

THIS THING CALLED HOPE

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We really do live in amazing times. I was active in the Civil Rights movement and its disappointing aftermath. Now we have a viable black candidate for president. I was also active in trying to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed for women and saw that go down to defeat. Now we have a viable woman candidate for president. At times, I didn't think I would live to see either of these happen.

But whenever I despair over our seeming lack of progress, I reflect on history. It is only then that I can see our two steps forward and one step back. Various people have identified this cycle and have given it various names. In The Chalice and the Blade, Riane Eisler identified these phases of history, from goddess worship to the present, as periods when the female, the chalice, was on the rise and periods when the male, the blade, was dominant. In this theory, all social progress happens when the female is on the rise and all wars happen when the male reasserts power.

Being an optimist, I like to think that human history is an upward spiral - that we are getting better and better. There are people who believe that the Nazi holocaust disproved that theory. But Eisler points to the extreme Nazi belief in strong male superiority. They believed that women and Jews were weak. Women were good for producing nice Aryan children and for serving the men, while Jews were good for nothing. If Eisler's theory is correct, the holocaust didn't change the upward spiral, but was a predictable backlash to the social progress in Germany prior to World War II.

It isn't just our presidential candidates that give me hope. I am also amazed at the success of the truth and reconciliation movements in Ireland and South Africa. The strife in Ireland lasted for centuries. Apartheid was the official policy of South Africa for fifty years. Yet both societies have realized fairly recently that retaliation doesn't work but reconciliation does. As Martin Luther King said, "An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind."

In South Africa they knew that without forgiveness, they would be in for a long blood bath. Their constitution states: This Constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of color, race, class, belief or sex. The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society."

People around the world are being pressured to grant basic human rights to all - whether it is the rights of women in Iran, or the right of female children not to be circumcised, or the right to dissent in China, or the rights of gays and lesbians in this country - people are being called to account for their actions. This is, indeed, cause for hope.

In fact, some people are so hopeful, they are predicting a major shift in world view from our dominator society to a new stage of cultural awareness where all of the previously mentioned human rights, and more, are recognized. One of the spokesmen for this revolution in human consciousness is Owen Waters. He, too, takes the historic view of our progress.

Humankind, he points out, first started with basic personal survival, what Eisler would identify as a blade time. Second, people noticed that they had a better chance of survival if they banded together into groups for hunting and protection, a chalice time. Third, came a period when power was everything - a time of war and the survival of the fittest ethic, a blade time. Fourth, truth was primary as people looked for order and purpose in life, another chalice time. Fifth, people sought prosperity as they strove to succeed, a blade time. Sixth, community and caring for one another arose, a chalice time. Owen calls these six stages the first tier of human consciousness.

The second tier starts with the seventh stage when the chalice and the blade begin to come together as people seek systemic responsible freedom. Environmental issues, world peace, personal accountability, and respect for the views of others are primary in this seventh stage. It feels very much to me as if this is where many of us are.

I find it interesting that Owen's stages mesh exactly with Eisler's theory of alternating male/female cycles. If Owen's prediction of the next stage is true, we can look forward to a global village outlook with solutions that will work for the whole planet. It is possible to see the beginnings of this stage in effect now.

There will be a temptation to slide back into the old dominator way of doing things. After all, it seems easier to just let George do it. (Oh dear, and I swore I wouldn't mention Bush!) and change can be scary. But once you catch a glimpse of the way society can be, it is hard to accept the heavy hand which only favors some and leads to totalitarianism. The good news is that we don't have to wait until a majority of people accept this new way of being. Lyall Watson called it the Hundredth Monkey Effect. It says that when a large enough percentage of any group shifts to a new behavior, almost everyone else will follow that behavior, also. The percentage is usually put at about thirty-three, or about 1/3 of The group. That is great news and it should give us great hope. If only 1/3 of a group shifts to a new understanding, the group will shift.

As an example of how this works, let's look at this congregation. Ten years ago, there would not have been a 1/3 of the congregation in favor of gay, lesbian and transgender rights. But gradually, there was a shift. Gays and lesbians have been now welcomed. Same-sex marriages have been performed. Last week you had a transgender minister give the service. This is a big shift that shows what can happen and gives much hope for the future. Imagine what power we have to take our new understanding out into the community of Billerica and effect a shift there.

And this story has been repeated many times in Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country on several social action issues. The chalice and the blade working together can indeed take us onward and upward. Amen.