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Utopia for Realists

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The federal holiday, Labor Day, was established by Congress to celebrate the labor movement's role in securing worker's rights. And often, the Sunday of Labor Day Weekend feels like an auspicious time to celebrate the past successes of the labor movement and dream about what a renewed labor movement might achieve in the future. But I want to be honest with you that with less than two months until the next presidential election, *preventing dystopia* is more on my mind than how the labor rights movement might help move us closer to utopia.

So as we enter into an exploration this morning of "Utopia for Realists," I want to steer us in between either of two extremes. On the one hand, I want us to avoid what is sometimes called "toxic positivity"—denial of the serious challenges before us—or insistence that progress will inevitably happen—when there is no guarantee that it will. On the other hand, I also want us to be realistic about the significant ways we could choose to improve our society.

Along these lines, and as I've reflected on this topic of "Utopia for Realists," one thing that kept coming to mind is a remarkable video that some of you may have seen that NPR (National Public Radio) released a few weeks ago—a video of young descendants of Frederick Douglass reading excerpts of his speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Douglass originally delivered this speech in 1852 to a group of abolitionists. Although we are facing serious threats to our democracy at the moment, the abolitionist movement is a reminder that we have overcome even more existential

threats in the past. And this video of Douglass's descendants reading his famous speech reminded me that we choose to struggle for social justice not only to expand our own freedom, but also to create a better world for generations still to come.

Alexa Anne Watson is the great, great, great-granddaughter of Frederick Douglass. Douglass Washington Morris II is Frederick Douglass's great, great, great, great-grandson. Zoe Douglas Skinner says that she learned to count the number of greats on her fingers when she was five. The six-minute video of these young people reading their ancestor's famous speech is very much worth watching in full. (It will come up if you google something like *Frederick Douglass' Descendants Read His 'Fourth Of July' Speech*.) But the part that stood out for me were the personal comments at the end, shared by fifteen-year-old Isidore Dharma Douglass Skinner. Reflecting on the lessons he took away from studying his great, great, great, great-grandfather's speech 168 years later, he said that,

Someone once said that pessimism is a tool of white oppression, and I think that's true.... **I think that there is hope and I think it's important that we celebrate black joy and black life and we remember that change is possible, change is probable, and that there's hope.**

Even as I hold in my heart the lives of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Jacob Blake—and so many others—I also have been holding in my heart those words from Frederick Douglass's great-great-great-great-grandchild as we enter deeper into this election season: *"There is hope and...it's important that we celebrate black joy and black life and we remember that change is possible."* And may we do all in our power to help create that change and to turn our dreams into deeds.

In that spirit, if Frederick Douglass could have seen a century-and-a-half into the future, I suspect there are many aspects of our world today that would break his heart. And I suspect there are other parts of contemporary society—including his descendants and all that they (and we) might still accomplish—that would give him great hope and joy.

So what might hope mean, specifically and concretely, in today's context? Well, one person who has helped inspire many people of late along these lines is the Dutch historian Rutger Bregman. His two recent books, *Utopia for Realists*, and *Humankind*:

Hopeful History, are both profound and motivating. He takes on so many of the arguments for despair about human nature and invites us to also notice all the reasons for hope, connection, and solidarity. Those two books go into far more detail than we have time to explore this morning, and I recommend them to you if you need some reasons to be hopeful about our species in such a time as this.

But rather than going in depth on Bergman's worldview, what might be most helpful now is highlighting two quotes from him specifically about this current moment in which we find ourselves. The first quote invites us to flip our perspective and notice not only the negative, but also the positive:

"For every panic buyer, there are a thousand nurses working as hard as they can. For every hoarder, there are a thousand civilians setting up WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups and people in the neighborhood trying to help each other."

It's so easy for our brains to latch on to the many cynical, bad faith actors in this moment—and miss the many people doing everything they can to redeem this moment in our nation's history. In challenging times such as these, it's important to remember our brains' negativity biases. We're really good at clinging to dire warnings about all the bad stuff. And don't get me wrong: we need to be real about that. But we also need to remember to savor, appreciate, and join all those continuing to work for good.

The second quote I wanted to particularly highlight is especially relevant for this Labor Day Weekend:

During this pandemic, we've seen who the real wealth creators are. "Governments around the globe have published lists of the so-called 'essential workers'. You look at these lists and you wonder: where are the hedge fund managers? Maybe we need to redefine the value of work. Nurses, teachers and garbage collectors are much more important than bankers and marketers."

