

“Hope and Hopelessness” by David Novello

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Advent 3

Six months ago, David Hilfiker preached here about, among other things, the state of the environment. He said, “Anyone who’s optimistic these days about the future of our environment doesn’t have the right data...There is little reason for optimism.” I have to say that I agree with him. But then David added that “optimism is different from hope, and hope is the cornerstone of our faith.”

So what is the difference? People often treat the two as the same. And what is hope? What would life be like without hope? Paul Tillich preached that without hope we would end in despair, a word that originally meant “without hope.”

It has been remarkable that, as I have thought about and worked on this sermon these past two weeks, words about hope and optimism seem to be popping up everywhere – appearing in

all kinds of places. There was a “quote of the day” last week from the web site gratefulness.org. And Ken Stailey circulated an email about a quote on hope by Eric Hoffer that a friend posted on his Facebook wall. And then Jill Joseph sent another email – this one to our mission group – noting that in the preparation for the sermon she gave last week, she read that the words “hope” and “hop” are believed to have a common origin, as hope implies some inner leaping with anticipated joy. Such synchronicity!

I also told myself when I decided to preach on hope several months ago that I’d do it *whatever* the lectionary for that week. Yet the Psalm reading for today opens, “Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose *hope* is in the Lord their God.” And James’ call for patience in waiting for the coming of the Lord certainly strikes me as a patient expectation, or hope.

So I’d like to talk about hope and hopelessness in our lives, what those words may mean, and how they may guide us. The inspiration is from a quote on hope by the playwright and former President of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel. I first heard it several years ago and I have struggled with it since. Havel says that hope “is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

I have often railed against this formulation. Like Havel, I don’t think hope is “the conviction that something will turn out well” – optimism really – that part gives me no trouble. But how is hope “the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turn out?” At least at first glance, that strikes me as something akin to fate – and that we

shouldn't wish for a good outcome, an end to suffering – but simply accept whatever comes our way. Much of the reason that I've gotten my back up about this quote, and wrestled with it, is that we've had a serious illness in our family since shortly before I first heard it. Others in my family and I have hoped – in perhaps what is the traditional sense of the word – for a good outcome. Those hopes have often been dashed in the past five and a half years. Seeing the suffering, and the terrible unfairness of it, is often excruciating. So what is Havel talking about when he says that this – or *any* – suffering makes sense? How does it make sense? What about poverty, people suffering and dying from malnutrition, war, or any of the many other horrors of this world? How does any of this “make sense?”

I also came across a definition of gratitude, by Timothy Miller, that raises similar problems for me – yet, as with the Havel quote on hope, somehow, some way, attracts me as well. Miller writes:

Gratitude is the intent to count your blessings every day, every minute, while avoiding, whenever possible, the belief that you need or deserve different circumstances.

Why should we be grateful for pain when the circumstances are bad? But at least Miller provides an out; he says “whenever possible.”

The Miller quote came across the Internet, and through the Internet – and Google, of course, I found Havel's words leading to the sentence that I have struggled with. They help

to put it in better perspective for me, though I still struggle. Here they are, spoken by Havel when asked whether he saw a grain of hope anywhere in the 1980s:

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world...Either we have hope or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation.

Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons...

Hope in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more propitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is.

Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

An orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. I resonate with that, as I do with hope not being the same as optimism, and being an ability to work for something because

it is good. But “the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out” – doesn’t that go far beyond?

When things, health-wise, began falling apart several years ago, I turned, perhaps not surprisingly, to the book *When Things Fall Apart*, a collection of talks by Pema Chodron, a nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I found her advice extremely helpful, including her discussion of the importance of cultivating not hope, but *hopelessness*. In fact, she says that hopelessness “expresses the renunciation that’s essential for the spiritual path.” What does this mean? Tillich equated attacks of hopelessness to “attacks against the faith in a meaning of life.” But Chodron writes, “Without giving up hope – that there’s somewhere better to be, that there’s someone better to be, we will never relax with where we are, with who we are.” I think she essentially expresses the view that our spiritual practice calls for full participation in life as it is, opening fully to living. She is saying we must be free from attachments to particular outcomes, however good they may be. Otherwise, we are losing ourselves in the future. And of course that means we are striving, feeling restless, worrying, probably obsessing, most likely feeling disappointment in the end – and not fully participating in just this, life as it is. It’s like the Eric Hoffer quote that Ken circulated ten days ago: “Disappointment is a sort of bankruptcy – the bankruptcy of a soul that expends too much time in hope and expectation.” But we can choose not to become ensnared in this expectation of a better future. As Chodron concludes, “If we totally experience hopelessness, giving up all hope of alternatives to the present moment, we can have a joyful relationship with our lives, an honest, direct relationship, one that no longer ignores the reality of impermanence and death.”

Isn't this conclusion at least akin to Jesus' words in Gethsemane, "Not my will but yours be done?" A letting go, a relinquishment of control; "the renunciation that's essential for the spiritual path." Or, as Jean-Pierre De Caussade wrote nearly 300 years ago, in *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*:

You do not need to know exactly what is happening or where it is all going. What is needed is to embrace the present moment with courage, faith, and love...The present moment holds infinite riches beyond your wildest dreams but you will only enjoy them to the extent of your faith and love...The will of God is manifest in each moment, an immense ocean which only the heart fathoms insofar as it overflows with faith, trust and love.

So how might we avoid the living in the past and future, as well as the disappointment that Hoffer equates with bankruptcy? Meister Eckhart admonished us not to ask "why" – "Do all you do," he wrote, "acting from the core of your soul, without a single "Why.'" God asks only that you get out of his way, he said – just act. And in his book, *Silent Hope*, John Kirvan offers a perspective in his commentary on the assurance of Julian of Norwich that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." Talk about optimism and rose-colored glasses! This is another quote I initially have trouble with, and Kirvan concedes that "at first such a promise sounds naive, like trivializing our pain or hoping that life will go away." But he continues:

The promise, however, is not that life will go away, or that new wounds will never appear. *The promise is that our wounds will lose their power to cripple us...*The promise that "all will be well" gives us permission to hope. We can

“surrender our spirit peacefully into God’s love, and ignore every disturbance.” It is a question of living *now*, trusting *now*, ignoring *now* anything that stands between us and the God who is the object of our hope.

Kirvan also writes of God’s desire to let Him “break through our self-centered conviction that we need to be in control.” And isn’t that what it’s all about? At least for me, the lesson is one of letting go – giving up the need to be in control or, even more likely, the illusion of control. Only by turning it over to God – maintaining hope in the sense of *trust* and Havel’s *orientation of the spirit*, but relinquishing hope of *particular outcomes* – can I truly live and find peace. I especially appreciate Chodron’s image of “relaxing where we are” – “relaxing into” the moment. That, to me, is living.

During this difficult year, I have worked more at slowing down, sinking into the moment, and holding those moments *together* with the heartbreak. There has been true joy amidst the sadness. I think I am beginning to understand in a deeper way that we can touch and live joy through the hardships. And I believe I now better understand Havel’s problematic statement about hope. Maybe Chodron’s hopelessness isn’t that different from Havel’s hope. Regardless of how things turn out – regardless of the outcome – we can dwell in the present moment, the only moment in time that truly exists. That, I believe, *makes sense*.

Amen.