"A Sense of Possibility"
*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*
*at the First Parish in Wayland, MA*
*May 3, 2015*

"We can't, we MUST not lose this sense of possibility because in the end, it's all we have."
-Marina Keegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*

In this month's *Unitarian* column, I wrote about congregational life as a journey of the planned and unplanned, the expected and the unexpected. Today's sermon is a bit of both.

Last December, I walked into The Wayland Depot for the first time. Seeing the book *The Opposite of Loneliness* by Marina Keegan for sale, I bought a copy. I expected to preach about the title essay at some point this year to honor and recognize the life of a young woman who had been a part of this congregation for so many years. Looking ahead to today when we would welcome new members, I thought I would use her essay to talk about the ways in which congregational life can be "the opposite of loneliness." This is what I planned.

And then came the events of this week.

Last Saturday a tragic loss of life in Nepal followed a massive earthquake. Thousands have died. Thousands are injured. And the fate of thousands more remains uncertain. Aid distribution is slow and inadequate as survivors remain hungry and homeless.

Then, Sunday night brought the long-expected interview of former Olympian Bruce Jenner. In an extended interview with Diane Sawyer, Jenner shared his journey of struggling with his gender identity. In short, Jenner identified as a woman.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments on the issue of same-sex marriage. Both supporters and critics of same-sex marriage agree that the resulting decision may be the one that finally legalizes same-sex marriage nationwide.

Throughout the week, media attention was also driven to protests in Baltimore and other cities in response to the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody. When some protests turned destructive, the public conversation wavered between discussions of protest tactics and the underlying issue of policing tactics.


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And then on Friday, Baltimore's chief prosecutor, Marilyn Mosby, charged six officers in connection with Freddie Gray's death. After months—even years—of nationwide protests against unarmed persons dying in police custody, charges were levied against the police officers involved.

Given all of these events, when it came time to submit my weekly sermon title and blurb to the communications team, I felt uncertain about what I might say this week and which current events, if any, I would focus upon or integrate into the sermon. So, I simply sent the broad title, "A Sense of Possibility."

The title actually comes from Marina's title essay, "The Opposite of Loneliness." She writes, "When we came to Yale, there was this sense of possibility. This immense and indefinable energy—and its easy to feel like that's slipped away." Continuing, she explains that while some of her peers may have chosen a post-graduation path, others are uncertain. Some may feel "lost", feeling the tug of a "what if" that questions prior choices which led to this place of uncertainty. In response to this seductive tug of self-doubt, she insists,

> "What we have to remember is that we can still do anything. We can change our minds. We can start over. Get a post-bac or try writing for the first time. The notion that it's too late to do anything is comical. It's hilarious. We're graduating from college. We're so young. We can't, we MUST not lose this sense of possibility because in the end, it's all we have."

Knowing that these words came days before her death at the age of 22, its difficult not to feel tears well as you hear or read them. There seems to be such a cruel fate that a young woman so eager for life, so open to its possibilities would, in the end, have so little of it.

I did not know Marina—as many of you did. As such, I don't pretend to speak *for* Marina. Rather, in reading Marina's book of essays, I sought to listen *to* Marina. As the events of this week unfolded, I found myself considering what she could teach me about how to respond to current events.

When I first read the essay "The Opposite of Loneliness" on Monday, I quickly realized that my plan to tie her essay to the value of church membership was somewhat shallow, if not totally misguided. Before reading the essay, I had thought the opposite of loneliness would simply be "community"—like the one we seek to foster here at First Parish. But Marina is much more thoughtful about her understanding. She writes:

> "We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life. . . . It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this


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feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team."

So the opposite of loneliness is not as simple as community or as love. Or, I would suggest, it's bigger than community or love. It's a sense of connection to a broad, intersecting web of people. Speaking of the web of people around her at Yale, Marina refers to the many "tiny circles we pull around ourselves. A cappella groups, sports teams, houses, societies, clubs." She's pointing to a whole range of ways people interact with one another in various groups, ways that people connect.

So also, our own lives are often full of "tiny circles we pull ourselves around." We have families and friends. We have jobs, volunteer work, people from the gym or the club. We have neighbors, parents of our children's friends, and regulars we see at the coffee house. And, yes, we have this congregation.

