

Hero Always Wear the Sign of Hope
March 13, 2022
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is Hero Always Wear the Sign of Hope.

It is so wonderful to see you. It's good for us to see one another, to gather together again...to BE together. I would like to take a moment up front to deeply thank the members of the Re-opening Task Force—Anne Macksoud, Chris Bartlett, David Parker, Diane Mellinger, Gina Auriema, Joby Thompson, Mary Blanton, Peter Rousmaniere, Richard Schramm and Rowland Hazard. I drew those names from a recent email. If you are on this committee and I have not named you, I truly apologize. Please accept my thanks and, if I can so presume, the thanks of our beloved congregation at North Chapel for stewarding us safely through a time of danger and uncertainty. You received both gentle and spirited responses from a North Chapel community that is not lacking in strong opinions. You handled an unprecedented set of circumstances with bravery, with great wisdom and grace. From my deepest heart, I offer gratitude. I cannot say this beautifully enough: Thank you...

Secondly, before we formally begin. I would like to thank Jenny Gelfan for sharing the first of two responsive readings that have been chosen for this morning's service. The first reading, The Litany of Atonement was #637 in our hymnal. The second responsive reading appears on the cover of your orders of service—or the response appears there, at any rate. Perhaps, the call is familiar to you. The leader will open the volley, will say, simple, "Look! Up in the sky!" to which the appropriate response of the spirit is, obviously: "It's a bird! It's a plane!" Shall we rehearse this or do you think we've got it? Here we go!

Call: "Look! Up in the sky!"

Response: "It's a bird! It's a plane!"

That was smashing. If ever during the course of this service you should hear the call, "Look! Up in the sky!" I believe you'll know just what to do.

Three questions: Do you believe in your heart, in your soul that you and I can travel faster than speeding bullets? Do you have faith that we are more powerful than locomotive trains? Can we leap tall buildings in a single bound? As you may already know, the answer to all of these questions is obviously, "YES!" In fact, we've already done it. We have all already been fantastically heroic. The task before us now is to share our methods with one another. How did we just do the impossible? Where did we find the strength to become so heroic?

Call: "Look! Up in the sky!"

Response: "It's a bird! It's a plane!"

Yes.

It's Superman! Strange visitor from another planet...Who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel with his bare hands, and who—disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper—

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fights a never ending battle for truth, justice and the American way!

I remember those words from my childhood. I also remember the story of friend of spirit that I have in life.

She wore her Superman costume long days past Happy Halloween—the

she wore in her Superman costume long days past Happy Halloween—the rubber-red boots with matching cape and belt, the full-body suit that was bluer than blue...that was lion's-roar blue, if you know what I mean...matching her eyes and personality. She wore her cape and colors long days into that November and showed no signs of changing right through Thanksgiving. December passed...and then, New Year's Day...and the days of Presidents and Valentines too. Most of winter came and went and she still wore it every day...right on into the foolish snows of March.

This weather is quite amazing. Although the signposts are all against me, I'm still hopeful for the coming spring. I'm not heart-broken by the late-winter snows this year—at least, not entirely. Well, let's just say that I have a better attitude about it than I did last year. I've matured a little bit since 2021. Not much, but every little bit counts.

For instance, a friend of mine just sent a picture of warmer weather—an outdoor vision of food and fun and fellowship. It looked like lovely to me. A group of winter coat-less people sat outside without irony...no scarves, no hats, no gloves...no joke. In theory, this can happen here in Vermont as well. Now, I admit that I wasn't happy when I saw how warm it looked and I admit that I wasn't happy about the weather situation here and I almost got bitter about it...but then, I remembered that little girl and her endless costume...how she wore it through late October and right on through to the New Year...how she wore it through Black History Month, thread-bare as it was...how she just wouldn't take it off, no matter what.

As the blue-red costume wore too thin at the elbows and at the knees, the family encouraged the child to face the facts. The costume that she wore was wearing out. They tried to forestall the inevitable...they tried to soften the blow of the coming bad news by buying another costume...same as the one that she had on. This way, she could be Superman once again next Halloween. The loved the thought but had a better idea. She accepted their gift but devised a better, more noble and more obvious solution. She tore the next Superman costume from its package and she put in on right over the first. That way, she could continue to war that great, heroic symbol over her heart. That way, she'd never have to skip a beat. And she continued this brave practice over time, through the teen years and right into young adulthood.

