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Arlington Street Church
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Pick Your Team

“Every day presents infinite reasons to believe that change can’t happen, infinite reasons to give up. But I always tell myself, ‘Sonya, you have to pick your team.’” Leadership coach Sonya Tinsley-Hook is speaking with author Paul Rogat Loeb. She continues, “It seems to me that there are two teams in this world, and that you can find evidence to support the arguments of both. The trademark of one team is cynicism. [The trademark of the other team is optimism.]

“[The first team will] tell you why what you’re doing doesn’t matter, why nothing is going to change, why no matter how hard you work you’re going to fail. They seem to get satisfaction out of explaining how.... [y]ou can’t change human nature..... It’s foolish to try, [they say]. From their experience, they might be right.

“[The second team will] admit that they don’t know how things will turn out, but [they’ve] decided to work for change. I see [Dr.] King on that team, Alice Walker, Howard Zinn. I see my chaplain from college and my activist friends. They’re always telling stories of ... ways things could be different, of how their lives have changed... of faith being rewarded.... They’ll give you reasons why you shouldn’t give up, testimonials why we’ve yet to see our full potential as a species. They believe we’re partners in ... creation, and that change is really possible.

“There are times,” Sonya Tinsley concludes, “when both teams seem right. Both have evidence. [But w]e’ll never know who’s really going to prevail.... [We] just have to decide which team seems happier, which side [we’d] rather be on. And for me, that means choosing ... the side of faith. Because on the side of cynicism, even if they’re right, who wants to win that argument, anyway? If [we’re] going to stick with somebody, [wouldn’t we] rather stick with people who have a sense of possibility and hope? I just

know that's the [team] I want to be on.”¹

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When I first heard the Alcoholics Anonymous directive to “stick with the winners,” I thought, Not my theology. Unitarian Universalism affirms the inherent worth and dignity of everyone; there aren't any losers, and if there are people who are on the losing end of life, our faith calls us to stick with them, and help take the edge off. But it turns out the AA slogan is saying the same thing. Stick with the winners means choosing our team, surrounding ourselves with Sonya Tinsley-Hook's optimists, so we're in good shape – especially, good shape to help. It's not that winners are always successful, but they have successful attitudes.

Therese J. Borchard, author of Beliefnet's “Beyond Blue” blog, writes, “‘Stick with the winners’ is a piece of advice I've had to adhere to religiously in my recovery from depression, because I can't afford to get sucked into negative thinking. It can be fatal for me....

“... One night,” she continues, “I called my mom from the hospital because, while most of the group therapy sessions were beneficial, there were those that scared ... me.... [Was I] headed ... the same [way] as Fred, the 65-year-old who had ... been in therapy for ten years, ... been on every medication manufactured by Lilly and Bayer, ... been hospitalized for a year (this time)....[?]”

“‘Maybe there is no treatment that will work for me, [Mom]. Maybe I'll never be able to function again.... Maybe living a normal, productive life is out of reach for me.’”

“[And she said,] ‘Stick with the winners....’

“... [So] I tried to find [other patients who were fighting for their mental health, fighting for their lives, who] wouldn't succumb to ... ‘I'm never going to get well’ ... [or other] language that could hurt their recovery.... [I picked people] who cried with me, but also tried their hardest to laugh [as if their lives depended on it, because they did], and [to] see the lesson in all of this.

“Even after I was discharged,” she concludes, “I continued to be

¹ Paul Rogat Loeb, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, pp. 406-407. Thanks to Joanna Lubkin for a great gift!

extremely picky in my friendships.... I don't have the luxury of being able to fool around with a poisonous crowd. Negative energy is, quite literally, toxic.... [b]ecause my depression is waiting for the chance to ensnare me with darkness, and take me to that lonely and harrowing place where I no longer want to [live]....

“I'm trying to do what my mom said and ‘stick with the winners.’”²

Pick your team.

Now for the tricky part: How do we know who the winners are? It's not always obvious! Do you know about the *tzadikim*? According to the Talmud,³ at any given moment, there are thirty-six righteous people, living among us, anonymously, as ordinary people, who alone, by their righteousness, are saving the world from destruction. In other words, sometimes the winners are hidden. To pick our team, we need to pay very close attention – to look, and listen, with the eyes and ears of the heart. We need to pay attention, and prepare to be surprised.

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At a conference on idealism,⁴ a young woman stood up and spoke what was on so many people's minds. “I want to do something, but what can I do? I'm just one person, an [ordinary] person. [How can I] have an impact? I live with the despair of my own powerlessness.... I feel so paralyzed.” Professor Danusha Veronica Goska was there; she says, “I practically exploded.... Years before.... I had moved to Bloomington for grad school. I knew no one in town.... [and suddenly, I was] stricken with a debilitating illness ... [whose symptoms] are like those of multiple sclerosis....

“I [went] to a food bank every two weeks to get my food,” Dr. Goska said. “I [had] no car. I [couldn't] carry two weeks' worth of food the three miles back to my house.... [So] I [got] a ride home from other food bank patrons. These folks [didn't] pause for a second to sigh, ‘Oh, problems are so big; ... will it really help anything if I give you [a] ride?’ They [didn't] look around to make sure someone [was] watching. They just ... [did] the right thing. I [got] rides in old, old cars. In one, ... I could see the road beneath whiz past under broken-down flooring.... [And] I once got a ride

² Therese J. Borchard at beliefnet.com/columnists/beyondblue/2007/11/stick-with-the-winners.html#ixzz3S1JcN2t6

³ Succah, 45b

⁴ *Spirituality and Ecology: No Separation*, a conference in Bloomington, Indiana in September of 1998

from a man who told me he'd just gotten out of jail....

“[These were people who had] next to nothing, but who stunned me with their insistence on the abundance of their own humanity.... Invisible, silent people who, day by day, choice by choice, [largely] unseen by me, unknown to me, ... [invited] me to keep making my own best choices, [and to this day,] keep me living my ideals.”⁵

Pick your team.

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How do we earn our place on that team? One last story:

Zen cook Ed Espe Brown has a friend we'll call Bill, who had been in recovery from alcoholism for many, many years. One afternoon shortly after Bill's beloved wife died, he bought a Greyhound bus ticket in San Rafael, California, with what seemed like a good plan to drown his sorrows by returning to the bars in Reno where he used to drink himself into oblivion.

The windows of the bus were streaked with dust; the floor was dirty. Bill settled in for a long ride. At one of the first stops, through the fog of his grief and despair, Bill noticed beautiful young woman get on the bus and make her way down the aisle.

He looked up, surprised, as she swung into the empty seat next to him.

“Hi, Bill,” she began. “You don't know me, but you were the speaker at the very first AA meeting I ever went to. I don't believe I get to sit next to you! You saved my life.”⁶

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Beloved spiritual companions,

“Every day presents infinite reasons to believe that change can't happen, infinite reasons to give up.”

Cynicism or optimism? We'll never know what's going to prevail. But who wants to win that argument on the side of nothing ever changing, of injustice and failure?

⁵ Loeb, pp. 60-67

⁶ Thanks to Kem Morehead for this story!

We can choose the side of hope and possibility.
Pay very close attention and prepare to be surprised.
There are countless ordinary people who,
in everyday gestures of kindness,
are saving the world from destruction.

Pick your team.

And let's earn our place on that team.
As we save our own lives, we may well save the lives of others,
and they, in turn, may save ours.
Years later, someone just might
sit down next to us on a bus,
and remind us.

Pick your team.

I'm telling you right now: *I pick you.*