

In for the Long Haul

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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*In the long run, men hit only what they aim at.
Therefore, though they should fail immediately,
they had better aim at something high.*

Henry David Thoreau

Opening Words²

Judy Welles

Our morning routine is to read the newspaper with a cup of coffee first thing, before we take the dog for a walk in the park. Many is the morning that I put the newspaper down and think "What a terrible way to start the day!" (Thank goodness for the comics...)

It's hard to find good news these days, at least in the newspaper. The state budget, the federal budget, radioactive leaks in Japan, the gas fracking industry, teacher layoffs, the cost of maintaining a no-fly zone over Libya, the growing gap between the wealthy and everyone else, pollution in the Chesapeake Bay, joblessness... every day it seems to get worse.



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Yet I am compelled to read the newspaper every day, unpleasant as it is, because I feel an urgent need to know what's going on. I need to know not only for my own sake, as a responsible citizen who is paying attention, but also because I have a responsibility to you, and you are reading the newspaper, too.

The bad news that is happening around us is happening to all of us (though I grant that there might be people somewhere who don't think it's all bad news — not that I know any of them). And my responsibility to you is to address what is happening in all of our lives — address it and attempt to make meaning of it, and help us all to think of ways to make things better.

Joanna Macy, one of my mentors for the past twenty years, says that there are three truths that we are living with these days. (She was talking about environmental issues, but I think her wisdom applies more widely than that.) The first truth is that things are really bad, things are serious, we're really in trouble here. The second truth is that human beings have the capability to make things a lot better — to apply our knowledge and skill and creativity to the world's current problems and solve them, or at least improve the situation. And the third truth is that few of us believe either of the first two.

Today we want to encourage you — give you courage — to take a good square look at some of the difficult issues we are facing these days and say "I can do something about that." Or better yet, "We can do something about that."

Rather than allow ourselves to become discouraged, or to put our heads in the sand, let's make the commitment to hang in there for the long haul and make things better. We can do that.

Reading

“Hope is a state of mind...” from *Disturbing the Peace*
Vaclav Havel

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation.

Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more propitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is.

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

Sermon³

Duane Fickeisen, Judy Welles, and Anne Gero

I. Introduction [Duane]

What comes to mind as you think about being in something for the long haul? Perhaps deep commitment to a long-term goal, one that arises out of recognition that the stakes are high

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and that achieving the vision requires sustained effort over a long period of time. You take steps that move gradually toward the goal, one after another, even though for long periods there may appear to be no noticeable progress.

Wind-blown particles of desert sand eventually wear down even massive basalt promontories. Water flowing downhill washes away mountains and has even carved the Grand Canyon. Evolution takes place over many generations.

Being in for the long haul is returning day after day to a meditation or yoga practice. It is the commitment and recommitment to stay clean and sober — a day at a time. It is saving something every payday toward your retirement. It's building up healthy soil in your garden spot.

Being in for the long haul means working to help the right person get elected when the voters are finally ready for change. It means writing your will to make a legacy gift to an organization that matters to you. It means building a coalition to win the rights of same-sex couples to marry.

Being in for the long haul takes dedication and devotion. It means setting aside expectations for immediate results and trusting that accumulated small steps will eventually lead closer to the goal. Even if it isn't achieved in your lifetime, because it is, as Vaclav Havel said, the thing that makes sense. It means standing on the side of love.

In these fast-paced times where marketing promises instant gratification, it is countercultural to engage in efforts that are only expected to pay off in the long haul. And yet there are some things that cannot be accomplished any other way.

Today we'll consider the long haul in three different contexts — direct action to create social change; political engagement to effect policy change; and the on-going effort to estab-

lish a thriving and robust congregation.

II. The Long Haul in Social Action [Judy]

Some things are going to take a long time, but that shouldn't discourage us from doing them. Taking the long view is what will keep us hopeful and encouraged.

You may remember Duane and me talking about our friend and colleague, the Rev. Mary Harrington, who died last Fall after a four-year battle with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Mary retired from parish ministry shortly after receiving her diagnosis, but she was still healthy enough to look around for a place where her energy, organizing skills, and vision could make a difference to the world.

That Fall, shortly after Hurricane Katrina had devastated the Gulf Coast, causing billions of dollars of property damage and over 1800 deaths, Mary's church, the Winchester Unitarian Society, sent her and a team of volunteers to the Mississippi coast to help in whatever way they could.