Of course, I'm kidding...just joking around. She never actually suspended the practice. She never stopped. She still wears her cape and her colors under her clothing, still today. I, too, dreamed of being heroic when I was young like that but I grew out of it, much to my chagrin. Not all of us do. Some of us never let go and never outgrow that hero phase, wearing the costume all the time...even in church and to this day. Mary Blanton, I hate to put you on the spot but unless you're feeling shy about, why don't you just run to the nearest telephone booth here in town, make your quick-change in secret and come out flying like you do. It's time to save the world again, my friend. She still wears her cape. To be honest, all of us do. The hero always wears the sign of hope.

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We've all just done something that is quite miraculous. Headlong, we met a

challenge that had the power to do us in, that did great damage to us and to the world in which we live. The COVID time of separation was hard on all of us. The COVID time was hard... I don't mean to imply that it is over. It is not. We will be living with this into the foreseeable future but something substantial has changed, something meaningful, something significant...and by it, we have all been changed. How we have been changed in unknown to us as yet. Our changes will reveal themselves over time. Maybe we've forgotten how to be social appropriately, having grown accustomed to life online. We may find ourselves in need of obvious coaching.

Do you remember the "Wear pants" advice? That's rough one to learn the hard way...when you attend an online meeting and you assume that you'll be seated for the whole time and the cat tips over a house plant and you spring up to save the day, revealing the pajamas or the boxer shorts that had been safely hidden from the computer's camera. I am so glad. As far as I can tell, no one forgot this tip this morning.

morning.

I've wondered how it would feel to be together again, to be able to SEE half of your beautiful faces, to feel your presence, to hum again...having overcome the impossible challenges we've faced.

Two years ago, almost to this very day, we were planning the Sunday service. I asked Pru Schuler to read the words of a great leader in the state of Vermont. I asked her to read the words of Senator Bernie Sanders...and then, the sky opened and the earth shook and everything was changed. I had to call Pru and ask her not to read those words...because I was worried, personally—and we were worried, collectively—that our togetherness could endanger our health. The pandemic just shattered our habits and changed our ways around.

Earlier this week, I asked her to consider reading Senator Sander's words now that we have figured out how to gather once again. I would like to ask that she read those words at this time. Pru, would you please share the reading at this time?

If there ever was a time in the modern history of our country when we are all in this together, this is that moment. Now is the time for solidarity. Now is the time to come together with love and compassion for all, including the most vulnerable people in our society, who will face this pandemic from a health perspective or face it from an economic perspective.

—Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders March 13, 2020

We were then and we are now in solidarity. We have been, we are now and we will be "all in this together"...with compassion soul-level deep for the most vulnerable in our society...with compassion for that which is most vulnerable within ourselves.

Now is a good time to gather the heroic spirit. In times of conflict, it is hardest to imagine that we are all in this together, it's hardest to imagine solidarity in times of war. The day before yesterday, I was reading a book I got in graduate school in my first career in Ethnomusicology. The book is by Taruskin—Defining Russia Musically. I was reading through it when I came across a story in the news, a story about a pianist named Alexander Malokov. It read:

Despite voicing opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the young Russian pianist was struck from the schedule of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra this week. In a Facebook post, Malokov wrote [quote]:

The most important thing now is to stop the blood. All I know is that the

spread of hatred will not help in any way but only cause more suffering.

The Montreal Symphony Orchestra will not let Alexander Malokov perform...not when Russian bombs are still falling in Ukraine. Our fears become so great in times of violence.

He's thirty-three years old which, in a Christian sense is noteworthy...because Jesus was thirty-three when he met his end. Malokov was born in Russian. He moved to Canada when he was 10...went to college in Ohio, at Oberlin, an excellent conservatory. He studied piano with Angela Chen and then, went on to Julliard. He studied at the Cleveland Institute and took his Doctorate in Texas...and until two weeks ago, he was a messenger of peace. He still is now, though some have forgotten already. We forget when we are afraid. We forget who we really are underneath it all.

Despite being struck from the performance schedule in Montreal (or, perhaps, precisely because of it), Alexander Malokiv is even more of an ambassador of peace today. He wants the violence to end. He wants the spread of hatred to cease. He wants to bring an end to the suffering...and he's not alone.

Tens of thousands of Russian people are protesting across that country. International news sources estimate that as many as 13,000 protesters have already been arrested. They were arrested singing, chanting, speaking and being the message of peace. We don't lose hope. We choose it. We find it somewhere within and we press on...to resist the choices of an unkind government...to find the common ground and grounds for peace. We press on until we learn to walk away from the battlefield...when fate allows us to be that fortunate. We press on to find

the best within ourselves and one another. We don't lose hope. We choose it—against the odds and against the grain. We choose hope and bear its heart and wear its symbol...

