"A Different Kind of Hope"
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A rich widow owned a rare and very valuable dog. One day it went missing. After a week of looking for the dog, she gave up hope of ever finding the dog again. A friend suggested to her that she contact an advertising agency and offer a large reward for the return of the dog. So she phoned up an agency and offered a $25,000 reward for the return of the dog. After a few days of no replies, she went to the agency for some information. She said to the receptionist, “I want to know whether you have given up all hope for the return of the dog? I haven’t had any response to the advertisement at all. Can I see the manager please?”
"I’m sorry madam, but he’s out," said the receptionist.
"OK, so how about his secretary?"
"She’s out too, ma’am. In fact everyone from his department is out."
"Oh my goodness," she said, "Where is everybody?"

"They're all out looking for your dog."

“In the winter of 1964, Nelson Mandela arrived on Robben Island where he would spend 18 of his 27 prison years. Confined to a small cell, the floor for his bed, a bucket for a toilet, he was forced to do hard labor in a quarry. He was allowed one visitor a year for 30 minutes. He could write and receive one letter every six months.” [But he never lost his hope. Instead] “Robben Island became the crucible which transformed him. Through his intelligence, charm and dignified defiance, Mandela eventually bent even the most brutal prison officials to his will, assumed leadership over his jailed comrades and became the master of his own prison. He emerged from it the mature leader, who would fight and win the great political battles, which would create a new democratic South Africa.” During these years, Mandela writes that his Christian convictions and faith sustained him in hope.

Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma’s pro-democracy activist, was recently at the center of President Obama’s trip to Burma. But between 1989-2010, she
was subject to ‘on and off’ house arrest for over twelve years. She was unable to leave the country when her husband was dying of prostate cancer for fear that she would never be readmitted. All during this time she never lost hope for her country or for democracy to come to Burma. She drew courage from her Buddhist faith. But what kind of hope did Mandela and Suu Kyi have?

Vaclav Havel, the former Czechoslovakian president, who nominated Suu Kyi for the Nobel peace prize, was also in prison himself for over five years in his struggle for freedom. During that brutal time, he thought about hope a lot and came up with this statement: “Hope is a state of mind, an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It is an ability to work for something good whether it succeeds or not. It is the certainty that something makes sense regardless of outcome.”

Havel thinks that this kind of hope has a mysterious quality. He says that it is not anchored in the world. It comes from beyond our horizons, in his words from ‘elsewhere’, this is a very different kind of hope to the one we are used to, which is based on expectations and favorable outcomes.

Although we may not have been placed in the crucible of prison, there are many things in our society today that can drain the hope out of us. Losing a job, serious illness, getting mugged, robbed or raped; losing a dear friend, being let down by someone you trusted; having to give up on a long term goal; getting older and losing strengths of mind, heart and body; facing retirement with pessimism, enduring a long loveless marriage that has ground us down.

In these kinds of circumstances it is very easy to lose hope. And when we lose hope, a slow death starts to take us over. We numb out. We lose our inner joy. We become the walking dead, part of the millions who go through life with a quiet desperation.

The problem is this; most of us have our hope rooted in things going well for us. We remain hopeful as long as we are in love with our spouse. Life is just great when the job goes well, when our health is good, when the pregnancy results in a healthy birth. But lose that job, have cancer knock at the door; lose that baby and the hope drains out of us. But if that is all, we know of hope, we have not yet understood or encountered the hope that Havel is talking about.

For me the ‘elsewhere’ that true hope comes from can only be located in God. Now in order to believe in this kind of hope it is necessary first of all to believe in God. In the Christian tradition, St. Paul says that if we believe in God we can ask for this kind of hope as a gift! He says pray and ask that “The God of hope may fill you with all joy and peace by your faith in him, so that united by the Power of Holy Spirit you overflow with hope.”