It didn't take them long to figure out that the government agencies, insurance carriers and established relief organizations were completely overwhelmed, drowning in bureaucratic red tape and essentially incapable of providing the response that was needed. Out of that first trip, Mary and members of the Winchester church formed a non-denominational, non-profit, tax-exempt, all-volunteer agency called Gulf Coast Volunteers for the Long Haul.

In the years since Hurricane Katrina, this organization has sponsored five or six week-long work parties every year — each one with between 14 and 40 volunteers — to do whatever needs to be done to rebuild the communities devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Their organizing principle is “What does help look like to you?” — a question they ask

residents each day as they prepare to roll up their sleeves and do whatever needs to be done.

On their web site, they write:

“While we trust that our volunteers will have a rewarding and gratifying experience, our purpose is to restore a little bit of control and hope to the people we meet and work for. The trip is about them, not us.

“It is a privilege to do this work. It is deeply rewarding and humbling. We are in it for keeps; for as long as it takes.”

I still haven't managed to make it on a Long Haul work party, but I haven't given up on the possibility of going down there with these good people and lending a hand. They are people who understand the value of a long-term commitment, not just so that the work will get done, but so that the Gulf Coast residents whose lives have been ruined will realize that they aren't alone and they won't be abandoned.

Those are the kind of people I want to spend my time with.

III. The Long Haul in Political Action [Judy]

Recently I've become so concerned about the attack on women's reproductive health (and therefore on women's *lives*) that I have made a personal commitment to do all I can on behalf of this issue. So in addition to signing the petitions and letters that arrive daily in my e-mail inbox, I've been telephoning my legislators when asked to do so, and writing letters to the editor.

Sometimes it feels futile. On my better days, it feels like swimming upstream. But I do it anyway, because I can, and because that's how a responsible citizen participates in government.

It's so very important that we not become discouraged, we who are outraged at the current actions of many legislators in Harrisburg and Washington. We can't give up, and we have to remind them that we, too, are their constituents.

Last November a college friend managed to retain her seat in the Maine state legislature by 89 votes. When I wrote to her about my commitment to take frequent and consistent action for the cause of reproductive rights, she replied:

"These are difficult times, but I believe that we can change the tide if we work at it—all of us.

"Please keep me [informed about what you are doing]. We'll need plenty of grass roots work to protect the rights and freedoms that we hold dear."

She went on to write that so many people who care about issues expect someone else to do the work—write the letters, make the phone calls—and she appreciated my efforts for an issue I believe in.

Another friend holds a seat in the Kentucky state house; I asked her how her constituents get her attention when they want her to take an action or vote in a particular way. She said that the best possible thing is a personal visit to her office in Frankfort. Second best is a hand written letter—you know, with a pen, on paper, in your handwriting; she said she *always* reads them.

I recently attended a fundraiser for the local Planned Parenthood where two pro-choice members of the Pennsylvania legislature spoke about what is needed to move legislation forward. They stressed the value of personal relationships, so that they have allies to help them strategize how to proceed. You could be one. It's only a half-hour drive to Harrisburg.

And in a dramatic example of taking the long view, they also stressed that what was *really* important was getting the right people to run for office in the first place. Good candidates who share our values need us to support them and help them get elected, then help them govern responsibly.

We can never forget the fact that our legislators need to hear from us. Don't expect someone else to do your work for you. Please don't hesitate to speak up, stand up, visit, write and call on behalf of your causes, whatever they may be.

IV. The Long Haul in Building the Congregation [Duane]

The founders of this congregation had a vision of creating an enduring presence for liberal religion in the Cumberland Valley. They were clear in articulating that they were creating it to give away — that the congregation was their gift to members who had not yet come through the doors, to generations not yet born, and that it was their endowment to the future of Unitarian Universalism here.

They took many leaps of faith along the way. Calling newly ordained ministers — two of us — and committing to supporting our lives in return for our service as your leaders, preachers, pastors, and ministers. Buying this building when it wasn't yet clear how the modest mortgage would be paid, but trusting that if they built it you would come and pledge your time, talents, and treasures to the mission and help pass the gift forward. Establishing program staff positions to support a growing religious education program, and later a dynamic music program, both of which were initially funded with Chalice Lighter grants, and trusting that the budget would grow enough to sustain them.

Judy and I took a leap of faith as we moved across the continent and put ourselves into your care, unsure if the small, still gathering group of folks could sustain even the low com-

pensation we started out with. When we applied for the mortgage on our house, the banker looked at us and said, “Let me get this straight. You are newly married, fresh out of seminary and newly ordained, and you’re coming to serve a congregation that hasn’t yet chartered? Tell me again who’s involved?” We mentioned the names of some of the founders. “Well, OK,” she said, “but clearly we aren’t going to sell this loan.”