Russia was another world to me when I was growing up. I was shocked they had a different alphabet. I took Spanish in grade school. Learning vocabulary was hard enough. Learning a different alphabet... That used to seem so different to me... until I heard *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky (*Le Sacre du printemps*)...until I saw the art of Sergei Diaghilev, the choreographer. I was moved to tears by what they did. I was struck so deeply in my core when I remembered who we are...when I remembered the human family...when I remembered that we are one, that we are all in this together, just like Pru and Bernie said. I was struck in my core when I shed the myth of separateness. Through "A Litany of Atonement," as Jenny Gelfan read at the beginning of our service this morning, we consider the "many acts [that fuel] the illusion of separateness." There are too many of these illusions at this moment of the world. It's a good time to divest, a good time to unsubscribe. It is a good time to withdraw, to retract our commitments to what no longer serve us. It's a good time to END the violence, a good time to say, "No to war."

Conversations have already begun about how North Chapel can help to nurture peace. It's early yet but the Board meets Tuesday and plans will get underway. Let's rest assured and keep the spirit of the sunflower and not the business of the war central in our consciousness. Some people think this kind of prayer is flaky—and maybe it is—but I believe it saves the whole wide world. When I tear off my clothing, this identity that I wear, the sign of hope is there for everyone

to see.

The corniest thing about Superman—and I remember thinking this as a child—the corniest thing about him was his ego, his self-indulgence. I thought it was corny that he wore his first initial on his chest. I thought that was stupid. It was a major design flaw for me. I disregarded it because I loved the rest of the message. I just overlooked it...even though it was always staring me in the face...until I learned that the 'letter' on his chest was not a letter at all. It only looks like the 19th letter of our alphabet. The likeness is absent from both the Russian and the Ukrainian alphabets...which is meaningless, of course. Like I said, the 'letter' on Superman's chest was not a letter. It was a symbol from a world beyond us all.

If you can recall, Superman was a strange visitor from another planet. His hero costume didn't come from Madison Avenue in New York City. It came from the equivalent of Madison Avenue on a planet called Krypton, which is 27 light-years away. Needless to say, the Man of Steel would not have learned our ABC's. The 'letter' on his chest was not a letter. It was a symbol. It was a Kryptonian symbol. For them (and now, for us), it was the symbol of hope. I'm very glad to throw away my self-indulgent, ego theory. I'm so glad my childhood hero isn't vain. In truth, the added this part to the storyline kind of recently—in 2003—but I'm glad that the change allows me to reimagine both the nature of my hero and my past.

The hero always wears the sign of hope. It doesn't matter whether or not we lose it. It matters exquisitely that we choose it. In *Whiskey and Swahili Bean Sauce*, writer Doug Abrams wrote about feeling nervous. He was the one who wrote *The Book of Hope* with Jane Goodall. I mentioned it recently. Abrams wrote,

It was the night before we were to begin our dialogues. I was nervous—because the stakes were high. The world seemed to need hope more than ever, and in the months since reaching out to Jane to ask if she wanted to share her reasons for hope in a new book, the subject of hope had been uppermost in my thoughts. What is it? Why do we have it? Is hope real? Can hope be cultivated?

Doug Abrams was kind of a doubter, now with a case of imposter syndrome, asking questions of a global hero. As he did, such beauty did unfold. He writes,

A chorus of tropical birds sang, screeched cackled and called. Two rescue

dogs came up to curl up at Jane's feet, and a cat meowed through a screen, insistent about contributing to the conversation. Jane seemed a little like a modern-day Francis of Assisi, surrounded by and protecting all of the animals.

"What is hope?" I began. "How do you define it?"

"Hope," Jane said, "is what enables us to keep going in the face of adversity. It is what we desire to happen, but we must be prepared to work hard to make it so." Jane grinned. "Like hoping this will be a good book. But it won't be if we don't bloody work on it."

Hope is not fantastic, not a form of fantasy. It's not a kind of wishing. It is the first and most visible aspect of the decision to survive. Hope comes up in us, sometimes, moments before we least expect it. It comes up surprisingly, not like sunrise, more

like day break, that faintest glow on the horizon that we can only barely see at first, the glow that we must work on...that we can work on joyfully.

So, let us enter this day into the steel-hard work of hope, against the odds and against the grain...against the grief and beside the pain, in grace enough for all, may we enter into hope. We tear away the 'clothing' of the outward sense of self, the illusion of separateness that sometimes plagues us. We tear away those clothes to find the hero underneath, flying far above our highest dreams. If we look, up in the sky, we'll see the bluebird of happiness and the plain and simple truth that we are all in this together. No matter how stubborn, how violent, how great the challenges are before us, we can enter into hope.

In all the time to come, may we know hope as our secret identity and soul-level deep, may we know hope as our sacred identity. May its symbol be forever worn on upon our bravest heart.

May it be so. Up, up and away! Blessed be and amen.

