

HOPE

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How dare anyone speak of hope? History and the daily news provide abundant evidence, it would seem, for pessimism, not hope.

The endless cycles of war, violence, conflict, and injustice of the human drama speak loudly on behalf of pessimism, it seems, not hope.

Yet there is another side to history. Human beings have developed systems of morality, written symphonies, created art and science, explained the workings of sub-atomic particles, viewed far away galaxies, discovered meditation, traveled to the moon, and written great novels, plays, and operas. Human beings have also created intricate systems of law, operated on the heart and brain, cured diseases, and transplanted human organs, among many other marvels.

Which type of human activity represents the truth about humanity and tells us if hope is real or illusory?

Alas, both sides, the constructive and destructive, are, in fact, part of who we are. We are capable of the most sublime acts of compassion but also of calculated cruelty. The polarities are difficult to accept; in fact, for most of us, far too difficult to accept. So we tend to project the bad stuff on our enemies and claim the good qualities for ourselves. Carl Jung argued that accepting (not changing or fixing) both the negative and positive sides of ourselves was the pinnacle of moral achievement.

Our evolutionary history has given us a motley mixture of destructive and constructive tendencies and potentialities. Our biological tool kit for survival has accrued a hodge-podge of potentialities. The "old" part of the brain, with its reptilian instincts, and the neo-cortex, with its ability to evaluate facts objectively and coolly, are strange partners, but it is what we have. We are left to

sort out as best we can the jumbled mixture of products from our two million years of evolutionary development.

The collection of diverse and sometimes competing instincts and tendencies within us can easily create inner and outer disorder leading, for example, to the undermining of peace and the constancy of strife.

Around 2,500 years ago it appears that human beings began to make substantial efforts toward resolving the self's inner disorder and the outer consequences of that inner disorder. They did this by creating ways of being and thinking aimed at integrating the parts of the self and building the foundations for social peace. We could call this perhaps the beginning of principled centered and directed living. Karl Jaspers called this period from about 800 B.C. to 200 A.D. the axial age and believed that within it "the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid simultaneously and independently... And these are the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today" (K. Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*).

Some of the figures who were a part of this revolution in thought were:

- The Prophets Micah, Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea in the late eighth century B.C.
- Socrates, in Athens, Greece, 470 BC-400 B.C.
- Buddha, in the southern part of modern Nepal, near India, 563 B.C. to 483 B.C.
- Confucius in Eastern China, 551 BC - 479 B.C.
- Jesus, around the beginning of our common era, near modern day Jerusalem

In a variety of ways, these persons (and the movements they represented), created systems of being and thinking aimed at

bringing order, integrity, direction, meaning and purpose to the potential (and often actual) chaos of humanity's inner and outer life. That all of these persons appeared upon the stage of history within a relatively brief period of time in geographical isolation from one another, is one of history's mysteries and marvels. Jaspers saw striking parallels in these developments without any obvious direct transmission of ideas from one region to the other, because no record of any extensive intercommunication between Ancient Greece, the Middle East, India, and China exists. There is, in fact, much diversity between these figures and the traditions they helped generate but a point of commonality is that they seek to cure the self's inner divisions and create a social order of peace, harmony and justice.

Religion, with its all its entanglements with dogmatism, fanaticism, and bad faith, is one of humanity's attempts to gather the cornucopia of human instincts and tendencies into an integrated whole. One of the meanings of the word Religion is "to bind together," and what it binds together is the parts of our very human nature. One of the ways religion sought to do this was by inventing words that describe phenomenon not found as objects in the natural world but which are essential to the process of making human life whole. Some of these words are peace, compassion, trust, faith, and hope. This brings me to a consideration of hope.

Hope is one of those intangible forces, described so often in the literature of religion, which aims to integrate, to make whole, and to bring peace, to the potentially chaotic experience of being a human being.

In my roles as minister, counselor, husband, and father, and in my experiences as a person, I have grown to deeply appreciate the importance of hope. I have grown to know, not on the basis of any kind of religious or secular authority, but on the basis of my experience, that hope, though insubstantial as air, is also as necessary as the air we breathe.

Over the years, I have grown to see and appreciate the different types of hope, that some are more authentic than others, and to grow in awareness and appreciation of what might be called mature hope.

Mature hope has an unwavering faith in its own value to create something that would not exist without the stimulus and guidance of hope.

Mature hope is not naïve but accepts reality on its own terms, yet understands that the future is not set in stone, but is more akin to malleable clay, and goes to work in the places where the facts of the present are being molded into the facts of the future.

Mature hope is not wishful thinking, nor is it passive; mature hope is engaged in searching for, and seizing, opportunities in which hope's aims may flourish. Mature hope acts toward bringing hope's visions to life, step by step, moment by moment, in a way carefully calibrated to the task at hand and to what can be done in the here and now, every faithful to the possible, rather than the perfect.

If our energy is not absorbed by the aims of mature hope, we become vulnerable to every way the wind of opinion may blow, to the disease of negativity and to the prison of the phrase "that can't be done." Without mature hope we become vulnerable as well to the currents of instincts and shared opinions in whose influence many live their lives.

What do you hope for?

Barbara Kingsolver wrote: "The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope."

So I ask, What do you hope for?