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Remarks to the Class of 2019, Baccalaureate Ceremony
Rev. Elizabeth Lerner Maclay
Parish Minister, The First Unitarian Church of Providence
101st Commencement
May 18, 2019

I'm so happy – and honored – and a little surprised to be here with all of you today. I doubt I'd have believed it if someone had told me 31 years ago when I was listening to the baccalaureate speaker as part of my own graduation experience here at Conn, that I'd be up here with all of you in 2019. This place was good to me and for me back then and I hope it has been good to you and for you now. And if there's still an enormous green fold-out sofa up in Freeman Tower that's too heavy to move out, I don't know anything about where it came from or how it got up there in the first place.

So here we are, with you about to graduate, whether you feel ready or not to find your place in the world - and for the record, I had no idea what I ought to do with my life when I graduated. So if you're all set for what comes next good for you and good luck in those next steps before you. And if you're clueless and maybe stressed about being clueless, my best advice is pay attention to what you want in your life – whether or not it's realistic – and work towards that whatever it is. If you pursue what you long for or care about, it will take you in a meaningful direction and you will find your way. Because for all of you, regardless of how ready and clear you feel about your future, you are moving out at a thrilling and demoralizing time, with so much possibility before us: new capacities for justice and compassion and saving the earth; and so much selfishness and ignorance and shortsightedness standing between us and the goodness that is possible – well, more than possible, frankly, imperative. We can't live on this planet if we turn it into a husk. We can't have peace if we victimize each other. That's all just basic math. But basic as that math is, here's a little more – we've known for a while that we needed to do better by the planet. We didn't always know how much was riding on it, but we knew a lot – and so far, we've done pitifully little as you all know. Likewise, the issues of victimizing each other - race and class and heritage and religion and all the ways humankind has timelessly drawn lines between 'us' and 'them' to further our own egos and status at the expense of those we define as 'other.' So, while the challenges before us all are very clear, they are also just this side of eternal – what in the world gives us the chutzpah to think we can make the differences that have to be made?

There are probably a lot of factors in that answer, but the one I want to talk about with you today is hope – one of the most challenging topics I can imagine speaking about these days, because honestly, there's so little of it in the world right now. Each day floods us with stories of outrage and tragedy from the smallest and most intimate to the greatest and most national or international– ubiquitous, unavoidable, mind-blowing, heartbreaking. It's not really a surprise to learn that birth rates in the last few years in this country are the lowest they've been in decades. Analysts tell us this is a 'barometer of despair,' when people don't have babies it's because the world doesn't feel like one they want to raise a family in. [NPR.com, Bill Chappell,

5/15/19) And this is part of the reality hope has to respond to, because if hope can't get real, it's not worth wasting our time on, not in this address I'm offering today, and not in our daily living.

Back when I was a very little girl, when it was time to go to sleep, lying in bed often meant thinking lofty thoughts that never occurred to me amidst the busy-ness of daytime. One recurring thought was to check myself on an astonishing calculation. I would review, with awe, that my figuring was correct: I might live so very long that I would actually live to see the year 2000. I would go over it in my head and work out I would be 34 whole years old. So old! But ... it seemed quite possible I might make it that long, and if I did, I would see that momentous year. A-mazing.

Fast forward a number of years and I was here and it was the 1980's and we were dancing to a song that may never get old, 1999 by Prince. The end of the millennium was beginning to appear as a prospect down the road, something we could at least anticipate though still not really foresee.

Fast forward to now and I look back on my young womanhood when the year was 2000 and I was a mere 34, starting my second solo ministry, this time in the Washington DC area, with no idea what I had ahead of me. No idea of the rich and relevant and inspiring journey that was ahead of me serving that congregation for many years; no idea that a year from that beginning I would wake up one morning to watch the twin towers collapse on television, to watch the Pentagon burn from the roof of my DC apartment building, and learn late that night that a family tied to my church had died in the plane that hit the Pentagon, including two very young and very wonderful daughters. I didn't know one of my parishioners would be prey to the anthrax attacks on our government that quickly followed 9/11. I didn't know that just a year after that the DC snipers would kill half their victims in the same town as our congregation, a harrowing time for us all. And I didn't know that the day after the DC snipers were caught, Al Qaida operatives would shoot to death a parishioner's father who was working in Jordan, a smart and capable American who was a supporter of Palestinian rights, a man who worked in politics for peace and people's empowerment his whole life. I had no idea any of that was coming, and once in that turbulent, terrible time I also had no idea how to hold it all, how to walk with and lead my people through all this destruction and death and anguish and chaos without crumbling myself. This was not what I expected when I went into the ministry, when I took that congregation on the outskirts of DC.

And that was fair, it wasn't what I thought I had signed up for. But you know what? That didn't matter. It didn't matter then, and it doesn't matter now, because that's life. We don't always get to pick our battles. Sometimes we do – and that helps. At least then the struggle is our choice. But so often the struggle is not our choice, it comes upon us whether we are ready or not, whether we want it or not, whether we are prepared or suited or skilled or informed, whether we have any sense of what the heck we ought to be doing - or not. And every time that happens, every time the struggle comes upon us, we don't get to choose 'whether' – we only get to choose 'how.'

This is a point deeply ingrained in all the readings we've heard today. Pope Francis who says hope requires that we not dwell in the past, we've got to steel ourselves and look forward. W. E.

