

From Despair to Hope

Rev. Mark Hayes

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In an article called “The Age of Despair – and Hope,” Robert A. Meyer writes:

Every day we are swamped with bad news. The deluge of unwanted news arrives in the form of bank failures, old established financial firms biting the dust, stock markets plunging, precipitous drops in consumer spending, unemployment soaring, etc. etc. etc. And to make matters worse some of the news hits home – affecting our personal and financial well-being. Is it any wonder that despair is no longer just creeping in – but blindsiding us. What are we to do?

Indeed. What are we to do? How can we keep despair at bay and keep hope alive? That is the question I’d like to address with you this morning. For even when the world *doesn’t* seem to be crashing down around us all, each of us has times when our own personal world crashes. When despair seems the only possible response. The challenge only becomes greater when the whole world is going to hell in a handbasket.

It seems to me that at the heart of despair – of hopelessness – is a sense that our options are reduced to few or even nonexistent. There seems to be no way forward or upward out of the depths. There is an apparent shrinking of possibilities. Hope, on the other hand, is the ability to see that there are still possibilities. There is still a way ahead.

External circumstances may give us reason to hope, and that makes it fairly easy. But let me make two points about that. First, I think we probably all have encountered folks who, no matter how good things are, seem able always to find the cloud behind the silver lining. And second, there may be little in our external circumstances suggesting hopefulness. Hope, ultimately, depends on our own personal response to circumstances, and our ability to keep alive the possibility of better times to come.

Hope, my friends, is not an easy fix. It’s not just a matter of ignoring difficulties and pretending that everything is okay. I’ve talked quite a bit lately about integrity. Well, denial is not a good foundation for a life of integrity. Maintaining hope is hard work. Hard, but necessary work, for how can we even live without hope? To hang onto hope is to identify and hang onto possibilities that are still there, and to work toward their realization. And if there seem to be no more possibilities, to create some of our own.

What I’d like to do this morning is share with you some stories of people who have found a way to keep hope alive. While their specific examples may not apply to you or your circumstances, I hope they will inspire and encourage you to consider where you might look for hope. What you might do to find hope in the midst of despair.

Robert Meyer, whom I quoted earlier, asserts that the way to capture hope is to “use the life-giving force known as positive action.” He agrees with me that hope is not a passive gift of the universe, but something we must actively foster. He mentions the temptation of drowning despair in drugs, alcohol, mindless entertainment and fun, but points out that “anything repressed always arises and rears its ugly head – causing you more misery.”

His particular plan of action for keeping the flame of hope burning: Adopt a daily practice of meditation, exercise on a daily basis, and indulge in continuous learning. He points

out that “The world is changing at a rapid rate,” and that “If you aren’t utilizing change for your benefit, change can become an enemy.” He insists that “You currently possess the seeds of happiness and success [of hope]. They may be hidden, but if you search for them, you will find them.”

Another example of someone finding the way from despair to hope played out in the news over the past several years. Cindy Sheehan’s world came crashing down on her when her son Casey was killed in action in Iraq in 2004. She found herself in a deep pit of hopeless despair, and even contemplated suicide. She relates that she found her reason for living in a poem her daughter wrote, called “A Nation Rocked to Sleep,” of which I’ll share the first and last stanzas:

Have you ever heard the sounds of a mother screaming for her son?
The torrential weeping of a mother will never be done.
They call him a hero, you should be glad he’s one,
But have you ever heard the sound of a mother weeping for her son? . . .

Have you ever heard the sound of a nation being rocked to sleep?
The leaders want to keep you numb so the pain won’t be so deep.
But if we the people let them continue, another mother will weep.
Have you ever hear the sounds of a nation being rocked to sleep?

Hearing those lines from her daughter, Cindy Sheehan knew that her life’s work would be to try and bring the troops home before another mother would have to weep. Even if she couldn’t make a difference, she knew she had to at least try. And she found that her antiwar activism, “with its wonderful feelings of love, acceptance, peace, community, joy, and . . . optimism for our future” gave her back her desire to live. She succeeded in making that journey from despair to hope.

Some of the most moving stories of hope triumphing over despair come out of the experiences of survivors of the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Viktor Frankl’s classic work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, explores that phenomenon, and comes to the conclusion that the key to psychological survival is the ability to find meaning in one’s life, and to hang on to that meaning no matter what. In fact, he is convinced that “the striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in [humanity]”

Frankl observed that in that most hopeless of environments, the concentration camp, “What alone remains is ‘the last of human freedoms’ – the ability to ‘choose one’s attitude in a given set of circumstances.’” Some chose hope. And they did so by hanging on to some lingering source of meaning for their lives: a love for their family, memories of better times, or perhaps a talent yet to be used.

Here’s a story about such hope:

At the university there was a piano teacher who was simply and affectionately known as “Herman.” One night at a university concert, a distinguished piano player suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. No sooner had the artist retired from the stage when Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked onstage, sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance.

Later that evening at a party, one of the students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully without notice and with no rehearsal. He replied, "In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years. It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was part of that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom.

Hope is not easy. It is hard work. And the possibilities that keep you hanging on may, in fact, not come to pass. But then again they may. And what a tragedy if you are not there to enjoy and appreciate their unfolding.

Hope, and a reason for living, may occasionally drop into our laps as a gift from the universe, as an experience of grace. In those cases, our responsibility – our obligation – is to be open to the gift. To accept it with open arms, and when possible, even to pay it forward. I have one more story. This one comes from the Rev. Rebecca Parker, minister and president of Starr King School for the Ministry. She relates it in her book, *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*.

It had been a year of great difficulty and grief for Parker, including a broken love and a heart-breaking abortion. She found herself spiraling into deeper and deeper despair. She tells her story like this:

My despair and isolation came to a crisis one night. I was past living one day at a time, or even one hour at a time, and was down to the question of whether I would be willing to continue to live at all. . . I left my house and walked down the hill to Lake Union. . . I was determined to walk into the lake's cold darkness and find there the consolation that I could not find within myself.

At the bottom of the hill, the street ended and the lakeside park began. I walked across the wet grass and climbed the last rise before the final descent to the water's edge. As I crested the rise, I discovered a line of dark objects between me and the shore, a barricade I was going to have to cross to get to the water. . .

It was the Seattle Astronomy Club.

There they were . . . A whole club of amateur scientists, up and alert in the middle of the night because the sky was clear and the planets were near.

To make my way to my death, I had to get past an enthusiast in tennis shoes. He assumed I had come to look at the stars. "Here. Let me show you," he said, and began to explain the star cluster his telescope was focused on. I had to brush the tears from my eyes to look through his telescope. There it was! A red-orange spiral galaxy. Then he focused it on

Jupiter, and I peered through to see the giant, glowing planet. I could not bring myself to continue my journey. In a world where people get up in the middle of the night to look at the stars, I could not end my life...

What saved me in that moment is difficult to fully name. That night, I was saved by people who held fast to their desire to see the beauty of the universe, in spite of the cold or the late hour. . . I was saved by the human capacity to love the world and the distant reaches of the unknown. I was saved by one particular human being who assumed I shared a desire to see the stars. I was saved by being met, right in the center of the pathway of my despair, by one – actually one hundred – who wouldn't let me go that way. I was saved by the stars themselves, by the cool green grass under my feet, by the earth, the cosmos, its presence, which won me over and persuaded me to stay.

And so may we each be aware of and open to the possibilities that life yet holds for us, and may we keep hope alive. As William Sloane Coffin once stated, "Hope arouses as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible." May we each go the way of finding hope, of offering hope, of sharing hope with one another, so that what is possible may yet become real.

So may it be.