Materials from a service
at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation
of South County, RI
October 11, 2026

Opening words

by Václav Havel
(Czech playwright, poet, dissident, human rights advocate, and statesman.)

> I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure that everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is the feeling that life and work have a meaning. You either have it or you don't, regardless of the state of the world that surrounds you.

Reading

Excerpts from an essay by Oleksandra Matviichuk (Ukrainian human rights lawyer and 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureate) published in February 2026:

This is the fourth winter since the full-scale invasion began. And it is proving to be very difficult. Russian missiles and drones are deliberately destroying the energy infrastructure on which civilians depend for survival. In January and February, temperatures drop to -25 °C. Ukrainian cities are literally freezing. Millions of people have limited or no access to heating, water, and electricity.

I remember in 2022, when the Russians first began striking the energy infrastructure, a photograph appeared online of a Kyiv schoolteacher. Wearing a red winter jacket and a warm hat, she was standing on tiptoe beside a metal pole on which she had placed her laptop – right outside, somewhere near a shop where a power generator was running and there was internet access. There, in the freezing cold, she was giving her students a lecture.

And I thought: the Russians came to take everything from us – our land, our freedom, our future, our children's education. But this Kyiv schoolteacher refused to give them anything. Even something as simple as teaching a lesson had become an act of resistance….

Ukraine has found itself at the epicentre of events that will shape the world's future. This is not simply a war between two states – it is a war between two systems: authoritarianism and democracy.

Vladimir Putin is seeking to prove that a country with a powerful military capacity and nuclear weapons can distrupt the international order, dictate its rules to the global community, and even alter internationally recognised borders by force.

The Russian leader did not launch the full-scale invasion merely to capture more Ukrainian land. It is naïve to think Russia has lost hundreds of

thousands of soldiers just to occupy Avdiivka or Bakhmut. Putin launched this invasion to occupy and destroy Ukraine in its entirety – and then move further….

Talk

John Andrews

(President, Jamestown Ukraine Relief Project)

As I begin, let me say thank you to Adria and to all of you for your kind invitation to speak with you today about the Jamestown Ukraine Relief Project – or JURP - and our sister affiliate, the Ukraine Relief Project-Aquidneck.

I want to tell you just a little about how and why we came together in this effort, and to share some important learning we have found along the way.

“Finding Agency in Collective Action” is a clunky title. Since you’ve now heard about Hope from Vaclav Havel and Lesya Matviichuk, I can give you my simpler title:

“Rediscovering Hope Together”

Hold that thought.

On a good day, If you’re like me, the news feed is like tinnitus – a housefly that annoys me when I want to be quiet, but ignorable when I keep myself preoccupied with busywork and distractions.

On other days, it’s more insistent and intrusive, looping stale, familiar themes like an earworm. Think “Baby Shark” or the Barney song. On such days, getting past it requires a blast of stronger, really disruptive music – try, say, humming Stravinsky. (It works for me.)

But then there are full horror days, when the news delivers a full, gasping nightmare.

February 24th, 2022, was one of those.

That was the day Vladimir Putin dropped the mask in his long-running war with Ukraine. No more semi-covert influence campaigns, no more Crimea phony election takeovers, no more proxy insurgencies in Donbas. After 8 years of pretense, the gloves came off and the world awoke to the largest military assault in Europe since World War II.

Remember the news of that day: A nuclear superpower had sent the second largest military in the world to seize and conquer a far smaller neighbor – a neighbor that had no navy ships, only 40 operational airplanes in its air force, and no established security alliances. The Russian generals brought their dress uniforms for the victory parade in Kyiv. The odds were lopsided and bleak. Putin had decided to fold Ukraine into Russia, the easy way or the hard way, and was daring the world to stop him.

Some of us may remember Russian tanks crushing the Prague Spring in 1968 – this looked far worse. Ukraine had been a nonaligned, sovereign country for more than 30 years, an entire generation growing up in free, in a young democracy with growing pains but an inspiring back story from its 2014 Revolution of Dignity on Kyiv's Maidan Square.

Now, with Putin's vast army on the march – what horrors might be in store for Ukraine and for our world? Could the invasion be countered in some way, short of World War III? Or were we all now at the mercy of this boldest of bullies?

I remember feeling shocked, enraged, fearful, deeply saddened, horribly depressed, and - above all - helpless in the face of such swaggering, leering evil. Ukraine was obviously done for, and we shuddered at the expectation of the brutal repression to follow. But what would or could ordinary Americans do here, thousands of miles away? We would express horror and outrage – sure. Send some emergency dollars for refugees, along with thoughts and prayers – ok. And then we would turn gradually away, toward some other rubbernecking opportunity.

