The “hope is a thing with feathers” bit isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.

Of course that Emily Dickinson quote has been passed around during this month - here at UUCV and no doubt in the other Unitarian Universalist congregations in our movement who are following this monthly set of themes.

The “feathers” or “wings” of hope seem rarely to be so comforting as the birdlike images that arise for me when I imagine something perching lightly in the soul and singing a tune without words.

Perhaps it is because of my work as a hospital chaplain, where hope is more often:
For a good death
For a reprieve - a lengthening of quality of life
Or - in rare cases - for a cure
It is in the hospital
Where last month we held a memorial service for all the infant deaths and fetal demises
Where the image that has become central to that annual service
Is a butterfly
Held by some Mexican traditions to be the bearers of the souls of children who have died in the past year
Which may be why Kazantzakis’ words and image of rushing the butterfly feel so much more appropros to me

Or perhaps it is because of our social conditions
And the world of nature
Both of which bring us to our knees
Our heads in our hands
Or our fists in the air
Calling out for reversal
Restoration
Right relationship

A world in which even the author of our meditative hymn this morning, Schlomo Carlbach, has been named as one of those guilty of sexual misconduct... yet one who is still capable of articulating such haunting beauty.

It’s as if all the #’s (hashtags) were metallic, industrial strength wings
Strapped to our arms
Beating the air
Demanding we rise
Overcome
While simultaneously weighing us down

It is easier, it seems
To talk of hope
As the outcome
As the thing we find when we look back at having overcome
At succeeding
How we endured
What we learned

Hope is, it seems, more visible in retrospect

But what about those in-between moments

What about those times
When the darkness closes in
Or the political unrest is too much
When our lives or the lives of those we know, love and care about
Are threatened by the upheavals

When, driving on I-5 you see people
On the overpass
Waving american flags
And carrying a sign that says
“It’s okay to be white”
And a part of you sighs and nods
While another part of you shakes your head
And wonders what they’d do or say
To a person of color if they had a chance

These are dark times, indeed, it seems to me
Days of ashes and cocoons
And as much as we aim and strategize
As much as we look for step-by-step plans
Coordinated political movements
Workshops
Trainings
Classes
Reading

As much as we seek these things
There is much
That can only come about
As part of coming through
Inexplicably
Enduring
Without any explanation at the time
Simply enduring
Without understanding or knowing

Until emergence
Arisal
Happens to us
Through us
With effort
But also with the grace of timing
And forces we cannot control
Or even understand

In conversation with Seth preparing for this service
The question of “how” arose in me
Sure
Each of us can
Without doubt
Talk about the times in our life
When things were tragic
Fearful
Seemingly insurmountable
And can contrast those
With now
Or if not now
Another time
When “It gets better”

Seemed like more than just
A pithy encouragement

But how many of us
Can truly describe
Or share
Let alone offer to another
The steps to take
To find our way
From ashes
Or protective cocoons
Opened too soon
To newness
Possibility

Hope

The paths we each take
Though there may be patterns
Seem unique
And unpredictable

Like the winding pathway
To the front door
Referenced a few weeks ago
Uncertain
And unclear
As to whether a desirable outcome
Will ever appear

And so perhaps
A better word than hope
In some seasons
Is endurance

Again
Perhaps because of my work in the hospital
And often in labor and delivery
With high risk pregnancies

Or perhaps
Because one of my favorite theological figures
Is Meister Eckhart
13th Century pre-reformation Catholic
Whose central imagery includes
The notion that each of us is pregnant
And waiting to give birth to The Word, God
Perhaps because of these
The image of endurance is appealing
And the idea
That each of us
Is not only birthing
But being birthed
From something
To something

And in order to actually survive that birthing
As the one being birthed
We have to be squeezed
We have to pass through
A narrow place
Where it's hard to breathe
Where our bones shift
Where we cannot see
Indeed, cannot even know or foresee or conceive
Of what's on the other side
And all we can do
Is surrender to the process
And endure the natural contractions
Bringing us through
The tight space
To a new opening

Or as ones
Who are birthing
Perhaps we can understand
And imagine
That the pain
We witness and experience
Is part of a natural process
That our bodies
The human body
The whole of creation
Knows how to do
In order to bring new life

