

I have witnessed a lot of suffering, especially during the Vietnam war. At that time, I was helping to build a village for refugees in the demilitarized zone when it was bombed by the Americans because Vietcong were hiding there. So we rebuilt it. Then it was bombed again. So we rebuilt it again. Once again it was demolished. The third time we discussed if we should rebuild it again. It was my belief that if we gave up, people would lose all hope. So we rebuilt the houses again a third time, then a fourth time and a fifth time.

If you run away from suffering, you cannot find happiness. On the contrary, we should face our suffering and try to identify its roots. Only then can we gain understanding and cultivate compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh

When despair prevails we cannot create life-sustaining communities of resistance. Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power ...

bell hooks

For as long as space endures
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I too abide
To dispel the misery of the world.

Shantideva

Hope Beyond All Hope

2/25/24

By Guy Newland w/inspiration from MLK's "Shattered Dreams"
other sources

"Under utterly hopeless circumstances Abraham hopefully believed that he would become the forefather of many nations ..."

Paul's Letter to the Romans 4:18

“When I take my journey into Spain, I will come unto you.” Paul’s Letter to the Romans 15:24.

Those who jump from the Golden Gate Bridge die 98% of the time; until the recent installation of steel mesh barriers, the fall was reliably more fatal than guns, hanging, and other means of self-harm. Jump survivors were asked what they thought the moment after they jumped, when there was no turning back. Almost all of them regretted it. One moment they were all for jumping; the next they wished they hadn’t.

When Ken Baldwin let go of the railing he immediately thought, “What am I doing? This was the worst thing I could do in my life.” He instantly thought of his wife and daughter and he didn’t want to die. As he was falling (for four seconds) he realized: everything he thought was unfixable was totally fixable — except for having just jumped.

Later research found that of 515 persons who intended to jump from the bridge and were stopped, only 7% went on to die by suicide at any later time. (If you are thinking of harming yourself, dial 988!). You can hold on for longer than you think. Even when the hurt is unbearable, it’s *not over*. When you really have no hope, there is still hope. There is hope beyond hope.

Hope As Optimism

Usually we understand hope to be an optimistic state of mind based on a (more or less confident) expectation of positive outcomes in your life or in the world.

Research shows that this kind of positive thinking can really help—in healing, for example—when based in realism, not on naive “false hope.” Creating focus on attainable goals allows the brain to create new, stronger bonds between neurons that help increase the likelihood that we will find ways to realize our intentions.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl reports that concentration camp prisoners were more likely to survive when they had some hope for the future; once a prisoner lost all hope, they were doomed. Among Frankl’s fellow inmates, those who survived were able to connect with a purpose, and then immersed themselves in imagining that purpose—perhaps conversing with an (imagined) loved one. For Frankl himself, his main hope was to be reunited with his wife—who unbeknownst to him, in fact died in the Holocaust.

At the social level, we associate optimistic hope with progressive liberalism. The arc of history is long but bends towards justice: so said Obama, quoting MLK, who with that famous phrase summarized a sermon by 19th cent Unitarian abolitionist Theodore Parker. Does the long arc of history bend toward justice or doesn’t it? Former Attorney General Eric Holder and other progressives point out: it does, but *only if we work together to make it so*.

I believe there is a case to be made—in many ways things have improved. Vaccinations, antibiotics, liberation movements transforming, for example, the lives of women in many parts of the world—considering these things, would you *really* prefer to live in an earlier age? While we hear the bad news—especially about climate change—and while many suffer terribly from war and civil chaos, both the number and the proportion of the world’s population living in extreme poverty has declined dramatically over the last forty years. On the other hand, some argue that much modern *extreme* poverty is the product of capitalism and the legacy of colonialism. They argue that members of hunter-gather societies of the past could usually find abundant resources without the intensive labor that both agrarian and industrial societies have required. The huge burden of this labor has often enriched only the 1 percent.

Whether things are getting better or not, James Luther Adams (20th century theologian) argues that HOPE is one of the “five smooth stones” essential to liberal theology: “The resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change *justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.*” He means that while things may get better or worse in the short term, over the long term we have what we need to work together with confidence that *there will be a better future.* Karl Marx agrees. And, for different reasons, so does Bill Gates.

And maybe there will be. It could happen. May it be so.

What Really Matters

But final outcomes are not under our control; they are ultimately unknowable.

What really matters is what we can control: our own choices.

A story from an ancient Daoist text has become a standard among life coaches today. The *Huainanzi* (18.7) recounts that a farmer and his son had a beloved horse who helped the family earn a living. One day, the horse ran away and their neighbors exclaimed, “Your horse ran away, what terrible luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe.”

A few days later, the horse returned home, leading a few wild horses back to the farm as well. The neighbors shouted out, “Your horse has returned, and brought several horses home with him. What great luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe.”

Later that week, the farmer’s son was trying to break one of the horses and she threw him to the ground, breaking his leg. The neighbors cried, “Your son broke his leg, what terrible luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe.”

