

# HOW HOPE WORKS

*Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach  
Easter Sunday  
April 1, 2018*

Dear Unitarian Universalist friends – welcome to our Easter Sunday morning service here at UUFVB. Before I share my message this morning on “*How Hope Works*,” I want to begin by letting all of you in on a dirty, little secret which all UU ministers share. Despite the great music and all the pomp and circumstance and enthusiasm that come with Christmas and Easter, UU ministers always struggle when these two expressly Christian holidays roll around each year – and some of us (I will confess) even dread their arrival in the calendar! We liberal clergy struggle because despite enjoying the larger-than-usual crowds that come out for these two religious and cultural holidays, it is always a challenge for us to come up with fresh and innovative sermons that both:

- 1) honor the traditional meanings and moods of the holiday and yet...
- 2) speak authentically to modern-day Unitarian Universalist theology and spirituality.

As I think most of you understand, more than a century ago our free-thinking and expansive religious tradition by and large moved beyond the limits and specificity of its liberal Christian roots, to become a more inclusive and eclectic spiritual movement that embraces spiritual wisdom and truth found in all the world’s great religious and philosophical traditions. So what this now means is that at Christmas and Easter times (when our more traditional Christian neighbors gather to spiritually celebrate the birth, life and death of “their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”), we UUs find ourselves searching albeit earnestly for other related and hopefully useful spiritual affirmations to make.

This is why Christmas and Easter are such challenges to 21st Century UU ministers – including me. We don’t want to “step on,” “ignore,” or “disrespect” the meanings our Christian neighbors find so personally meaningful, but we also want to authentically engage – in a real and positive and Unitarian Universalist way – the important themes that make these two holidays so special...and this can be a tricky balancing act, trust me!

All of this is by way of telling you that as I began to think about Easter this year, I realized that I wanted to address the topic of “How Hope Works”...for it seems to me that with so many discouraging and disheartening things going on right now in the life of our nation and world, hope may be in short supply in many of our hearts. Easter is about many things, but none is more central than hope...and that is where I want to focus my spiritual attentions this morning.

So let’s begin by taking a look at what the word “hope” means in common parlance:

**[THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION OF “HOPE” IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

**THE MERRIAM WEBSTER DICTIONARY:**

## **hope**

1. **a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.**

***“he looked through her belongings in the hope of coming across some information”***  
**synonyms aspiration · desire · wish · expectation · ambition · aim**

2. **wanting something to happen or to be the case.**

***“he’s hoping for a raise at work”***  
**synonyms: expect · anticipate · look for · wait for · be hopeful of**

In common parlance, hope is really just basically “wishful thinking”...it’s you personally wanting something to happen in the future. “*Hope*” (in this limited dictionary sense...and I really think this is a terribly limited understanding of what hope can be) “*hope*” is something that happens strictly “*within the privacy of our souls and psyches*” when we yearn for or desire a particular outcome in life. “*I hope it doesn’t rain today...I hope I win the lottery...I hope she accepts my marriage proposal...I hope my daughter finds happiness...I hope I don’t have an accident on my bike... I hope my favorite sports team wins the championship...I hope that hurricane goes out to sea...I hope the doctor gives me a clean bill of health.*” So according to the dictionary, hope is simply a private, internal expectation of the heart and mind that wants something particular...wishful thinking on our parts.

There is absolutely nothing wrong or harmful with this kind of hope. All human beings quite naturally hope for all kinds of pleasant, satisfying and desirable outcomes in life – just as we also hope to avoid painful, dangerous and tragic outcomes – and it would be quite unusual (not to mention unhealthy) for us in life not to ruminate about what we want to happen in our lives and in the lives of those we love. We human beings are all forward-looking and generally optimistic creatures, and so it is only natural for us to project our positive expectations into the future. This kind of hope – which I will call passive personal hope – is fine as far as it goes...and we all do it!

But this Easter Sunday I want to offer for your spiritual consideration another kind of hope...a more active, engaged, and participatory kind of hope... a larger, stronger and more demanding kind of hope...hope that actually requires us to do something...that requires us to roll up our sleeves, get busy, and work at changing the world in positive and purposeful ways! Let me try to put all this in one simple phrase:

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

**“HOPE WORKS BEST...WHEN WE WORK HOPE”**

I believe the kind of hope that has the power to make the most profound difference in our lives is the hope that moved beyond “wishful thinking” and becomes “wishful doing”...hope becomes truly powerful and transformative when it moves from our heads, where we dream about what we want to happen, to our hands and hearts...where we can actually do something to create positive change in the world.

Let me give a concrete example, that is on many of our hearts and minds right now...the hope of reducing gun violence in America.