But you say to me, when your baby is still born, when your husband is dying of cancer, when you get fired and lose your job, when you get divorced and you feel abandoned, how can you be hopeful? How does faith in God help practically?
In Christianity, the Advent story of John the Baptist, who was a forerunner of the historical Jesus, begins with a priest named Zechariah who was supposed to be a mouthpiece for God. But instead, he was an angry disillusioned man who was only going through the motions. His faith index was very low. He desperately wanted a son, but his wife Elizabeth was infertile and old. He had done what most of us do with hope. He had placed it entirely in externals. In the story, an angel comes to him and announces that Elizabeth will get pregnant. Zechariah does not believe it and the angel because of Zechariah’s lack of faith, strikes him dumb. Now he is really going through the motions as a priest—that is all he has left!

But you say to me, so, he still had his faith in externals because he was happy and hopeful again when his son was born! But that is to miss the point of the hope that Havel is talking about. True hope does not depend on externals at all. For if Zechariah’s hope had been based on externals, if he had not learned anything in those nine months of silence, then when his son John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded, there would be no hope left in Zechariah. There would have been no Advent, for Advent simply means that there is a God: a God who loves us; a God who comes from ‘elsewhere’ into our lives to save us from meaninglessness and despair; a God who comes to give us hope in all circumstances and hope for everlasting life.

John was the herald of the Jesus of history. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!” he said hopefully. But then what a tragic end was ahead for John! - beheaded! Then, the Jesus of history he had prophesied about did actually come. Jesus taught, he loved without conditions, but in the end he was also executed!—crucified! But the hope from elsewhere still came into play. The Christian tradition teaches that God acted in history to have the last word and that word was resurrection from the dead for the Jesus of history. That meant that there is life after this life, and in that, we all can have hope!

Devout Muslims say that the Quran teaches that even if believers have lost everything, they can start fresh without the slightest feeling of hopelessness and with patience and enthusiasm. Their enthusiasm arises from their faith, their trust in and love for God, their Quranic morals, and their certain realization of this world’s transience. True Muslims become beautiful models for all people everywhere Muslims teach.

The Buddhists teach us that fear and hope are always linked together. That is our daily experience with the world news isn’t it? When something good happens we are hopeful. When something bad happens we fear the future. The Buddhists say that fear is the necessary consequence of feeling hopeful. They are a single package, not opposites which trump each other. If we hope to accomplish something we are also afraid that we will fail. So according to the Buddhists fear is the price of hope. Are we willing to pay it? Is the stress worth it?

They say that if we are motivated by hope, but then confronted with failure, we become depressed and demoralized. Life becomes meaningless.
So, the Buddhist would teach us to abandon hope in order to get beyond hope and fear. They say that if we are able to do this we will discover clarity and energy.

In order to achieve this we have to embrace the wisdom of uncertainty - we need to become familiar with insecurity. We abandon the quest to find security in our accomplishments. We move from certainty to curiosity, from living by fear to living by generosity. We treat all problems as challenges. They become experiments and opportunities to learn as we go. The quest is not to be about what will succeed or fail, but simply to find what works. Buddhists teach that if we are willing to move beyond certainty into insecurity we will start to overcome and live beyond hope and fear. For hope and fear are necessarily grounded in the past or future. If we want to get beyond them we must live in the present moment. It is not easy to live in present awareness when all around us is toppling down, but then nothing in modern life is easy today. Present awareness gives us clarity and resolve to do the right thing. It is to live beyond outcomes. Don’t ever surrender leadership to outcome!

Now we come full circle to the different kind of hope Havel talks about. It is an orientation of the spirit, something as profound and native to us as our sexual orientation, a sense not that things will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense anyway!

**This different kind of hope is a realization: that we are the hope!** It’s a dimension of being human.

Our friend Marjorie Loyd, who recently passed away, had hope and faith and trust in the mystery of God. She actually asked the medical profession to disconnect her pacemaker as she felt it was unnecessarily prolonging her life. She was unafraid to die. She left the outcome of her death to God. After some 27 days she passed away peacefully.

