



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Living Hope, Loving Justice

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I want to share a reading this morning in memory of Jamal Khashoggi, the journalist killed for his efforts to expose corruption and political oppression....

“Decisions” is a 2009 poem by the Slovenian poet, Boris Novak. Novak has served in leadership in PEN International, an international association of writers which affirms the role of literature in global understanding and advocates free expression.

### Decisions

Between two words, choose the quieter one.

Between word and silence, choose listening.

Between two books, choose the dustier one.

Between the earth and the sky, choose a bird.

Between two animals, choose the one who needs you more.

Between two children, choose both.

Between the lesser and the bigger evil, choose neither.

Between hope and despair, choose hope:

it will be harder to bear.

-Boris Novak

Between the lesser and the bigger evil, choose neither.

Between two children, choose both. (The child from the United States AND the child from Honduras; the Christian child and the Jewish child)

Between despair and hope, choose hope; it will be harder to bear.

The dusty book, yes. The two children—please. And hope, of course—but, why do you suppose the author says hope will be harder to bear? Surely I am not the only one here who is feeling despair today. And it is hard to bear.

In July, shortly after starting work at UUSC, I traveled with 60 faith leaders to Ajo Arizona. We learned about the brutal conditions many in Central America face and the way our government has “weaponized the desert” as a deterrent to migration. That’s what they called it—it is similar to the strategy the current administration has used and is threatening to use again of separating children from their parents. In 2017, remains of 128 people who died making the journey were discovered. Many times that number are reported missing but have not been recovered. **I despair a world where deadly deterrence is policy.**

Our group walked only about a half a mile into the desert that morning. We each carried as much water as we could manage, between us leaving 125 gallons, in the hopes that people making that terrible journey might have a chance to survive. I had one gallon in my backpack, another in my arms, and another gallon for myself, divided between two large water bottles. We marked the bottles with love notes in Spanish. We see you. We want you to survive. Our nation is more than enforcement and deadly deterrence.

The heat itself was like a physical assault, reaching 110 by noon. By the end of my mere two hours in the desert, I had chills. They started in my head and eventually moved through my whole body. It was confusing. I was afraid. Why would anyone make a days' long journey in these conditions? I am certain they would only do it if they felt they had no other choice.

We went to Ajo this summer because UUSC's partner No More Deaths asked us to organize faith leaders to show up in solidarity with their volunteers who are being criminally charged for leaving water in the desert for migrants making the desperate journey. I think I should say that again: Nine people, criminally charged for leaving water in the desert, for providing humanitarian relief.

They were targeted after they brought to light the practice of federal agents who were slashing the bottles of water they were leaving.

One of the volunteers, Scott Warren, is facing two felony charges and the possibility of 20 years in prison for harboring illegal migrants. For giving human beings food and water and shelter. **I despair a world where humanitarian relief is considered a crime.** Where the work of human rights, and those who advocate for human rights, are targeted and harassed. **I despair a world where compassion is criminalized.**

I wish I could tell you this is unusual. As my colleague Rachel Freed reports:

In Italy, [six Tunisian fishermen are awaiting trial for people-smuggling charges](#) after helping rescue drowning migrants off the coast. These fishermen have been celebrated as heroes in their communities for saving hundreds of migrants over the years. Now they are targeted by Italy's newly-elected populist government. The Hungarian government has responded to the Syrian refugee crisis by severely restricting access to asylum. In 2015, Hungary began to institute a series of changes to its asylum legislation and practices and approved the so-called "[Stop Soros](#)" law that criminalizes offering assistance to asylum-seekers. This year, in France a reports have noted that, "aid workers have been subjected to [645 incidents of police surveillance](#), repeated ID checks, stop and searches, physical and verbal violence." [While a recent French court decision upholding the right to assist migrants](#) has been celebrated, it has not prevented some activists from facing prosecution for providing aid.

Some days, I despair. I despair that our President is stoking the fires of hatred and violence. I despair the nationalist and xenophobic policies too many in our nation are embracing and too many around the world are feeling emboldened by. That they are criminalizing our values and our work for justice.

Some days I don't do very well at hope. And my despair crowds out my capacity for compassion and action.

They want this. They want us to choose despair. They want us to be discouraged and afraid. They know that our discouragement will lead us to lose hope. That our lost hope will mean we realize there's nothing to be done. And when we finally believe there is nothing we can do, we will resign ourselves to this and wallow in our sense of powerlessness.

Between hope and despair, choose hope; it will be harder to bear.

Despair diminishes us. Despair creates a hardened heart. And a hardened heart doesn't have to bear anything.

Hope is harder to bear because it leaves my heart open, vulnerable. It means I cannot turn my back on the suffering in the world. I cannot walk away. Hope means my heart will be broken again and again.

I have to work hard to choose hope. It takes discipline and practice. This is why I am a Unitarian Universalist. This is why I am here today. Our communities are places of courage that call me back to hope. Our faith in a Larger Love calls me back from my despair and reminds me that my hands and heart are needed for Love to be made real. Our heritage of affirmation for the precious value of every life inspires me to work harder to live hope.

Our Unitarian and Universalist heroes of resistance remind me, from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an African American writer and activist in 19<sup>th</sup> century Philadelphia to Thomas Starr King in San Francisco. I am also here today because you give me hope. I know you despair some days, too. But I have seen the broken heart and the brave hope in our congregations. Right here in this congregation. In the work some among you are doing right now in Tijuana. In your projects of love and hope like Building Bridges, Jericho Road, and your Refugee Resettlement project. Your hands and hearts making love real.

Most of all, these days, UUSC's partners give me hope. I have seen the broken heart and the brave hope of native people whose lands are disappearing due to climate change but who are demanding self-determination as they move their families from the lands of their people. I have seen the broken heart and the brave hope of a community in Haiti who built eco-villages from nothing. I have seen the broken heart and the brave hope of women in Nicaragua who are demanding safety at home and in the streets, of journalists in Honduras who are exposing their government's cruel policies and violent retributions, at great personal risk. These are just a few of UUSC's partners that give me hope.

Some days I despair. And so I give thanks that our faith calls me back to a broken heart and a brave hope. I give thanks that I am not alone. That I can borrow courage from you when I need it. I give thanks for the Sharpes who inspired these almost 80 years of work of our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. And I give thanks that, with your help, we can be a beacon of love and hope around the world through our partnerships and support for people who are suffering the most.

We are diminished when we look away. When our hearts are hardened by despair, we forget how to love.

Together, we are stronger. Together, we will live hope. And when we live hope, our hands and hearts will make love real.

They can call it a crime. They can pass laws that criminalize our values and our work for justice. But I promise you this—we will not stop. With broken hearts and brave hope, let us be charged and found guilty.