Some of us in my home church and in the Jamestown community wanted to – had to – talk more about all this. It felt too big to digest, too confronting to shrug off. We offered a couple of open conversations – not to solve anything, but to share thoughts and feelings, to learn more from each other and from available sources, and to consider any action opportunities at all. At that point, available options seemed limited to funding emergency aid to address one of the largest refugee crises of this century - and yes, maybe we could raise a bit of money for that.

Yet even as we were talking, Ukrainians were writing a very different narrative. President Zelenskyy came on camera out in the open at the center of besieged Kyiv to say “I am here. We are here. And I need ammunition, not a ride [out of the country].” Against widespread media tropes and expectations, here was a leader in real time choosing to save his country rather than his skin. News media are deeply skeptical of heroic tropes, but this story broke through – was this a futile heroic gesture, or could David actually imagine beating Goliath?

For me there were some special, more personal resonances. Growing up in Concord, MA, I would bike to school past the Old North Bridge, where American farmers stepped forward – at first reluctantly, then decisively – to face and then rout soldiers of the most formidable military force in the world at that time, in the first victory of our American Revolution. This began to feel like that – Ukrainians reminding us Americans how to step forward together, rather than turning aside and slipping away.

More stunning stories of resistance – individual and collective – kept pouring in. The Kyiv housewife who noticed a Russian drone hovering outside her window and brought it down with a well-aimed jar of pickled tomatoes. Seniors confronting Russian soldiers on the street and boldly telling them to go home. Crowd-funded Ukrainian military units forming hastily and pushing the invaders away from Kyiv - in the process uncovering scenes of unspeakably savage cruelty and mass slaughter in places like Bucha and Irpin. And a country with no major navy ships

methodically sinking Russia's mighty Black Sea fleet, one by one, beginning with its proud flagship, the Moskva.

Creativity and courage in the military resistance was only a part of the picture. A wider lens captures other faces, other hands in action – first responders risking double-tap drone attacks night after night to douse fires and transport the wounded. That teacher crouched in the snow outside a charging station giving her class a Zoom lecture on her laptop. And millions of ordinary Ukrainians commuting to ordinary jobs after yet another night sheltering in the subway station or parking garage, under air raid alert. Living ordinary lives **in** and **as** resistance to evil – Ukrainians are reminding us every day that these choices are possible for us too, and that here too, in these choices, meaning can be found.

We at JURP began to set our sights on longer-range goals and a future beyond the fighting. We sent thousands of solar lanterns that first winter to light ordinary households through the blackouts, timing our deliveries to share in celebrations of Chanukah and Christmas.

And then we discovered another striking detail that poses a lesson for all of us. It turns out that Ukraine actively **dis**courages boys from enlisting in the Armed Forces. The minimum age for conscription is 25. That is because Ukraine's leaders understand that the nation's children and youth are its future – its hope, where its deepest meaning is to be found. For this reason, our efforts at JURP are now focused mainly on supporting services for children – trauma recovery and prevention, living essentials, medical care, and education for kids unable to attend school (because Russian attacks have destroyed or damaged roughly one third of Ukraine's 13,000 schools.)

Yet every bit as valuable as the funds raised, the goods sent, and the events held, is the ability to connect in some way with these our neighbors in Ukraine, where every gesture of our support reassures them that they are not alone, not forgotten, that their lives have meaning that we see and share.

Oleksandra Matviichuk describes her work documenting over 100,000 Russian war crimes this way:

> *While this war turns people into mere numbers, we give them back their names. Because people are not numbers. And every single life matters.*

When we learn this from and with each other, we begin to realize as well that our actions, our choices, are no longer to be measured by volumes – dollars raised, relief tonnage shipped – but by each single action we take, in love and hope, that honors the dignity and worth of a fellow traveler on this planet.

Winter in Ukraine will be especially brutal this year – cold and dark, with more missile attacks, more pain and more death. Ukrainians are at the bleeding edge in a global struggle against tyranny and oppression. Americans can be reminded that we have been in that struggle too. And so we can hear our own voices in Matviichuk's words:

> *Hope is not assuming that everything will be all right. Hope is a deeply held belief that all our efforts have meaning.*
>
> *And while our future is uncertain, it is not predetermined by anyone. That means one simple thing: we have the chance to shape, by way of our own efforts, the future we want for ourselves and our children.*

Thank you.

Closing words

by Oleksandra Matviichuk

We sow. We sow seeds. We even sow in winter, when everything is frozen. We sow things that are not afraid of the cold. We sow as an act of faith, knowing that spring will inevitably come and everything we have planted will grow. Yes, it's a long work. But it is those who plan for the long term who are the ones who win.