

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On  
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November 9, 2014

Just three months after my father died, in 1952, our mother moved us from Chicago to Hartford, CT. We lived with her dad and step-mom for two months, but by October we had moved into our own little four room stand alone house in a lower middle class or you could say working class neighborhood on the other side of town. There was my brother who was 13, I had just turned 11, and my sister was almost 8. She and I shared a room, our brother had his room, and our mother slept on the couch in the living room.

On election night we were all on the couch. It was late so the couch opened up into a sofa bed. We had a black and white TV, that is all there was, then, and we watched the election results. We were all Adlai Stevenson fans. He was from Illinois and we had just come from Illinois, but more importantly he was a liberal. And he was smart! One of my best friends, Annette, had been wearing her I like Ike button. She was a great Dwight Eisenhower fan! I'm assuming her whole family was, but I didn't know them. I remember the results, Stevenson's loss, and the sinking feeling I had in my stomach. I remember going back to school the next day and feeling awkward, but somehow Annette and I got beyond this difference in our political persuasions, our friendship persisted, through junior high and high school. And I continued in my liberal thinking which I had inherited, and which I still embrace today.

Every election, there are winners and losers, and supporters feel either jubilant or discouraged, happy or angry, sometimes self-satisfied and even gloating, sometimes awkward in the presence of someone from the opposing side. And there are also always folks who were not engaged in the politics, not a candidate, not a supporter, not a volunteer, sometimes not even a voter.

In mid-term elections there are always fewer voters, and sometimes it is at midterms that the stakes are very high. So fewer people make the decisions that impact millions of lives.

The political decisions that our next U.S. congress (house and senate) will make will have huge impacts on the lives of many Americans and people around the world. And I have heard and read many analyses of why the voters exercised their citizenship right to vote or stayed out of it. And analyses of why the election came out as it did. And I suspect there are both accuracies and inaccuracies in most analyses. And figuring out some of that may be important for our future.

But what I focus on, every day, is the same, no matter who wins, no matter who loses. What I count as important as being steadfast in my witness to our shared ethical values.

We teach our kids our principles: to respect every person, to do what is fair and just, to accept one another, to affirm the spiritual value of the unquantifiable, multi-definable quality we call love, we teach them to seek truth with open minds and hearts, to recognize we are one world, a world we would like to see characterized by freedom, justice and peace. We teach them to love the natural world, know ourselves as part of that natural world, inseparable, and interdependent. We teach them to affirm the authority of science and also of personal experience.

We teach them to pay attention to their inner lives as well as what they can see and test and measure.

We don't always agree on how to live these values in the world or know what path will lead to greater justice and fairness, what knowledge, steps, legislation or action will help us protect and heal the environment. But we know the vision that we hold; we know that we strive to respect our diversity.

The Unitarian Universalist ethicist Dr. Sharon Welch has written two editions of a book, which she called *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*. She is moving toward calling the third edition simply *The Ethic of Risk*. One of her main points is that those who hold power over governmental policies or corporation policies operate on the assumption that they know what is wrong and they know how to fix it. Liberals like our president speak in terms of American exceptionalism and certainty that we will prevail over every challenge. More conservative leaders are also likely to be sure they know what is wrong and how to fix it. Welch says, the challenges we face in this complex world generally do not admit of easy fixes. We do not have control over all the variables. We are not in control of all the other actors. There are always unintended consequences.

So being steadfast in our witness to the values of our faith, and the personal callings of our consciences does not mean we can be certain of what we need to do and how we need to move forward. Whatever decisions we make may or may not lead to our desired outcomes. But that doesn't mean we ought give up on the visions. Just because an action we take alone or with others in the service of justice and fairness might not succeed, does not suggest we should be immobile. Doing nothing may also cause unintended consequences. Social Responsibility does not necessarily mean we do nothing in the face of uncertainty.

The movements for human liberation like women's suffrage, like the anti-slavery movement, like the civil rights movement, like the movement for the rights of women for reproductive choice and the movement to win marriage equality, are never monolithic. There is not just one way forward to consider.

People get together, they think together, perhaps they study the dynamics of the situation, perhaps they remember the example of prophets before them, they tell stories, they express feelings, passions, vision, concerns and reservations. They consider possible steps to take, and decide on actions, and in doing this, they are expressing the courage to take risks and possibly fail. As UU minister Wayne Arnason wrote, "Take Courage,

Friends, The Way is Hard, the Path is never clear and the stakes are high, but there is also another truth. You are not alone.” They take courage from the wisdom and prophetic action of those who came before, they recognize they may or may not succeed in their goals, and they are strengthened by their solidarity.