There is an opportunity on the other side of this pandemic to restructure our priorities. There are no guarantees that we will do so, but there are unforeseen possibilities now, for the previously overlooked many who truly are essential in our society.

Even just the fact that one set of stimulus checks were sent has opened many

people’s minds to what a Universal Basic Income could look like. As a point of comparison, three years ago in 2017—on a Labor Day Sunday just like this one—I preached my first full sermon on the topic of a Universal Basic Income. At that time, the notion of a Universal Basic Income seemed like a much more elusive utopian ideal. That was before Andrew Yang announced his run for the presidency with a Universal Basic Income as one of his major platform proposals. That was before the pandemic stimulus checks. Today, a Universal Basic Income feels like it has unexpectedly shifted in the direction of a realistic utopia. And that’s often how it goes: paradigms can often seem entrenched—only to shift quite suddenly.

Relatedly, many of you have heard me talk from a Unitarian Universalist history perspective about what a “*Universalism* for the twenty-first century might include. If we take seriously the Universalist question of *What do we do next if everyone matters?* then I think a universalism for the twenty-first century would minimally include, (1) Universal health care as a basic human right, (2) Universal access to education through college or vocational training, and (3) a Universal Basic Income. Part of the point is to create a society that has a *stable floor for all*: a point beneath which we do not let any human being slip out of respect for what our UU First Principle calls “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” It’s not at all about everyone being equal. Most people have small or large dreams that necessitate striving beyond a basic income, and many with a UBI will work to achieve those dreams. Rather than holding anyone back, a “stable floor for all” is about ensuring that everyone has the minimum needed for a dignified life—and a reasonable chance to aspire to more.

Universalist health care, universal college education, universal basic income—those may sound like utopian pipe dreams. But I invite you to consider that they can be part of a quite realistic utopia. Consider that when Frederick Douglass delivered his speech on “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” it was 1852, more than a decade before the end of the Civil War.

- It was not considered “realistic” in the 1700s when our Universalist forbears denounced the doctrine of hell and proclaimed universal salvation.
- It was not considered “realistic” in the 1800s when Universalists joined the abolitionist struggle to end slavery.

- It was not considered “realistic” in the twentieth century when Universalists joined the women’s suffrage movement.
- It was not considered “realistic” in the early twenty-first century when Unitarian Universalists supported the movement for same-sex marriage rights.

What rates as a “realistic utopia” is often only appreciated in retrospect. And I promise you that the prospect of achieving further universalist ideals in the twenty-first century is no more daunting than the struggles our universalist forbears faced.

We can do hard things. Today we are raised up “on the shoulder of giants” — ancestors who helped shift history toward freedom and equality. And now it is *our* turn to find out if we collectively have the fortitude to bequeath to future generations a better world than the one we inherited.

Now, there are forces in our world today trying to drag us backward: to re-entrench supremacy culture out of a false and warped nostalgia for the past. But our call is to tell a different story — of a future with hope — a story not of fearfully constricting and turning inward, but of ever-widening circles of compassion and inclusion. In the words of the American Pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, we have the opportunity to learn to better tell the story of ourselves:

as proud and loyal citizens of a country that, slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its...moral tolerance, and built colleges in which [increasing percentages] of its population could enroll. A country that numbered Jefferson, Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Eugene Debs...Rosa Parks, and James Baldwin among its citizens. (121-122)

That’s a story we can keep getting better at telling: a story of becoming a more perfect union; a story of creating peace, liberty, and justice — not merely for some, but for all.

Despite the powerful voices in this country trying to sow seeds of chaos, division, and despair, we can continue to choose solidarity with our fellow citizens. And in this spirit, as is our Labor Day tradition, we will soon sing “Solidarity Forever,” perhaps the labor movement’s most famous anthem. As we prepare to do so, it is significant to recall that the original lyrics were set to the tune of “John Brown's Body,”

a marching song written by Union soldiers during the Civil War, about the radical abolitionist John Brown. Some of you may recall that, of the [Secret Six](#) who helped fund and supply John Brown's 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers' Ferry, *five* were Unitarians, two were Unitarian *ministers*. Among those five Unitarians was Samuel Howe, the husband of another of our Unitarian ancestors, Julia Ward Howe, who awoke in the middle of the night after visiting Civil War camps and hospitals, inspired to write new lyrics to the tune of "John Brown's Body"—verses that became the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

As we prepare to sing this labor anthem, I invite you to remember the historic echoes in "John Brown's Body" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," opening the imagination of your mind and the compassion of your heart to all that becomes possible whenever we join together in the ever-increasing circles of inclusion of **"Solidarity Forever."**