

**A REPORT FROM AFGHANISTAN**  
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark  
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

“I’ll give you hope, when hope is hard to find.”  
– *Carolyn McDade*

There is an old tale told for centuries around the winter fires of Afghanistan. When the wind off the high Hindu Kush blows raw, when snow piles in the narrow streets of Kabul, when the river freezes in the Panjshir Valley, when families in Herat huddle close for warmth, someone inevitably tells the story of how Afghanistan came to be.

“Allah had finished creating the world,” the storyteller begins. “Using stars, he had created the heavens, using water he had filled great seas, rivers and streams. Using light he made day, using dark he made night. Using rocks, he formed continents and countries. He looked at it all, and saw that his creation was good. Then, Allah noticed a pile of rocks that were left over: sharp and jagged. Allah took these leftovers and tossed them aside, like refuse, like garbage. These rocks fell to earth. Where they landed became Afghanistan.”

Few places in our world appear more hopeless than that remote, mountainous, Central Asian country that is just slightly smaller than the state of Texas. But once, this landlocked cusp of the Hindu Kush mountain range was a renowned cultural center, the crossroads of the world, the heart of the fabled Silk Road trade route. So influential was Afghanistan, that once, Alexander the Great married an Afghan bride and adopted tribal Afghan dress. Once, Afghanistan was the site of one of the most influential Buddhist kingdoms ever known. Once, Mahmoud the Great, a patron of the arts, filled his court in the city of Ghazni with poets, artists, and architects. Once, world-famous gardens grew in Kabul, and once, from his palace amidst those gardens, Babur the Great laid the foundation for the Mughal Empire that would rule India for more than three hundred years. Once, Afghanistan had influence and prestige.

But recent history has been unkind to the country. In the 1800s and early 1900s, Britain and the Russian Empire used it as a violent chessboard in their strategy for supremacy in Central Asia. Decades later, the U.S. fought a proxy war there against the Soviet Union, funding the Afghan freedom fighters known as the Mujahideen. Between 1978 and 1989, during the almost 12 year Soviet occupation, an estimated 1.3 million Afghans were killed, land mines and bombs maimed another 3 million, and millions more fled as refugees to Pakistan and Iran. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 came a brutal 6½ year civil war that devastated cities and villages and claimed an additional 400,000 lives. Then came the Taliban’s 5 year repressive rule, spawning more refugees fleeing the country, and finally, there have been the last ten years of US military action and Taliban insurgency. Add it all up: several generations—an entire population of a country—lives in a collective state of trauma.

But, as I found out, so many Afghans also live in a collective state of *hope*. I'm not talking about a flimsy hope, a naïve positivity that ignores reality. No. Afghan hope is a courageous, sacred, spiritual hope. As Vaclav Havel once wrote:

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense,  
is not the same as joy that things are going well,  
or willingness to invest in enterprises that are  
obviously heading for . . . success,  
but rather, [this hope is] an ability to work for something because it is good, not  
just because  
it stands a chance to succeed.

Strange as it may seem, I journeyed to Afghanistan because I needed to find hope. After years of preaching about the resiliency of our human spirit (and the promise of peace on this planet), I needed to leave the sheltered suburbia of our congregation and step into another world, a world where survival didn't include SUVs, Starbucks, and Sunday morning soccer practice. I wanted to step into a poverty-stricken third world country to meet a people who had been beaten, battered, and bombed beyond comprehension, and yet who still possessed the "ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed." And so, when you gifted me with a four month sabbatical, I knew exactly where I would go. I signed on as part of a three-person delegation heading to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. Our delegation's charge was three-fold: to learn how women were working at a grass roots level to create change in the country; to look at the present human rights situation; and to assess the current status of U.S./Afghan relations.

Was I scared to go? You bet. I was terrified. I had no idea what to expect, how I would be received, what I would find.

My first few hours in Afghanistan were startling. Arriving at Kabul International Airport was like landing at a military base in lockdown. Afghan soldiers with machine guns stood stony-faced in the midst of coiled barbed wire, stacked sandbags, cement barricades, tanks, and one large cannon. When my guide and translator failed to materialize at the parking lot where I was supposed to meet him—I found myself dragging my suitcase through icy mud and snow around the airport's periphery, hoping to find someone who would answer to the name of Najibullah, my guide's name. As I approached an obvious checkpoint, two Afghan soldiers started frantically gesturing at me. Unable to understand what they were saying, I kept pulling my suitcase forward, hoping to get to the barricade and explain my situation. Their sharp shout of *یرودری* (wadraga!) and two machine guns pointed at my chest stopped me cold. They gestured for me to unzip my parka and hold my hands over my head. One of the soldiers came forward, thrust his hands inside my coat, and began to pat me down. I was being searched to see if I was wired with a suicide bomb. In that moment, Afghanistan became real to me. I had wanted a war zone. Now I had it.

