

Finding Hope

Rev. Louise Green

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Text: Meister Eckhart, trans. by Daniel Ladinsky

The Hope of Loving

What keeps us alive, what allows us to endure?

I think it is the hope of loving, or being loved.

*I heard a fable, one about the sun going on a journey
to find its source, and how the moon wept
without her lover's warm gaze.*

We weep when light does not reach our hearts.

*We wither like fields if someone close
does not rain their kindness upon us.*

As Unitarian Universalists and seekers, we vary wildly in the hope department. I can name my sources and experiences, and you have your own construct of hope, based on your life. So I'm inviting you into an exploration of your own theories, as I describe a few of mine.

My original grounding in hope was from Judeo-Christian tradition. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures passages speak about waiting in hope for Yahweh or God to act, with a confident expectation of saving mercy. The New Testament defines faith itself as based on hope:

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Romans 8:24: Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?

This Judeo-Christian sense of hope implies a future orientation, with an idea that we want things to change for the better. The God of Judaism said to make a way in the wilderness. The Catholic God has with a merciful preferential option for the poor. The Unitarian God is on the side of justice and inclusion. All are expected to move us into a different future.

In contrast, non-theist traditions such as Buddhism emphasize that attachment to *any* different outcome other than “what is” brings suffering. There is a hope-less-ness in this non-attachment, a settling into the present to cultivate peace. *Not* grasping for the future is described by many Buddhist teachers who teach various methods of letting go. Learning to be in the middle way, leaning neither right nor left, seeking no escape, staying present, is the heart of practice.

In June, I went on a 3-day silent retreat at Dayspring in Germantown, 200 acres where prayers have been spoken and walked for over 60

years. I feel a profound shift in this quiet space—a chance to slow down and deepen, to sense what Thich Nhat Hanh names as inter-being. In this time of spaciousness, widening out from the narrowness inherent in daily tasks, I feel open to present experience.

While at Dayspring, I read a small book I've been pondering all summer, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God*, by Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest who teaches Centering Prayer. Now *mystical* here means *meta-*, or *over-*, physical, not knowing with the brain, but knowing in an experience of body and spirit. Now I understand this is counter to much Unitarian rationalist history, yet present in other Unitarian streams from Transcendentalism and elsewhere. It is now most notable in our 7th principle which names the interdependent web of all creation, and our statement about drawing from many sources, including world religions and earth-based practices. So bear with me here as I explore the mystical.

Cynthia Bourgeault's theology stands in the line of Christian mystics from the time of the 3rd-century Desert Fathers and Mothers, those who withdrew from Egyptian cities to live in contemplative desert communities. They emphasized love in spiritual life—love over any kind asceticism, solitude or prayer. All exercises of the spirit were seen as meaningless without loving God with heart and soul, and loving neighbor as yourself. They describe an experience of oneness in love, transforming the new Jesus religion to practice, and thereby fostering a long line of thinkers considered heretical by traditional Christianity.

Bourgeault writes of her own mystical experience in Centering Prayer. Centering prayer is taught as simply being present in *mystical hope*, rather than expecting a particular answer, or lobbying for certain outcomes. Mystical hope is to sit in the presence of what she calls the "luminous web" and offer inner availability. Sometimes, it is to know profound oneness through this sitting experience. Oneness that senses deep connection, out of the duality of ego and world, in a single field of unitive consciousness.

In Bourgeault's book, mystical hope is not dependent on external circumstances or conditions. She says it is a space of presence, an immediate experience of communion marked by lightness of being, from within. Mystical hope is connecting to what Bourgeault names "the Mercy," larger than any naming of a God entity. The Mercy is "fierce, bonding love," that which is the very "power that binds one person to another in the covenant of hearts," as she puts it.

In my own spirituality, I'm often experiencing a kind of toggle switch: hope in the future as it relates to social justice, and hope in the present for personal transformation. This East-meets-West is the product of various streams of experience, and does not feel contradictory to me. I see the connective tissue as love in that luminous web: the loving spark of the divine within me now; circles of love past and present in partners, family, friends, and congregations; and the timeless interdependent creation in which we are beloved. This is why I find the poem by Meister Eckhardt so powerful: *What keeps*

us alive, what allows us to endure? I think it is the hope of loving, or being loved.

Meister Eckhardt was a German Catholic, a Dominican monk and scholar who lived from 1260-1328 C.E., a very public professor and a mystical contemplative. His experience was not traditionally Catholic, as evidenced in this quote:

Is this not a holy trinity: the firmament, the earth, our bodies? And is it not an act of worship to hold a child, and till the soil, and lift a cup? And Communion, first seek that from your lover's soul before anything offered from a priest.

Not surprisingly, he was accused of heresy in 1327, and his work was condemned and suppressed by the Church for centuries.

He and others in the Christian tradition of mysticism--defined as metaphysical and beyond rational knowing--kept pointing to this experience of oneness as their primary source of hope. Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Juan de la Cruz—these mystics eventually became canonized as saints by the Catholic Church. They wrote about their deep surrender into Divine consciousness, experiencing profound love, finding hope based on this intense connection.

Interestingly, the same experience is described by many mystics of the Eastern traditions of Islam and Hinduism— female and male voices such Rabia, Rumi, Kabir, Mira, and Tukaram. All wrote of hope

springing from deeply sensual and ecstatic states of divine consciousness. Hafiz, a 14th-century Persian Sufi writer of 5,000 poems, observed, *"A poet is someone who can pour light into a cup, then raise it to your beautiful parched holy mouth."* For many, hope is finding this sustenance and comfort in light, in union with all that is. As Eckhardt reminds us, *We weep when light does not reach our hearts. We wither like fields if someone close does not rain their kindness upon us.*

These days I find most hope in the present moment, in mindfulness practice in nature, meditation and yoga. When I sense the luminous web, oneness in deep belonging to all creation, I feel beloved by the Spirit of Life. For you, hope might be other points of connection--to other people and animals, to an *experience* you name as Nature, God, Allah, Gaia, Higher Power, Mysterious Universe. What is your hope? Where do you find it?

In this congregation, we teach about ever-widening circles--from your heart to Sources of love, from your self to this community, from particular communities to widest world. Many find hope at All Souls, in the love which we strive to offer to each person who walks in the door. For Meister Eckhardt asks us: *What keeps us alive, what allows us to endure? I think it is the hope of loving, or being loved... Amen.*