

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
September 9, 2018

Embracing the rarified air of possibility.

Return Again

It's taken a while to see what my sister meant. She and I connect every month or two, our emotional language similar, our everyday lives and world views less so. Last week, out of the blue, a text came in from her: "If you haven't heard the service for John McCain, you ought to. Quite inspiring....I saw the whole thing. Moving."

This surprised me. Susie's not into politics. If anything, I get the sense she steers clear of it all. I don't even know how she voted in 2016. We don't text much either. But this day she sent an unusually spirited, long run of messages. Turns out she taped the McCain funeral. "I knew it would be history-making and it was." She even invited me to come watch it sometime at her house in Merrimack – she'd make dinner.

Intrigued, I asked why this service meant so much to her – was it because of the politics these days? Not so much that, she wrote, as "because of its message of unity...doing something beyond yourself." She found the speeches inspiring. "You don't hear that everyday," she said. She was reminded of our dad and, "for that matter," she said, "all service members....Our freedom," she texted, "comes at a cost. A reminder of how blessed we all are." That text ended with a flag emoji.

Susie's enthusiasm felt important – we don't text like this, some thirty messages back and forth, she insistent that I watch this service. Which I did. I found the visual spectacle powerful. Presidents, secretaries of state, senators and other public figures whose service spanned some fifty years sat side by side, solemn and thoughtful, a rare unguarded quality on many faces. Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama sat together in the front row with their spouses, faces we know so well.

I think that the "rarified air" of this event is what sparked my sister's passion. It did mine. John McCain was a complicated man, hero to some and a person who lived with regrets, too. But participating in his service, even on a screen, felt elevating and compelling – not juicy-snarky-revved-up compelling, but powerfully appealing to the higher self, to our better angels. To me, the atmosphere in that cathedral felt inspiring and hopeful. Rarified air.

By "rarified air," I mean an atmosphere completely different from the everyday, as in "the rarified air of the highest peaks." Dictionary synonyms for the expression "rarified air" include exalted, lofty, idealistic and noble.

We recognize this feeling of being lifted and apart from the ordinary. We came into the world a tabula rasa, a blank slate. Openness is our original state, our birthright. We hunger to return to it, do we not?

And yet many of us live in a world of rancor. We participate in it when we jump aboard with our opinions, our certainty and our need to be right—the opposite of openness. Who among us is not

occasionally quick to judge? Who among us doesn't experience a twist of cynicism now and then, or a "nothing good will come of this" attitude? Sometimes we simply shut down, closing ourselves off to others and doing our own thing. Opting out of interaction can be its own form of cynicism.

Call it what you will. Cynicism. World-weariness. Snarkiness. It distracts us. It eats away at our souls. And we need to take care lest we let it vanquish our hope or kill our joy. Don't get me wrong, our opinions matter. Our right to have and express them matters. Taking action so that we can make a difference in this broken world matters. *And...* interrupting our unhelpful habit of cynicism, pervasive and distracting in these times, also matters.

We thirst for the opposite of cynicism. For purity of spirit, for a fresh breeze that clears our minds and lift our awareness. Where in your life do you feel curious and not knowing—truly open? Interrupting our "I've seen it call" or "I know better" takes intention.

Two years ago this past June many of you came to my ordination in Portsmouth. Thank you! It was quite an afternoon, love and excitement in the air, the late day sun streaming in through the tall windows, a blessing in itself. I enjoy flipping through Dick Pollock's photos of that day (he was a beloved UUFES person, Ellin Leonard's husband – he died that fall). Dick captured wide-angle scenes of the ceremony from up in the balcony and took many close-ups, too. He caught the aliveness in the room, a collective optimism and hopefulness. Sure, hope for a person and a ministry, but a far larger sentiment than that. People still tell me how they felt that day.

Well over a year later, a person I'd been surprised and glad to see attend – a local director-playwright – sought me out. That day had moved him deeply, he said. What was it, I asked, that made such an impression? His reply came swiftly. "It was an entire hour without any cynicism," he said. For him, that was noteworthy. He went to on to say that he was not a religious person nor was he accustomed to spending time in a church. But that lack of cynicism made an impression and had stayed with him all that time.

I think of his words often—"an entire hour without any cynicism." Cynicism's an easy place to go though it runs against everything our faith tradition stands for. Unitarian Universalism is about nurturing the soul and making the world a better place. It's about hope and paying attention to what thrills and delights us. What makes us come alive with ideas and plans and creativity. There's no place here for cynicism.

Think about a newborn baby, ready to love, full of potential, open to the world. Ah, to return to that pure state. To breath that rarified air. What does it take to remove our armor and breathe in possibility?

Our family spends time most summers on a funky, simple little island in Buzzard's Bay called Cuttyhunk. In the 70's my in-laws and and their best friends went in together on a cottage there, and the two families still share it.

Our next-door neighbor there, my age, has just received a lousy diagnosis of an aggressive blood cancer. Her husband told us at the beginning of August. She couldn't come, too tired to make the

trip, so I was elated this past weekend to see her there. She had on a “Cancer Sucks” T-shirt. Chemo would start soon. I stopped in one of those hot days, wondering if she felt up to a swim.

No way. Her son was headed back to the real world that day, and she was in a cooking flap for him, wanting to send him home with home-cooked food. The counter was stacked with tubs of veggies, marinated steak tips, you name it. Commanding the kitchen, she stood sweaty and smiling in a cloud of flour. She’d just made a pan of brownies and now was mixing up a batch of cookies. She agreed that she was overdoing it and would pay the price later, “but I haven’t done anything for my son in weeks,” she explained. And so this huge effort – overcoming her body’s bone-tired weariness, overcoming her disappointment and uncertainty and fear. Talk about rarified air. A mother’s love. Whatever cynicism and dismay at the world I carried in that day dissolved in the love that filled my friend’s kitchen.

In our imperfect world,” writes poet Stuart Kestenbaum, “we are meant to repair/and stitch together/what beauty there is.”¹ We don’t need a magnificent, professionally perfect occasion to turn away from cynicism. We don’t need a cathedral to be lifted into hope and possibility. We just need to be human. To remember love. To be willing to return to the gift of openness with which we were born.

Let us treasure the hallowed ground of places where we can take off our armor. Let us return again and again to them and breathe in the rarified air of possibility.

So may it be.

¹ Stewart Kestenbaum, “Holding the Light,” *Only Now*. Deerbook Editions.