Eventually our guide found me (and the two other Americans making up our delegation: an African American graduate student and a free-lance reporter). We crammed ourselves into our small car, and drove into the snarled traffic of snow-filled Kabul, a city bursting with over four million people. So began our bearing witness to those who are working to rebuild Afghanistan. So began our bearing witness to those who have been striving for the past 10 ½ post-Taliban years to restore, to forward women's rights. So began my journey to find hope: that ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

In so many ways, Afghanistan still lives by old traditional village values. Part of that tribal tradition teaches that women are less valuable than men, that women are property, that women are meant to serve, that women need not be educated, that women should be separated, secluded, hidden away. This male-dominated culture was obvious in those first hours in Kabul. Throngs of men and boys crowded together on the sidewalks, men and boys gathered at the market places, men and boys filled the cars and buses, men and boys sat talking at tables in kebob houses and pizza shops. There were some women and girls moving about. There were some war widows begging in the street. But they were outnumbered to a staggering degree. We had entered a man's world, unlike anything I had ever seen before.

But there are many who are working to slowly transform this male-centered world.

The courage to create a new society is epitomized by educator, activist and social organizer Fatima Aqbary who, during the Taliban time, was beaten and jailed because of her refusal to stop educating girls. A widow, whose husband was killed by the Taliban, Aqbary now runs a neighborhood school, heads a business association for women, and also trains war widows and developmentally challenged adults in woodworking so they will be able to support themselves and their families. Her small school is situated in a very poor section of Kabul, down a tight, snow-choked street. We jump over icy puddles and slip on rotting garbage on the way to her small compound. For some of her students, her classroom is an after school program where girls and boys (together) come to strengthen their reading and writing skills, practice math, and study the Qur'an. For others, especially some girls whose fathers will not permit them to attend a public school, this is the only access to education they have. The afternoon we visit is cold, with temperatures just below freezing. In the unheated classroom, kids keep on their coats and hats; there is no central heating in Kabul. When one young girl stands to read to us from the Qur'an, we can see her fingers shaking from the cold. And yet, these beautiful children are engaged, enthusiastic, filled with life. As is Fatima herself. Her voice is passionate as she tells of teaching adult women, of organizing women to run businesses, of watching women—tentative and unsure at first—emerge into their innate ability to be independent, savvy, strategic, and collaborative. "We have come so far," she tells us. "Ten years ago, women and girls were beaten in the streets if we accidentally let our hands be glimpsed outside our burqa. Now, we can use those same hands to learn and practice a trade. Ten years ago, it was illegal to educate girls. Now, by edict of our new constitution, it is illegal *not* to. Ten years ago, a woman wanting to run a business did so underground, dealing in the black market. Now, we have citywide associations that

promote women-run businesses. Ten years ago I was jailed for dreaming of a better tomorrow. Today my sisters and I are openly shaping our future.”

But that future has few guarantees. With the Taliban’s reemergence in Afghanistan (including increasing incursions into Kabul), and with the imminent withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2014, Fatima Aqbary has no illusions about what the future might hold for the children and women she mentors. She knows nothing is certain. Fatima—and the women of Afghanistan—live within the tension of knowing that despite all their work, all their progress, the past could quite literally come back to haunt them.

Jamila Afghani lives within this tension every day. This young activist grew up in a conservative family of rich businessmen who held to traditional cultural values. They saw no reason for any girl to be educated, least of all one that, like Jamila, was disabled and reliant on crutches to move about. Sitting on brightly colored cushions on the floor in the small apartment she shares with her husband and three little children, Jamila pours us hot green tea while saying: “I suffered a lot from the strictures of my family. My father and my brothers tried to prevent me from getting an education. I wasn’t even permitted to see a doctor for healthcare or treatment of my disability. To them, I was invisible and expendable.” Unwilling to be hidden from the world, and inviting the wrath of the male members of her family, Jamila found ways to get an education. “My sisters-in-law would cover for me, telling my brothers that I was in my bedroom sleeping, or that I was quite ill from my disability and couldn’t come out of my room, while, in actuality, I had snuck out of the house to go to class.” She continues: “Their courage in secretly defying their husbands helped me to get the learning I now use to empower other women.” With her Master’s degree in International Relations and Islamic Law, Jamila heads an educational and capacity development organization that teaches business management, finance, and database design to women.