**[PICTURE OF JIM AND SARAH BRADY IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]**



How many of you recognize this couple?

Right...it's Sarah and Jim Brady. As many of you know, after Jim (who was President Reagan's Press Secretary) was grievously wounded in the spring of 1981, outside the Washington Hilton hotel, by Presidential would-be assassin John Hinkley...he and his wife Sarah, instead of focusing on all the many ways in which their lives would never be the same because of Jim's debilitating injuries ...and loss of career and income, founded **The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence** and worked tirelessly for the rest of their lives for sensible gun control legislation. With the help of President Reagan (who was almost killed in the same assassination attempt) they and other gun control activists persuaded a reluctant congress in 1993 to pass the Brady Bill...signed by President Clinton...to mandate federal background checks on firearm purchasers and to impose a five-day waiting period for gun purchases. In the next year...another piece of sensible federal gun legislation persuaded Congress to ban military-style assault weapons – a wise law which, unfortunately expired just ten years later in 2004. Jim and Sarah Brady – by their unwavering hope that they could make a positive difference and their steadfast advocacy work – led the way to the only sensible and substantive American gun laws being enacted in the last half-century. And to this day The Brady Campaign (which is their non-profit institutional legacy) is working to:

“create a safer America by cutting gun deaths in half by 2015” by:

- a. keeping guns out of the wrong hands,
- b. strengthening background checks,
- c. banning assault weapons and large capacity magazines, and
- d. stopping the 5% of gun dealers who are ‘bad apples’ who supply 90% of crime guns.

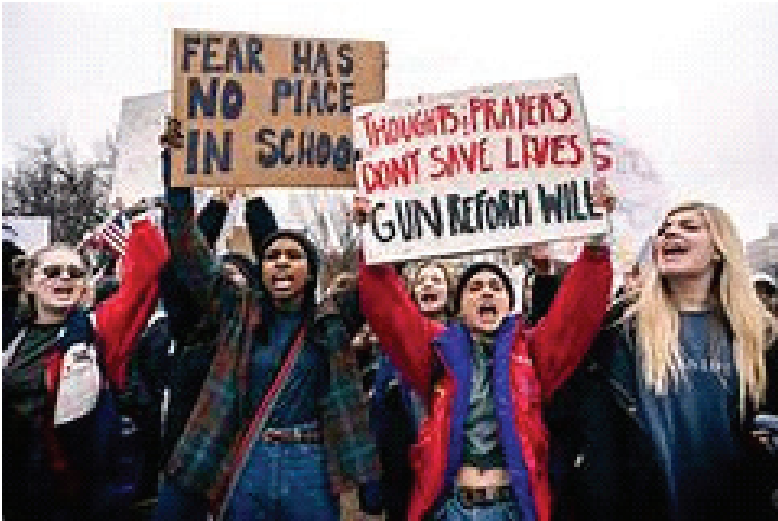
Jim and Sarah Brady did much more than just idly “hope in their hearts” and “dream in their minds” for gun sanity [sensible gun laws] in America. Despite Jim's grievous and debilitating injuries and their personal sorrow, they rolled up their sleeves...raised their voices...created a powerful organization... got busy...and worked night and day to bring some sanity to U.S. gun policy. And despite the fact that both Jim and Sarah are now gone, their hope and work lives on because...as you all know...the struggle for sensible gun restrictions in America is as urgent now as it ever has been.

Speaking about that urgency...everybody I know is just heartsick over the recent senseless murder of 17 students and teachers in Parkland Florida a few weeks back...not to mention the scores of school massacres (usually involving military-style assault weapons) that have occurred over recent years in these United States. I know that everyone is aware that gun violence in American schools has reached epidemic proportions...but do you realize that in the last five years alone (just since 2013... and this is a shocking statistic many of you will find hard to believe...but just in the last 5 years in this country) there have been (are you ready for this?) 305 school shootings where more than one person has died...305...that's about one shooting a week!

Most Americans (both liberals and conservatives) surely “hope” in their minds and hearts that this crazy gun carnage will somehow stop. Community after community after community has held memorial services and prayer vigils hoping for an end to the madness. But all these efforts (as heart-felt and sincere as they surely are) fall into the category of “passive dictionary hope”...well-intentioned people simply wishing for things to change without doing anything concrete ourselves to actually change them.

This is where the amazing students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School – and now hundreds of thousands of other energized high school students from all across America – come in.