Some of our circles may be communities to which we belong or people that we love. Yet, some of our circles may be moments when we feel our sense of connection to the larger web of people—to the feeling that there is an abundance of people. For example, the sense of abundance we get when we sit on the beach at Walden Pond and sigh with contentment as we watch children who are not ours smile and splash. Or, the sense of abundance when we gather in a crowd to watch a festive parade, cheer on a sports team, or revel in the sounds of the symphony. It's the sense that on this journey of living we're all in this together.

As the news of the week continued to pour out, I questioned whether to shift the focus of my sermon. In light of Baltimore, should I again preach about the injustices facing black men in this country and the legacy of mass incarceration? Should I respond in some way to the loss of life and struggle *for* life in Nepal? Or, should I speak out in support for the journey Bruce Jenner is on or for marriage equality to *finally* be recognized nationally?

As I considered these questions, I kept hearing Marina's voice. Specifically, I returned again and again to her insistence that "we can't, we MUST not lose this sense of possibility because in the end, it's all we have."

A sense of possibility. How does this make all the difference to the family of Freddie Gray? To the survivors of the Nepal earthquake? To Bruce Jenner? To those who have long waited for marriage equality?

In the face of such loss and longing, perhaps a sense of possibility is indeed all we have. The possibility that police will be held accountable when they injure or even kill someone


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without cause. The possibility that Nepal will receive the supplies they need, that they will rebuild. The possibility that at age 65 Bruce Jenner will find a degree of peace and integrity of self that he has longed for all his life. And, the possibility that full marriage equality *will* be the law of the land.

Possibilities. Perhaps like part of me, a part of you feels a patronizing sense of cynicism. "Ah, she's so young when she writes that's there's always a sense of possibility." Sometimes, we don't have a choice. We don't have any options. Sometimes we just have to accept the consequences of our choices, of the path we find ourselves upon.

While Marina certainly affirms the importance of possibility for her young classmates in this essay, her other essays and fiction reveal she also has a keen awareness of the reality of loss. Throughout the book, she powerfully expresses the loss of love, of pride, of ideals, and even of life. Yet, as she brings the reader again and again to places of uncomfortable, even painful moments of loss, she also weaves in elements of hope, fragments of possibility. In this way, I hear in her writing a frank honesty about life that does not shy away from mistakes or losses, but also refuses to give up on dignity or possibility.

Loss and possibility are intertwined in her essay "The Opposite of Loneliness." Her essay begins with an attempt to describe the opposite of loneliness. Clearly, she's loved college and the sense of belonging that it's given to her. But she's also aware that she and her peers are about to leave. There is a loss and a leave-taking and Marina admits she is afraid. In response, she first addresses the sense of loss and the idea that leaving college means "the end" of "the best years." Rejecting the idea that the best is over, she insists on new possibilities. With this forward facing attitude established, Marina then addresses her fears of loss by recounting a story.

One snowy night, Marina left her dorm in search of a party. But in a moment of confusion, she ended up instead in an empty lecture hall. She writes,

> "And I sat down. And I looked up. At this giant room I was in. At this place where thousands of people had sat before me. And alone, at night, in the middle of a New Haven storm, I felt so remarkably, unbelievably safe."

Alone, she felt the opposite of loneliness. From her words I hear anew how one can be alone and feel connected. I hear how sometimes our loneliness is abated by an abundance of people we cannot even see.

Having told this story, Marina then concludes her essay with an affirmation that the opposite of loneliness does not need to end with graduation. Calling out to her peers, she


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closes with these words: "We're in this together, 2012. Let's make something happen to this world."

We too are in this together. Thousands of people have sat in these pews to ask together how we might make something happen to this world. We can be a part of the opposite of loneliness. We can seek to be a circle in which we are reminded that we are not alone, but live amidst an abundance of people within and beyond these walls. Yes, there is loss of all kinds in this world. We graduate college. We lose a job. We move away. We get divorced. Those we love die—even our children, even our young adults.

There is so much struggle and uncertainty in our lives and in our larger world. In the face of so much loss and longing, I felt humbled and comforted this week by the words of Marina Keegan who challenged me that I "MUST not lose this sense of possibility because in the end, it's all we have."

So may it be.
Amen


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