One of her phrases that she often used was this one: If someone questioned her generosity she always replied, “I couldn’t afford not to do it.” She didn’t care whether something worked out or not. If it was the right thing to do she gave the money away or supported the cause she believed in anyway. She was consistent to the very end letting go of outcome and putting her faith and trust in God.

Moses did not see the Promised Land. Abraham, the father of Ishmael and Isaac, ancestor of the modern the Jew and the Arab, set out not knowing where he was going except that he was looking for a city whose builder and maker was God. A strange quest and he did not find it here on earth. Nevertheless he set out!

The Dalai Lama, speaking to a group of colleagues who were in despair said “Do not despair. Your work will bear fruit in 700 years or so!”

Margaret Wheatley a Buddhist writes: “Can we do our work without needing to see results? Can we be content that our work might bear fruit, but not in our lifetime?”
We can if our faith is grounded in God, for God will survive even the end of the world—an Advent theme. Jesus, the Buddha, Mohammed, and the Sikh Gurus and other religions’ spiritual teachers form a company who will be with us to the end of time—a bright company of hope. This different kind of hope assures us that we are never alone, despite appearances to the contrary. God does hear and answer prayer, not always the way we want the outcome to go at all, but the Great Presence is always with us, despite what it may seem.

One of the themes of Advent is that of angels, messengers and guardians, beings from ‘elsewhere’ who help us along the way. One of the interesting things about world religions is that they all talk about guardian angels. They are bringers of hope and joy and protect us in times of danger in every tradition including Buddhism and Hinduism as well as the Abrahamic faiths.

In 1980 Dave Carr, of Bangor Maine, felt that he should start a mission for the homeless and people down on their luck. However he was a truck driver, not a pastor. He had a young family to support with nothing left over for a Drop in Center for the homeless. Yet, the urge to do something grew stronger, especially after a man was murdered in the middle of the night and thrown over the Penobscot River Bridge. Without some kind of a safe oasis Dave thought the same sort of thing might happen again. So, one September evening Dave began his quest to look for a location to open a coffee shop for the homeless. He started in Bangor, in the evening, looking at likely sites but felt that he had not found it. The time got late and at 1 pm he found himself walking across the Penobscot bridge towards Brewer. A car approached, slowed and stopped. The windows were down and one of the occupants said; “Let’s throw him over!” All three men inside the car jumped out and came toward Dave. Horrified, Dave suddenly recalled that the murder of the street person had been on this bridge! Were these the same men? His prayer was that he could survive the icy water below and somehow swim to safety, but when he looked below, the tide had gone out and only rocks and dirt were left.

But then Dave sensed a presence near him. A warm, safe feeling flooded over him. He knew, without knowing how, that he was not alone. Now, the men were almost upon Dave. They were three, large, muscular, and leering at him. “Get him!” one shouted.

Suddenly they all stopped. They stared at Dave then looked to his right and his left. They seemed terrified. One said “Oh my God. Run, Run!!” and they all jumped back into their car and roared off. Whatever or whoever had protected Dave, he was thankful “Thank-you God.” he said. He felt so exhilarated and full of hope that he resumed his search. As he crossed the rest of the bridge, Danny a friend of his, drove by and honked at him and kept going, unmindful of Dave’s narrow escape. A while later Dave came across some derelicts but as he approached they all fell back. One put his hands over his eyes and said “You’re shining! It hurts to look!”

Dave wasn’t sure at all about this whole experience, but the next day clarity came because he ran into his friend Danny again.
“Sorry I didn’t stop last night on the bridge but I had passengers and I could never have fit all of you in my car too.”

“All of us?” Dave asked puzzled.

“Those three huge guys walking with you. They were the biggest people I have ever seen. One must have been at least 7 foot tall!”

Dave got the message and Advent came to Bangor in the form of a coffee house which he opened in 1986. It still runs today. And every night at least 100 homeless people find a different kind of hope, as they find shelter and safety; served up with coffee and hugs.