

## Sometimes

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
May 26, 2019

### Readings

“Sometimes” by Sheenagh Pugh

Sometimes things don't go, after all,  
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadell  
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,  
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;  
elect an honest man, decide they care  
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.  
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go  
amiss, sometimes we do as we meant to.  
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow  
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

from “Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir”  
by Pete Seeger (whose 100<sup>th</sup> birthday was on May 3)

Incorrigible optimist that he was, Pete wrote this near the end of his book. It was in the context of contrasting his view with that of his father, Charles Seeger, who Pete wrote had become quite pessimistic near the end of his life:

Perhaps the synthesis is in the song “Turn! Turn! Turn!”. There’s a time for this and time for that. We are all descended from people who were good killers. The ones who were not good killers didn’t have descendants. Now? Maybe we can all learn what FDR told us in the last year of his life: “If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships – the ability of all people, of all kinds, to live together in the same world, at peace.”

Pete, against much evidence to the contrary, did believe, as he wrote many times elsewhere, that we were learning to do this, in fits and starts, but maybe getting there.

Let’s surely hope so.

And he believed fervently that music and singing had an important role to play in this learning to get along.

## Sermon

I've long appreciated the poem we heard earlier, titled "Sometimes."

And I think my appreciation (maybe yours too) comes from the reality that in fact sometimes things *do* go from bad to worse, sometimes we *fail* to do as we meant to, and sometimes a people do *not* step back from war or elect an honest man.

And so forth.

So it is really good to be reminded of the contrary "Sometimes"; particularly if we are feeling beaten down, either personally or politically... or both.

On Memorial Day we remember those who lost their lives serving in one or another of the wars our nation has fought over the centuries. The roughly 37,000 American flags flying on Boston Common represent just those from Massachusetts who were killed in those wars, going back to the Revolution – these only a fraction of all Americans who have died in war. And I expect that most, if not all, of us in this room can name one or more relation – whether in our own generation or in generations past – who was among that number.

In short, we have *not* consistently stepped back from war. But... sometimes we have.

Sometimes we *have* negotiated our way through disputes with other nations. Would that we could do so more often, maybe even always... so that someday Memorial Day, if we even celebrated it at all in that imagined future time, would be a sort of historical relic.

But this won't happen, if it happens, all by itself, like some sort of miracle or act of God. After all, most of the things named in that poem require some human participation – to aim high, to do what you feel you were born to do, to succeed in our best efforts, to care for a poor or grieving neighbor. Human participation a necessary ingredient... which doesn't guarantee anything, but surely improves the odds.

One of the things I found inspiring about Pete Seeger was just this, that throughout his life as a activist for justice, equality, freedom, peace, and the environment he kept on, participated, even when events seemed stacked against those values and goals, kept on, kept the faith with those who were improving the odds on it all.

Lines from many of his songs that lift up this hopeful message, some of them we've heard and sung today:

Don't you know it's darkest before the dawn...

And because I love you, I'll give it one more try,  
to show my Rainbow Race it's too soon to die.

...a time for peace, I swear it's not too late...

And we heard his words in the reading, the sort of thing he often said or wrote.

There is a particularly wonderful story told about Pete. I can't recall where I heard or read this, but it's true.

One rainy day not far from Pete's home in Beacon, New York, an acquaintance of Pete's was driving along a busy road, and saw ahead some old guy, all alone, holding a sign on which was written, simply, "PEACE". As he got closer he saw who it was: Pete

of course, witnessing for peace, having *not* called the press to report on his solitary vigil, seeking no recognition or acclaim, just doing one more little thing to improve the odds.

Look, I marched and demonstrated against the Vietnam War, as I know many of you did, as hundreds of thousands did. And it may well have improved the odds on ending that war sooner than otherwise.

Sometimes, you see, people do step back from war – but they/we need encouragement.

You and I together, among many others, worked hard to bring equal marriage rights to Massachusetts – and now equal marriage is the law of the land. I received a beautiful email from one of the couples at whose wedding I officiated just a few days after marriage between two men or two women became legal in Massachusetts. They sent their email the day before their fifteenth anniversary, and they were thanking me – but really they were thanking all of us and everyone who improved the odds on making that day possible.

Sometimes our best efforts do indeed meet with success.

Many of us and many others around the globe have been writing, marching, lobbying, and sometimes some of us getting arrested in the climate justice movement. Will it be enough? Well, it seems there is more activism on the issue now than ever: we see children taking days off school in countries around the world to demonstrate for action on climate change, we see the Green New Deal proposal and more. Will all this be enough to save our Rainbow Race? We do not and cannot know. But we are surely improving the odds.

A few words relevant to all this came across my desktop earlier this week, on the birthday of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, yes the Sherlock Holmes Arthur Conan Doyle. Somewhere, sometime, he wrote this:

I should dearly love that the world should be ever so little better for my presence. Even on this small stage we have our two sides, and something might be done by throwing all one's weight on the scale of breadth, tolerance, charity, temperance, peace, and kindness to man and beast. We can't all strike very big blows, and even the little ones count for something.

Well, I want to say not “*even* the little ones” – because it is mostly the little blows for charity and peace and the rest that add up to a better world, a more just and beautiful world. And we can all strike those “little” blows – every day, in one way or another. Improving the odds.

I took a class in college on the history of attempts to create utopian communities. I believed then, certainly hoped, that some sort of utopian world would someday be possible. Lots of us did in that era.

Well, hasn't happened yet; in fact it does sometimes feel that things these days in our nation and in the world are going from bad to worse. But if we can learn anything from history it is this: that, echoing Ecclesiastes “Turn! Turn! Turn!”, there are better times and there are worse times. So, as I've been saying this morning, the things we do each day, individually and collectively, can improve the odds on the better times. We've

seen it can and does happen – from the civil rights movement to the movement for equal marriage rights to the too slow rising of environmental awareness and activism. It can and does happen.

But we won't get too far if too many of us throw up our hands in despair. For we just don't know enough to give up on the human race or on the family of life.

As Pete put it in "Quite Early Morning":

Some say that humankind won't long endure  
But what makes them so doggone sure?

Think of this: The peoples who are native to this continent, which many of them call Turtle Island, know about the sort of resilience that will, if anything does, see us through. For, as we know, hundreds of tribes of this land were decimated by disease, massacred, cheated by treaties, and so on... to this day... yet... they are in fact still here: writing poetry and novels, painting pictures, sharing stories, working in every field and profession, coming together in traditional gatherings, protesting continuing injustices, surviving and sometimes thriving in spite of everything over the centuries.

May their resilience inspire the rest of us.

You see, among other things, it seems to me that we surely owe it to all those of whatever background, culture, history... all those who have preceded us in the good fight, whether in war or peace, whether to end slavery or bring women the vote, or in our time to shrink income inequality, ensure affordable health care for all, slow global warming, and on and on – we owe it to everyone who is striking blows for, in Conan Doyle's words, "breadth, tolerance, charity, temperance, peace, and kindness to man and beast," to join in whatever modest ways we can in putting our own hands and hearts to work, to raising our voices for justice and peace, to adding to the store of care and kindness in this world of joy and sorrow.

Because "sometimes" things do not go from bad to worse, sometimes our best efforts do not go amiss.

Together, let's continue to improve the odds.

So may it be!