romans 5:1-4

ISLAM

“Surely those who believe, and those who leave their homes and fight in the way of God, may hope for His benevolence, for God is forgiving and kind.

Qu’ran 2:218

“Wealth and children are an attraction during worldly life. Yet honorable deeds that last forever are better as a recompense from your Lord and even better to hope for.”

Qu’ran 18:46

“What is the matter with you, that you do not place your hope for kindness and long-suffering in Allah?”

Qu’ran 71:13

VADAN

“Riding on the horse of hope,
Holding in my hand the rein of courage,
Clad in the armor of patience,

And the helmet of endurance on my head,
I started on my journey to the land of love.”

“Nothing is lost as long as your hope is not lost.”

“To live means to hope, and to hope means to live.”