B. DuBois' beautiful prayer that we be and stay absolutely resolute, and that out of all that is wrong may come all that is good. The passage from John that lifts up Jesus' absolute resolution and passion when he confronts the exploitation and corruption of what is sacred. The passage by Egyptian American Muslim writer Yasmin Mogahed that reminds us it is possible, not just possible but essential, to go forward towards the sacred, even when that going forward is a progress that carries pain and hardship throughout the journey. The Jewish teachings that life is a process of engagement and commitment, considering always not just what the world is but what it should be, and what we not can but must do with our own living, to co-create that better world that depends on us for its making.

Western society has offered itself an 'onward and upward' narrative for a long time. It has perceived history and reality with that lens, even when it's taken a lot of angling that lens to make it work. My own religion, Unitarian Universalism, has done the same thing. At another dark and despairing time in our nation's history, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached that even when evil seems pre-eminent and goodness seems beaten and crucified, still good will rise again, and the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. Dr. King was quoting one of our great Unitarian ministers, Rev. Theodore Parker, a fiery 18th c. preacher and abolitionist who first created that phrase about the arc of the universe, with its long lens of resilience and justification of hope.

But nowadays we don't believe that our direction is always onward and upward, the arc just isn't that clear or clean, and while its long line over millennia has bent in the direction of betterment and justice this far, the more our mortal powers grow, the more the whole end point of that arc can be prey to the whims of a few, maybe a very few. There's so much wrong with our world, with our nation, with many of our leaders, with many of our institutions, with many of our communities, and with, let's not forget, our own selves with all our inherent racism and sexism and classism, all the -ism's we are wrestling so hard to free ourselves of, usually with uneven –at best – success. They're deep-rooted and they've been part of us so long, it's going to be a long haul, this journey of being better to each other, to our planet, and yes to ourselves, and as we all know, windows for saving – well, everything - are closing all the time. There's a kind of cosmic claustrophobia creeping up on us as we begin to wonder whether we really are trapped in here, in all ... this, whether we can really find our way out.

Of course, this is where hope comes in. But what does that really mean? Sometimes we refer to hope as if it just comes – and sometimes it does – like a warm, sunny day after this remarkably bleak spring, it lifts our spirits all the more, and reminds us of goodness that simply is in the world, goodness that we can't compel and have no responsibility for whatsoever and what a relief that is. But hope that comes so easily can also leave us just as easily with the next bleak day or dire discovery or outrageous news cycle.

In which case, what justifies hope at all? Not the ephemeral hope that flits in and out, lifting us and letting us fall, but a stronger, better, realer hope, that the world, society, we, can actually become different, that we can make a difference – not just a difference but enough of a difference?

Rev. Dr. Miguel de la Torre teaches at Iliff School of Theology in Colorado. He studies how religion intersects with race, class and gender oppression. He also focuses on the issue of immigrant justice, about which he has extensive and ongoing knowledge. As a theologian, he doesn't pussyfoot around and this is most evident in his *Theology of Hopelessness*. Where most of us are always looking for hope, Rev. Dr. de la Torre has abandoned it. He has not just abandoned hope, he has embraced hopelessness, because he believes that when we cling to hope and hopefulness, this brings with it a kind of complacency. When we look at the bright side, or content ourselves with the belief that things always work out in the end, we let ourselves off the hook, and we let down all those whose lives are hanging in the balance right then. Instead, Rev. Dr. de la Torre believes, it's only when hope dies that action begins. It's only when – if - we wake up and realize all will not be well if we don't get in the game – not just get in the game, that's not enough anymore – if we don't change the game, before it's too late - that we really begin to make a difference.

But my point isn't that you, we, need to give up hope. I think of his idea of embracing hopelessness as the other side of a coin I hold onto – and am offering you today. The other way to look at this is that yes, people say there's always hope – I think that's largely true. But not because hope is always out there, hanging like a light bulb or a star that you just need to look around you until you see it. In my experience hope doesn't work that way at all. In my experience, the hope that really matters isn't the hope you look around for, but the hope you look inside yourself for. Hope that isn't about wishing, hope that is about strength. Hope that comes from a refusal to accept what is unacceptable, a refusal to allow what is reprehensible, a refusal to ignore what is deathly.

That kind of hope may be a wellspring in you already. Or, you may have to do some deep digging and discernment to find it, you may have to excavate, it may take work and time. That's what I have had to learn to do, when I didn't have what I needed already as a wellspring in me. Life and work required me to grow and dig down in order to be equal to the times and places I found myself in. But the work of finding that kind of dogged hope does not let you down. In fact, it makes you bigger, more courageous, more of a risk taker, more capable. All that is in every one of us and if we work for it, we begin to find it, hope grounded not in complacency but in strength, not in certainty but in possibility, an understanding not that everything will be fine, but that there is something for us to do and that we can do it and so we will do it. If we can do something, then we must do something, so we will do it – and if we all get on that train, if we all get on that train - things change. And that is what justifies hope; not eternal optimism but developed strength, not certainty but possibility.

That is the virtue of Pope Francis' unlocked heart, that is W. E. B. DuBois' resolution to persist in good work, that is Jesus' passion that overwhelms corruption, that is Yasmin Mogahed's hajji who will not be deterred by pain and hardship, that is Elie Wiesel's insight that meaningful hope can always only be given and received by another human being. That's it. Tomorrow you graduate. You have already known struggle in life - you will encounter more struggles now, and possibilities beyond all expectation, and your options will not be 'whether' but only 'how.' Choose deep. Choose strong. Choose compassion. Choose risk. Choose the deep work of hope built on strength. It will bless you. And then you will bless us.