And now it’s your turn to step up to the plate again, and once again commit to the long haul. As Judy and I retire in fewer than a dozen weeks, it is every more important to sustain the momentum, to maintain a robust congregation through the ministerial transition.

Now Anne wants to talk with you about stewardship for the long haul.

V. Stewardship for the Long Haul: Akio’s Lesson [Anne]

The concept of stewardship encompasses a lot of related issues. It is the commitment to take care of, the striving to have not only a good present-- but also to ensure a good future. It is the investment of time and money to do the best we can to make the community as healthy and functional as possible. It is our mission/ vision put into action---making our decisions through the lens of our ability to transform lives and care for the world.

I thought I knew about this concept from my studies, but I learned what this concept *really* meant from Akio, a visiting student from Japan who enrolled in an Organizational Development class that I was teaching at the University of Iowa.

Akio challenged me and the class members to think about our respective jobs as the organizations that we would work in for our entire career — the way it was in Japan. He argued that an attitude of life-long commitment will encourage investment

in making the organization better and would reduce the pattern of leaving to seek something different. He reframed our learning by challenging us to "*Be in it for the long haul.*" It transformed the class focus and the experience transformed me. I shifted my thinking to make the most of wherever I was and to help improve the situation, when necessary.

Akio taught us all to be in it "For the long haul". Thank you, Akio. I pray that you and your loved ones are safe in this difficult time in Japan.

Joan Bechtel, one of our Coordinators of the Stewardship Campaign, could not be here with us today. She asked me to read this letter to you. The next voice you hear will be Joan's.

Dear Members & Friends,

This is a letter I hoped I would not have to write. We hoped to have met the goal of \$199,000. I am sure that many of you did your best and that is evident because we are close. We have met all but \$25,000 of our projected budget. We are very grateful to you for that.

The difficult part is that the shortfall, if not met, will force painful cuts that none of us wants. For example, the deficit is equivalent to the salaries of the custodian and the RE Director. Both positions will be open because of resignations, so it would be logical to not fill them. I would dread having to cut the RE program. In the last few years we have made great strides in providing top quality RE experiences for our young people. In terms of the custodian, I can't imagine being able to keep our building clean with volunteers only. So here we are asking again for more to cover the deficit.

An issue we have not previously addressed is that some of you may be hesitant to increase your pledge at this time, because you want to wait and see if the changes in the pastorate will negatively affect the church we all know and love. Tempting as that is, my answer, Dear Friends, is that NOW is the time for increased support, not less. It is up to us to sustain the excellence of our programs. It is up to us to make sure that we are able to attract an experienced, trained interim pastor who will help us discern who we are and give us expert guidance as we seek the settled pastor that is right for us.

As I ask for additional financial commitments, I know that many of you have given to the limit of your ability. We honor that and thank you. However, if you can contribute more, your help will be enormously appreciated.

Peace & Love. Joan Bechtel

Your support has perhaps never been more crucial to the sustainability of your congregation. Being in for the long haul means that you value the mission to create "an enduring liberal religious community... to transform lives and to care for the world." That you value it enough to commit your time, your treasure, and your talents to it, trusting with faith and hope that its future will indeed be bright and that it will long thrive as the gift it was intended to be.

VI. Conclusion [Duane]

So that's it. In the realms of social change, political action, and sustaining a deeply important religious community, the work demands a commitment to the long haul, to doing what needs to be done, even when the results seem far off in time.

Our charge to you this morning is to make those commitments, even though they are countercultural, even though they won't necessarily bring quick gratification, and indeed even though the benefits may be your legacy to the future, unrealized even in your own lifetime.

It takes ongoing commitment to bring hope to people whose communities have been destroyed by a disaster as big as Katrina or the Japanese earthquake or by warfare and terrorism. The arc of the universe bends toward justice as the result of many small political victories. It takes an ongoing and generous commitment to assure the sustainability of your beloved congregation. Are you in for the long haul? Will you help create hope through your support? Will you take one more step? Say one more prayer? Write one more check? Sing one more song?

Image: Navy Chief Petty Officers haul the mizzenmast topsail yard aboard the USS Constitution, the oldest commissioned warship in the world. Boston, August 24, 2007. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Eric Brown. Public domain.