And that
In order to endure it
We, too, must surrender
Trust that the contractions
Are the best possibility
Though painful

That we can and must learn
To breathe through it all

And if we take the metaphor further
Perhaps we can acknowledge
That sometimes specialists must be called
Incisions must be made
Labor must be interrupted
And some pregnancies
Even
Terminated
Some complications
Make things
“Incompatible with life”

And what must be endured then
Is the mourning
The grieving
Of lost possibility
Of lost hope
Whose wings are broken
Unable to take flight

Perhaps the difficult truth
Of life’s uglinesses
Are what makes hope
Or endurance
So challenging
And so necessary

In the not so distant past
I became reacquainted with ugliness and despair in
my own life

I realized that I was carrying quite a bit of grief
Accumulated from transitions and losses
Diagnoses and disappointments
“I need to be more mindful of how I am carrying
my grief,”
I realized

Okay, I thought
I can do that
Becoming more mindful of grief
That’s not so bad, right?

And then
The graveyard came
It came to me in a vision
Unbidden
It wasn’t terrible or frightening

Graveyards and cemeteries hold calming memories for me
Recollections of hunting family roots
With my grandfather
The genealogist

I need to build a graveyard
I realized
Someplace to bear witness
To the grief in my life
A visual and tangible reminder
That I could revisit regularly
During a deepening season
Of sadness

The hope I needed
Was grounded in grieving

I gathered up some dirt from around our apartment building in Portland
Placed it in a plastic container usually reserved for taking leftovers for lunch
And made a little cardboard grave marker

And then the poem returned
From the works of naturist and essayist, Wendell Berry

“No, no, there is no going back
Less and less you are that possibility you were
More and more you have become
Those lives and deaths that have belonged to you
You have become a sort of grave
Containing much that was and is no more in time
Beloved then, now and always
And so you have become a sort of tree
Standing over a grave
Now you can be generous toward each day that comes, young
To disappear
And yet remain unaging
Every day
You have less reason
Not to give yourself away”

I printed that poem
Placed it next to my little graveyard
And put twigs
Taken from trees on the grounds of the hospital where I was born
In the dirt
By the headstone

And that was good

For weeks
I would linger briefly
daily
By that graveyard
Honoring my grief
And feeling it

I poured water on the dirt taken
And watched as grass sprouted
Then withered

And then the time came
When the grief grew so large
I realized
“I don’t want to live anymore”
I don’t want to feel this

There have been a few other times in my life
Where I’ve felt that way
And never have I planned
Or acted on it

Yet it always intimidates me
To know
That that sentiment is within me
The weariness with living
And the desire just not to be

It took me by surprise

In these tumultuous political and social times
Married to a man who is dedicated to social change
Ordained in a tradition that prides itself on engagement and activism
Where each of us is so, very needed
That the overwhelm was under it all

But why would it
I believe this is the case for many of us
If we stop and look and listen long enough
We may find
That which confounds hope
Which says
You can’t
You’ll fall
There is nothing on the other side
Of the darkness
Of ash
And the blaze
Of flame
But more struggle
And suffering

It is there
But that which would endure
Is working
In the darkness
Is waiting
For rebirth
For renewal

If we will give ourselves to it
If we will wait
If we can allow ourselves to grieve
The loss of what has been
Even the changing of our dream and vision
For what we thought almost was

To sit
Sometimes for months
And just keep living
Like the character in our children’s story this morning
Until one day
Almost without knowing it
We realize
We are on the other side
The labor pains have stopped
The walls that closed in so long we have come to accept them as the permanent contours of our world
Have opened up
And there is
Something new

Like
Well, as the story says
Like:
Sitting on a big rock under some tall trees
Hearing feeling the breeze whispering through leaves and branches overhead
A stream flowing nearby
Heck, okay, maybe even a robin singing (damned birds again)

Maybe then we will realize that we, too
Are a part of life offering itself to the larger life
And we may find
That we have endured
And say “Thank you.”
And be ready
To begin again
That our lives
Are prayers
And birthings
And being birthed
As the darkness deepens for a few more weeks
As we continue to engage
The pain and struggle
Around us
Within us
Between us
As holidays and holy days
Approach
And recede
Endure, friends
And help one another to endure
For we would be
A people of hope
Even if not yet
Someday
Someday