But it is her use of religion that is most revolutionary. Many of those who espouse traditional values regarding the status of women use Islam as the basis for their actions and attitudes. “As a Muslim woman,” says Jamila, “my faith gives rhythm to my day and meaning to my life. In all things, I try to follow the teachings of the Qur’an, and live in alignment with the Islamic vision of society. At first, I couldn’t understand why my religion would so denigrate women. I sought a Qur’anic education so I could see for myself. As I studied the Qur’an, I discovered that it does not sanction second-class treatment of women. It doesn’t advocate child brides, the beating of a woman, the giving away of girls as barter, the throwing of acid into wives’ faces. It doesn’t forbid education. I saw clearly that, in regards to women and girls, the traditional culture of Afghanistan is contrary to the Qur’an, contrary to the will of Allah.”

Emboldened by this truth, Jamila began meeting with Imams (religious teachers in the mosques) to show them that the Qur’an supports gender equality. “At first,” she says with a knowing smile, “most Imams were unwilling to even meet with a woman to discuss religious matters, let alone take instruction from one. I was teaching in one small village in the north, and the Imam there told all the parents that I was the devil, and they should not send their children to me. After repeated requests, this Imam finally agreed to

meet with me. As I quoted passages from the Qur'an supporting respect and gender equality, I saw him begin to soften. Regaining his composure, he said in a huff: "I know all that already. I was just testing *you* to see if *you* knew the Qur'an." That day, he gave permission for the girls to come to my classroom." Jamila and her teaching team have now trained 150 Afghan Imams in a more egalitarian understanding of Islam. Those Imams are back in their mosques teaching that women must be treated as equals. Says Jamila: "My hope for Afghanistan comes from seeing religious leaders change. Islam is everything to us, and where our religion goes, our hearts will follow. Where our religion goes, our country will follow."

Her hope comes with great risk. Jamila has been threatened repeatedly, and attacked several times. She knows there are those who want her dead. She leaves her apartment only when necessary, and no longer feels safe sending her young son, Salahuddin, to school. "This is the tension we all live with," she says, "the push outward to do what is good, and the pull back to protect those we love."

Protection is on everyone's mind in Afghanistan. 'Security' is the one word we heard over and over again. 'Security is dependent on the presence of U.S. troops' is the one statement we heard over and over again. I went to Afghanistan expecting to hear complaints about the U.S. occupation, complaints about civilian deaths caused by the U.S. offensive against the Taliban. But what we heard—over and over and over—was instead a plea. Few we met in Afghanistan believe the Afghan Army and Police Force are in a position to ensure the security of the country. More time is desperately needed to train and strengthen them. Until the Army and Police can stand on their own—people told us—the country needs the U.S. presence. People begged us to come back home with one message: "Please keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan to help us secure the country from the re-emerging Taliban." We heard this from everyone we met: from human rights advocates, teachers, principals of elementary schools, Members of Parliament, women business owners, female radio producers, peace activists, hospital administrators, and ordinary people in the streets.

Silver-haired, sparkling-eyed Soraya Perlaka, one of the country's leading human rights activists, and president of the AAWU, the All Afghan Women's Union, articulates this plea clearly. She was part of the leadership group that worked out the power sharing arrangements after the fall of the Taliban, and was one of the writers of Afghanistan's new constitution. She tells us: "The last 10 ½ years have brought enormous strides in rebuilding our country. It is a very different country than it was in the time of the Taliban. In the last 10 ½ years, the city of Kabul went from being a bombed out wasteland with no electricity or running water to a city that burns bright at night with power in 90% of the homes. Afghanistan went from being a place where women could be beaten if they left their homes to being a country where the new Constitution guarantees that 27% of the Members of Parliament must be female. But much still remains to be done in securing women's rights country wide, much remains to be done to educate women and men about the gender equality that is now guaranteed in our Constitution, and much remains to be done to keep Pakistan from destabilizing us and the region. But significant progress has been made in so many areas. All this progress will

be lost if the U.S. and the International community withdraw their troops. In the vacuum created by the pullout, the Taliban—armed and funded by Pakistan—will once again overrun the country. Even worse, the situation will dissolve into a civil war that will leave Afghanistan decimated. Afghanistan would again become a safe haven for terrorists, and the world would have to do something about it.” She pauses, then adds: “It is no exaggeration to say that the security of Afghanistan is the security of the region; the security of Afghanistan is the security of the world.”

I flew to Afghanistan a committed dove, a pacifist who was against military action in almost any instance. I returned from Afghanistan a surprised hawk, reluctant but convinced that we must not abandon her people, whatever the cost. I flew to Afghanistan uncertain and scared. I returned believing in hope, believing in our “ability to work for something because it is good.”

I think back to that old, old story. The story where Allah created the world, and then realized he had some rocks leftover. He picked up those rocks and tossed them aside. Those rocks fell to earth, and Afghanistan was created. The women, children and men I came to know in Afghanistan have a deep hope that we will not toss them aside. If we do, unlike in the story, Afghanistan will be destroyed.

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