

**Daring to Risk Futility**  
**Rev. David A. Morris**  
**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
**December 6, 2018**

In this darkest of seasons, humans have long celebrated festivals of light. The menorah candles of Hanukkah, the twinkling lights and guiding star of Christmas, the flames of a Kwanzaa kinara, the bonfires and Yule logs of Pagan Winter Solstice celebrations—all shine with promises that in the darkest of times there is still light. These are festivals of hope for times of despair, festivals of courage in times of fear, festivals of faith in times of cynicism.

You might feel we're living in one of those times now—not just metaphorically, not just because it's cold outside and the sun goes down so early and rises so late, but because there are lengthening shadows in the life of our national and global human family.

Many of us feel under assault by the news of the day—our nation's increasingly combative stance in the international community; our government's apparent indifference and even cruelty toward people fleeing the terrors of war or crime in their home countries; a global resurgence of racism and anti-Semitism on open display in public and political life. Reports on the environment warn us that genuinely catastrophic effects of climate change and rising sea levels are nearly upon us, and that the window for averting the worst is closing. One of our major political parties seems willing to subvert the democratic process to hold onto power by controlling election results in advance or negating them afterward.

We might be tempted toward despair. We might decide that working against what seem to be prevailing trends is futile—not worth the effort.

American journalists and social scientists have written recently about an epidemic of what they call deaths of despair—particularly among white, middle-class Americans feeling anxiety about their social and economic well-being. Deaths by suicide or by diseases related to addictions; deaths from illnesses made worse by stress and isolation—such deaths have historically affected the white working- and middle-class less than they have poor people or people of color; now the numbers are leveling out.

This seems like a good time for us to be celebrating our culture's ancient stories of hope, stories of courage, stories of resistance. Hanukkah, especially, is a story of people daring to risk futility—a small band of guerrillas fighting the might of Greece's Syrian empire; a few faithful leaders rededicating a terribly defiled temple; a sacred lamp lit without enough oil to successfully complete the ritual.

The story of the parakeet named Dreidel is taken from a collection of 8 stories of Hanukkah by Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Polish-American writer of stories in Yiddish, called *The Power of Light*.

Like so many stories in this season, they tell of miracles and wonders hidden in seemingly ordinary things—a parakeet, a candle, an act of generosity. Nearly all of them have as their central feature a choice to make a seemingly futile gesture of faith—lighting a forbidden makeshift menorah secretly in a concentration camp or a Siberian hut; inviting a visitor into a poor house on a cold night when there’s no food or warmth to offer; walking out in a dark, freezing forest to find firewood for a poor family. These small faithful choices change everything, making a way in the stories for God to work wonders.

According to some scholars of Judaism, it’s actions like these, not mighty or magical transformations of reality by the Divine Power, that are the real point of such stories. In the words of one writer, Eliyahu Kitov, “According to tradition, the miracle of Hanukkah was that, when the Maccabees sought to rekindle the Temple menorah, the very little oil they were able to find lasted an unexpected eight days. But the real miracle is that they went ahead and lit the menorah on the *first* day, even though they did not know what the next day would bring.” He goes on to say, “It is that same miracle that enabled the Jews to endure through every generation and every exile. For had we been discouraged by our anxieties about the future, we would have long since lost the capacity to survive.”

I’ve long felt that miracles don’t have to be a magical transformation or a supernatural intervention that overpowers natural law. A miracle is, quite simply, the moment when the seemingly impossible becomes possible; the moment when hopelessness becomes hope. That moment happens in us when we decide that keeping faith with justice, or with compassion, keeping faith with the kinship of living things, or with our own integrity calls on us to dare to risk futility. When we act on behalf of what we hold sacred, without regard for what seems possible, we invoke the power of hope and possibility that this holiday season of miracles celebrates.

You don’t have to look to religious miracle stories alone to see this power in operation.

I think about the years when same-sex couples I knew would go, year after year on Valentine’s day to the Register of Deeds in Contra Costa County, where I lived before coming to the Outer Banks. Each year they would request a marriage license that they absolutely knew would be refused. Newspapers took pictures, articles were written, religious people bore witness. Other couples all across the country took similar actions, and brought hopeless lawsuits, and insisted on keeping their inequality before the law visible—and then one day the impossible became possible, and marriage equality became the law in this country.

I think about the celebrations last weekend for the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Nelson Mandela. He and others led an absolutely hopeless movement to end legal racial segregation and inequality in South Africa. Tens of thousands of people put their bodies in harm’s way in utterly futile marches and gestures of protest—and one day beyond all hope, Mandela left the prison he was never expected to survive, and became the President of his nation.

I think of so many smaller stories, closer to home—stories of days of laughter and sunlight coming suddenly after years of grief and shadow; stories of family reconciliations after someone sends a hopeless letter of invitation; stories of love blooming unexpectedly long after someone has given up on the possibility, because they decided to say yes to a meeting even though they knew nothing would come of it.

These stories are like the stories of Hanukkah, stories that tell about the power of a small faithful action, an intentionally hopeful choice made in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. They aren't fairy tales or fables; even the ones that have acquired mythic qualities in the telling describe something that really happens.

It's not a magic trick. The small hopeful action doesn't always work a great transformation in a relationship, a society, a world. The gift doesn't always arrive just in time; the prison walls don't always fall down; the liberating victory may not come for generations, or may not ever arrive. The oil doesn't always last. In one of Singer's stories, a prisoner comes home to find that the beloved whose face burned like a menorah light in his heart has died. Yet something has changed; the light kindled in his heart has not gone out. He is alive, and love still lives in him.

The hopeful choice, the choice to risk futility in and of itself is the point of these stories. The decision not to surrender to despair is the soul and center, not because it changes the circumstances, though it might. The hopeful choice changes us—from powerless to powerful; from passive victim to active participant; from hopeless to defiantly, insistently hopeful. Whatever happens next, *we* are changed. And I believe that changes everything.

There's a lovely story—not a Hanukkah story, but it's got the same quality—told about the great violinist Itzhak Perlman. Rabbi Harold Schulweis, the founder of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, tells it this way:

“We have seen Yitzhak Perlman  
Who walks the stage with braces on both legs,  
On two crutches.

He takes his seat, unhinges the clasps of his legs;  
Tucking one leg back, extending the other,  
Laying down his crutches, placing the violin under his chin.

On one occasion one of his violin strings broke.  
The audience grew silent but the violinist did not leave the stage.  
He signaled the maestro, and the orchestra began its part.  
The violinist played with power and intensity on only three strings.

With three strings, he modulated, changed and  
Recomposed the piece in his head

He retuned the strings to get different sounds,  
Tuned them upward and downward.

The audience screamed delight,  
Applauded their appreciation.  
Asked later how he had accomplished this feat,  
The violinist answered  
It is my task to make music with what remains.

A legacy mightier than a concert.  
Make music with what remains.  
Complete the song left for us to sing.  
Transcend the loss.  
Play it out with heart, soul, and might  
With all remaining strength within us.”

No hopeful choice is ever futile. Whatever daunting reality we face, whatever powers we see doing harm in the world or in our own lives, whatever scarcity threatens, may we find the courage to keep faith with that which we hold sacred, with our own deepest values and highest hopes. May the source of all our hope and courage give us the strength to make music every day with what remains.

So may it be.