

Hopelessness
UUF

Rev. Walter LeFlore
February 7, 2016

There was a time when I was a much younger man. A much younger man. In my twenties I was a member of a men's group for several years. It was a valuable and beneficial experience.

One day, one of the guys—one of the more stereotypically macho looking types--suggested the group go on an outing, a rock climbing outing. He was experienced, knew a great place and would lead. We tossed the idea around for a while. I'm pretty sure he was the only one of us to have climbed before. He was convincing in what he thought we as individuals and as a group would gain from the experience. We agreed to go.

It was fall, not too warm and not yet cold. We made a short hike to the starting point. A rock face maybe 150' straight up. We gathered for instructions and a bit of training. I really don't remember details...it was a long time ago.

He started up the rock face, putting in pitons as he went to hold our ropes...a form of protection against falling very far. It was impressive to watch him, he made it look easy. Soon the next guy followed him up the wall. Then another and then another. There were eight to ten of us.

I was not in a hurry. I watched five or six guys climb pretty effortlessly. They looked like big spiders, arms and legs extended. By now the first guy had made it to the top and disappeared onto flat land. I noticed that everyone had stopped for a short breather on a crag—a small flat out-cropping.

I started out without much difficulty. I was able to find hand holds and foot holds that allowed me to push to the next hand hold. I followed those before me and climbed a bit laterally as I went up. I too rested on the outcropping. When I got ready to start climbing again, I could not find a foot hold to get off the ledge, or a hand hold. I tried several times. Nothing was working. I was embarrassed, as others seemed to have had no difficulty.

I tried some more with no luck. I was encouraged by those above and those below. But I couldn't move. I sat down for what seemed like a very long time. I felt hopeless. It was an experience I had never had---to feel so completely and utterly defeated.

With more encouragement I tried again. This time I was able to get off the crag and made several moves. Then I slipped and broke loose. I went swinging along the face of the cliff, twisting and turning...but not falling. I could see the bottom was much further down than from where we had started. I regained control with my feet pressed against the wall, suspended in mid air. I was then able to finish the climb. (I never went rock climbing again!)

I was encouraged and supported out of my sense of hopelessness when I was at the end of my rope. My life was saved by those at the top who held the end of my rope.

Hopelessness is sometimes a very legitimate response to our sense of reality. Yet hopelessness is seldom anything we hear people talk about. Hopelessness is often accompanied by a sense of feeling defeated. It often comes with a sense of shame. Hopelessness sets in when we feel we have little or no control over events and circumstances. No wonder we don't hear much about it! Who wants to admit to that?

Hopelessness is fundamentally un-American. As a nation we have not reconciled ourselves with the existence of hopelessness—we are so busy being focused on a better tomorrow, success, happiness. America is exceptional we're told, and we make sure the world knows it too. There is no room in the American psyche for hopelessness and despair.

At least, not for those who get to dictate the storyline. For those of us with privilege, hopelessness is something we seldom encounter. It's not an unknown, but it is rather rare. Those with privilege, even a modicum of privilege, seldom feel they have no control over events and circumstances.

Those with an education (meaning college degree for the most part), those with savings, those who have home equity, those who are white and are accepted as part of the status quo, seldom feel out of control---even though control is a complete myth.

Hopelessness is a particular interpretation of one's sense of reality. It's not about the facts, it's about how we experience our circumstances.

There are segments of our society for whom a sense of hopelessness is an ongoing phenomenon. I've not studied hopelessness, but it appears to me that hopelessness does not come from a single event, like loosing a job, or not being able to find a foothold.

It seems to me hopelessness sets in when multiple variables come together. Not being able to find a foothold *while* on a ledge 60' off the ground. Loosing a job *while* having no savings, *along with* a sick child and no insurance because you lost your job.

Hopelessness comes when you have no car and all the jobs have moved out of your neighborhood. It comes when no-one around you is seen as a success AND you are very much just like them. Hopelessness comes when the schools are falling down, when the majority of kids go to school too hungry for their minds to be fed, when mom works two jobs and the kids are left on their own for long hours at a time.

Hopelessness comes when you and your kids have to live in an environment where the only real money is made by selling drugs and the only ones with a sense of control are the gangs defending turf.

Hopelessness comes when you get a ticket and can't afford to pay it AND you have your license taken away or worst, you are put in jail for non-payment. Hopelessness comes when your city, county and state knowingly are poisoning you and your family with lead, while you pay the water bill and their salaries.

Hopelessness comes when you work three jobs, then realize you've been sold a sub-prime mortgage that the seller knew would lead you to financial ruin, while they took their cut and got ready to take advantage of someone else.

Hopelessness can be a legitimate response to the circumstances one encounters in life.

So, how does one live with an ongoing sense of hopelessness? Does on-going hopelessness continue to feel hopeless or does it morph into just feeling “normal” after a while? What is one to do when one finds oneself in circumstances that seem beyond our ability to control?

I don't believe I have an answer. But I do have some observations and suppositions. One might buy the proverbial large screen TV if all seems hopeless. Why not? One might do drugs if all else seems hopeless. It certainly could change one's sense of reality.

One could ignore voting if there is no hope you'll see any benefit, if your long-term experience is no-one gives a damn. I probably wouldn't bother going to school if I had no hope of getting a good paying job. I might have a baby that I knew would love me and make me feel wanted and needed.

Who are we to judge? How could we possibly know how we'd behave if we experienced an elongated sense of hopelessness? I certainly don't know how I would behave without the encouragement and support that I experienced when I was actively in touch with my sense of hopelessness.

It seems to me, we all are in need of help now and then. We all need a cheerleader in our lives, cheering for us to cross the finish line. We all need someone to hold the other end of the rope when we lose our balance and risk falling into despair... or to our death.

We all need someone to teach us and help us find our balance again when we break loose and find ourselves swinging in midair. Some of us are in greater need than others.

For many folks, God is at the other end of the rope, helping to keep us safe, to guide us, to be our cheer-leader and greatest fan. For some, poetry is an outlet, an avenue away from hopelessness. For others, it might be music in some form. For still others it might be football, basketball or comedy or acting.

When one is at the bottom of the barrel, there is only up. Hopelessness can prompt tremendously creative responses. After all, is failure worst than hopelessness? Embedded in hopelessness is a nugget of great power if it can only be tapped, unleashed and harnessed. We ought not ever give up on another soul. Who knows what lies in the next moment, just around the corner?

If we are to be of help in lessening a sense of hopelessness in our fellow human beings we must be willing to truly engage one another. We need to find empathy---not to be confused with sympathy.

We must be willing to get rope burn from holding that safety line. We must risk disappointment when the outcome is not as we would choose.

If we don't get involved in hand to hand support, working closely with one another, we can work at the organizational or systemic level. We can help to elect only those who genuinely care for the downtrodden. We can work to expose discriminatory laws and practices. We can work to outlaw predatory practices. We can push for education and training instead of life-sucking jail sentences.

We can support re-entry programs helping those previously incarcerated return to a more normal life and existence.

But nothing comes for free. All of this costs involvement, it costs taking a risk, it costs being exposed as someone who wants to make a positive difference in life. It means we may not always be in calm waters.

Someone needs to be actively involved in holding the rope---yes willing to be responsible for someone else's life. There is a very real difference between being at the bottom of the cliff cheering and being up on top holding the rope.

I want to hang out with the folks willing to get rope burn. Who do you chose to be associated with?

May God bless us all.