**[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF THE PARKLAND STUDENTS PROTESTING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**



***Parkland Florida High School Students – demanding sensible gun reform***

These brave activist students are unwilling to accept the insane status quo of rampant gun violence in our schools and on our streets...which the National Rifle Association and their bribed enablers in Washington are steadfastly refusing to address. They are now demanding a wide range of common-sense gun control regulations...including an all-important ban on military style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

As you all know, last Saturday in response to a call for action from a small group of articulate and committed students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (four remarkable kids in particular – Cameron Kasky, Alex Wind, Emma Gonzalez and David Hogg), a huge crowd (perhaps as many as 800,000 of mostly young people fed up with just “hoping and praying” for change) gathered en masse on the National Mall in Washington DC for the “March for Our Lives” – to say loud and clear to our national leaders of both parties that they will no longer tolerate inaction on the part of our federal government. And as you know from the inspiring news reports over the weekend, in hundreds of cities and towns all across America countless thousands of other young people – joined by their parents and other adults – marched in their own communities.

There was a “March for Our Lives” rally right here in Indian River County in Sebastian’s waterfront park, with several thousand in attendance...and other large marches all over Florida...demanding federal action on sensible gun control. It is my great hope that the senseless school massacre in Parkland, Florida will prove to be “the straw that broke the camel’s back” when it comes to the American people no longer tolerating the absolutely insane and unacceptable level of guns and gun violence in our communities.

Maybe...finally...because of the activism of our young people...we will see a tidal and transformational shift in the thinking of most Americans...and finally...after all this unnecessary carnage...new common-sense gun legislation being passed, including legislation to ban the murderous assault weapons used in these terrible and senseless school massacres.

The important thing to remember here is that none of this positive momentum toward real gun control in our nation and safety in our streets would have occurred if the students of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High had limited their “hoping” to the usual, obligatory “prayer vigils” and “memorial services.” Blessedly, somehow, these young people knew that they were being called upon to do

something more than to just pray...they were being called upon to work their hope...to take hope into the very fiber of their being...and to march their hope with their feet!

And here is an amazing thing about such activist hope...it is contagious. Thanks to these exceptional students of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, millions of Americans who were once politically discouraged on this important issue now have renewed hope that there actually is something we can all do about gun violence in our land. Because these students have been willing to stand up, raise their voices and work their hope, there is now renewed hope in America that we can put an end to the insanity and bring peace and safety to our nation.

**[PICTURE OF PAUL GORDON IS PROJECTED UP]**



Before I close this Easter Sunday, I want to bring this important idea of “working your hope” down to a more personal level. I believe it was last Easter Sunday when I told you about my dear, old friend and long-distance cycling buddy Paul Gordon. That’s him on the left, enjoying a meal with Collins and me and his wife Debbie at a mountain home we once owned in West Virginia. Paul was always an upbeat and pro-active guy, he had a natural strength of spirit which animated just about everything he did. This did not change when – in his early 50s...at the peak of his personal and professional life – he was diagnosed with an aggressive and malignant tumor attached to his spine. No one would have blamed him had he just sat back and hoped for a medical miracle – an unexpected remission ...or some new fantastic treatment. But this was not the spiritual or emotional approach he took.

What he did was bravely “work his hope” amidst the uncertainty and pain of his cancer treatment – continuing to live each day vibrantly and well with his wonderful family...his many friends...his successful business...and all the many small pleasures he took in life. Paul “leaned into” the life he had with purpose and passion. In a most difficult situation, Paul found hope and worked it...and when at the very end of things he had to let go, he did, letting us all know that he had no regrets for the journey that was his. As long as he had breath, Paul “worked his hope” and it made all the difference in the world.

Dear friends...it is Easter Sunday...a day first and foremost about HOPE. I would have you remember that dictionary meaning of Hope: “wanting and yearning inside yourself for something to happen” is “wishful thinking” hope – it is passive hope...it is sedentary and in a way lazy hope...it is sit-back-on-your-haunches-and-wait-hope...and ultimately it is often an impotent and ineffectual hope.

But the hope I recommend to you this Easter Sunday is hope that works...it's hope that gets inside you, and challenges your spirit to roll up its sleeves...dive into the world...get busy...and do something (actually do something) that makes a difference. Hope worth having requires that you engage your heart...and your hands...and lend yourself to the world and its improvement.

This is Easter morning...a morning when in every church in the land "Good Spiritual News" is being shared from the heart.

Here is my Unitarian Universalist "Good News" this Easter morning, dear friends. We are human beings...free and capable agents in an open and fluid creation...who are free not only to hope...but to also work our hope – to roll up our sleeves and get busy about being somebody positive in a yet unfinished world. It is this freedom and the power of such hope that drives creation forward, and makes our lives works of goodness, purpose, and joy.

Amen.