A few weeks later, soldiers from the national army marched through town, recruiting all boys for the army. They did not take the farmer’s son, because he had a broken leg. The neighbors shouted, “Your boy is spared, what tremendous luck!” To which the farmer replied, “Maybe.”

Life coaches today use this yarn to help people imprisoned by own discouraging mental stories; it creates some space between our reactive judgments and the possible realities. Can any event in and of itself can truly be judged all good or all bad? Maybe. Time will tell. But the Daoist farmer didn't cultivate detachment as a life enhancement technique. He didn't keep an open mind so as to improve productivity or wellness. He simply doesn't divide Life into good events and bad events, like piles of laundry. For the farmer, "maybe" expresses his realization: that apparently good and bad outcomes entail one another, imply one another, and are judged good/bad only from one point of view.

So I say: Don't base your life on outcomes, hoped-for results. My grandmother worked hard to help the poor women of El Salvador but, despite her very best efforts, the situation kept getting worse and worse. Her hopeful heart led her into a profound discouragement, even depression and despair. She might have benefitted from the Hindu wisdom of karma yoga: do the right thing not as a means to an end, but simply as an offering to God. Whether we believe in God or not, this is the way to live.

Unlike Obama and MLK, the Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker admitted in his "arc of history" sermon that he really *did not know* which way it was bending. Whether things will work out as intended or go very horribly awry,

whether you are praised, blamed or utterly ignored—all these are matters far beyond your control.

Just do the right thing. That is all we can do. And it's huge. This is our one great power in the world.

Hope as Courageous Commitment

Emily Dickinson famously writes, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune *without the words* and *never stops at all*.” Folks blithely reference the “thing with feathers” bit and miss her point: Singing *without words*, hope—like music—bypasses rational comprehension to inhabit our hearts. And: it never stops. It never stops *at all*. In this spirit, psychologist Charles Snyder’s “hope scale” uses twelve questions to evaluate hope in terms our ability do we have to maintain drive in the pursuit of a particular goal.

But what if there is little or *no* basis for optimism, but we remain committed? This may seem crazy, but it is not naïve. Norse mythology mocks optimistic hope, imagining it as drool from the mouth of a threatening wolf, and instead celebrates cheerful bravery in a battle against all odds. Along these lines, for about 1500 years East Asian Buddhist practitioners have been taking a great vow: “Suffering beings are numberless, I vow to free them all.” Whether, or how, it might be possible to save an infinite number of beings from suffering is irrelevant. Because we are infinitely committed. We are saving them *right now* in our hearts with an endless,

indefatigable, indomitable, utterly unrelenting determination to lovingly care for them all.

Isn't this the hope of Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, the last word in unrealistic hope? The Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community: these are all utopian dreams. The invented word "utopia" encodes a pun on the Greek "eutopos" (= good place) and "outopos" (no place.) Dreaming the impossible dream, marching to the promised land, never stopping on the freedom highway: it's foolish and futile only when driven by mere optimism anticipating better times. No one knows the future. There may be better things coming our way; but when optimistic hopes are broken by vicious injustice in the world (or thwarted by some meanness within our own hearts), we simply *refuse to be deterred*.

Mahatma Gandhi, after long years of struggle for independence, dreamed of a united India, only to see that dream end in a bloody religious war between the Hindus and the Muslims. Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane that the cup might pass, but it did not. The enslaved of America longed for freedom, but countless died in chains, even their names forgotten.

Paul's letter to the Romans describes how Abraham in hopeless circumstance, with an elderly wife, still believed God's promise that he would have many descendants. Mistranslations of this passage give us the strange expression, "to hope against hope." Later in the same letter Paul shares his own fervent hope

that he will evangelize in Spain, visiting the Christians in Rome along the way west. But unlike the miraculous fulfillment of Abraham's hopeless hoping, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, taken to Rome and executed. He never got to Spain. MLK says "The story of Paul's life was the tragic story of a shattered dream and a blasted hope."

And yet: "I have learned," Paul said, "in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." How can one understand his tranquility when pain throbs, the prison cell surrounds him? Paul did not mean that he had learned to be complacent. In the depth of his conviction, he found a peace beyond all understanding. This is Dickinson's "song without words."

Conclusion

Martin Luther King preaches,

Ultimately, we *all* die not having received what was promised. We must determine how to live in a world where our highest hopes are *not* fulfilled.

The answer lies in developing the capacity to accept the finite disappointment and yet cling to the infinite hope.

He counsels us in courageous determination, moving on non-violently through obstacles and crushing disappointments. Just keep on keepin' on (as Curtis Mayfield sang). And then keep on some more.

The infinite hope King invokes is not a hope that knows a particular time in the future when people *will* be judged only by the content of their character. Rather it is deep confidence in what is always with us. He called it God. We can call it that or our Great Vow, or the spirit of life, or the hope of human love. It's always with us, always among us, even when we are *most* bereft. Hope is the courage to love when all hope is gone. Don't give up. Do the work of love anyway. No matter what.