The fifth principle of our tradition, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in our congregation and in society at large, calls on us to be engaged, to live our faith’s vision in the world, not in a knee-jerking way, but in a way that fosters seeking of truth, being in dialogue with others, trying things out.

If you have been watching TV or reading blogs or in whatever way you get the news, then you followed the election, and no matter what your partisan perspective there may have been times you felt hopeful, perhaps excited or happy, perhaps disappointed and discouraged. You may still feel one or more of those or other feelings. And you would have heard or read about calls for bipartisanship and signs it might be possible, and other signs that suggested it was not likely. You may have heard or read about the president’s hope that the congress would find common ground and move the country forward. And you may have wondered about the possibility of them reaching common ground or compromising.

If our congress people have a hard time talking across aisles, so do many of us. We also may sometimes demonize those whose worldview is vastly different than ours might be.

And we may have deep questions about how now we keep our eye on the prize, how we sustain steadfast witness to our vision.

I think of two challenges we need to face.

One is the challenge of loving resistance to actions that are plainly dismissive of human dignity and to do so by affirming a positive alternative vision. Examples are what Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights activists did and do when they witness for voting rights, which are again under attack. And what liberal clergy do today when they officiate at weddings of same sex couples.

Another is the challenge of what I’ve spoken of before, what Sr. Simone Campbell, the leader of the nuns on the bus, calls Walking Toward Trouble. This is the challenge to be open to those of diverse views, to listen to their points of view, their stories, their experiences. She gave examples of listening to workers who made other choices than she would have made in the struggle for worker rights. Opening our minds and hearts to the experiences and stories of others, may or may not change our minds, but it sustains us in a healthy humility, recognizing that we don’t know everything, we’re not sure what will help, we don’t have control over all the variables, and we too can be blindsided by unintended consequences.

There is a reading about democracy – it's either in the UU Hymns of the Living Tradition, or it's in the blue hymnal that preceded it. It reminds us that there are unknowns and uncertainties, no matter how much preparation or study or research we do, before we are called to make a decision and to act. The nature of reality is that in matters of politics and its impact on human lives and families and communities, we can't know everything. But we can and should learn some things and at the same time recognize there will also always be a quality of risk-taking in our decisions and actions. Still we are called to witness, to keep our eyes on the prize, the vision we hold, for as the psalmist told us, "Without a vision the people perish." And as the poet the late Langston Hughes reminds us, "Hold Fast to Dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly."

What Sharon Welch knew and what we can know is that when we take risks, failures can be our teachers. From them we can learn more about human nature, about ourselves, about what we might try next. We can learn from both successes and failures. Valuing them both can aid us in sustaining our courage and our willingness to persist in faithful witness. The civil rights movement taught her that. The history of workers in the fields of justice-seeking for GLBT folks affirms that for me. This work of keeping our eyes on the prize is holy work, but it is hard work, and only the privileged think it might be quick work. Steps forward, steps backward, forward again, the struggle continues.

And all of us who desire a world more fair for our children, our grandchildren and generations to come, can be grateful of the legacy of singers, songwriters like Pete Seeger and Honey in the Rock and Holly Near and Carolyn McDade and others, who understand the importance of singing and celebrating even small gains, recognizing we stand on the shoulders of those who come before us. Alan Lomax was one of these, for he included in a songbook the song Keep Your Eye on the Prize, Hold On, which became a civil rights song, and was based on a gospel plow song. We can be grateful for the witness of those who dared to risk, for they are our teachers.

You have some such teachers, personally known and known by reputation, who have shaped your vision.

And we can be grateful for the wisdom of the author E.B. White, who wrote: "If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy; if the world were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I wake up each morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it very hard to plan the day." Savoring is what we do when we love.

White reminds us: it is love that is our truest guide, love of creation's wonders and creatures, love of children and the children of the world. This love is a commitment perhaps more than a feeling. It is the agape form of love, when the divine within me recognizes the divine within you, within all being, within life itself. If we let Love nurture us, sustain us and Guide Us, Love will help us keep our eye on the prize. Through the steps forward and backward, day after day, year after year, love can help us keep the

faith. Love can help us hold on. To aid us in keeping our eyes on the prize, may we also take time for love. Amen.