

HOPE IN THE TIME OF THE CORONAVIRUS

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For our weekly Extended Troxel Family Zoom call, we have decided to rotate “facilitator” who then picks a theme around which we check-in with one another. This week our son Jonathan volunteered and asked us to think about “Where We Find Hope in the Time of the Coronavirus.” His challenge really pressed me to give our current circumstances more thought than I had before. Frankly I had experienced a mild case of trauma drama coming up with anything that helped make sense of the times in which we are living. Finally, after a lot of soulful reckoning I came up with three ideas of where I am experiencing a degree of Hope I’d like to share with you. They actually may be three sides of the same thing.

1. “The Hope that does not disappoint”

This idea comes from the Bible: Romans 5, verses 1-5: *“Since then it is by faith that we are justified, let us grasp the fact that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have confidently entered into this new relationship of grace, and here we take our stand, in happy certainty of the glorious things he has for us in the future. This doesn’t mean, of course, that we have only a hope of future joys – we can be full of joy here and now even in our trials and troubles. Taken in the right spirit these very things will give us patient endurance, this in turn will develop a mature character, and a character of this produces a steady hope, a hope that will never disappoint us.”*

I had recalled that I gave a talk on this theme some 40 years ago, soon after my first cancer operation to remove a melanoma. Lo and behold, I found my notes from that talk in my archives. Since I am about to undergo another cancer operation, I thought, “Oh boy, I’ll just read what I wrote then; they’ll never know the difference. Whew! That’s handled.” Unfortunately, most of my notes, though, I either couldn’t decipher or were only relevant for that audience at that moment in time. They were useless for this situation.

Nonetheless I do have the punch line which still seems somewhat appropriate. Here goes: “The Hope That Does Not Disappoint is Living a Life Without Illusions.” Most things we hope for are illusions; but illusions will eventually always disappoint you. One of my illusions of 40 years ago was my thinking at age 33 I had the rest of my life still in front of me waiting to figure it all out in good time. Then I came to the realization that with my cancer I was a dead man. That is to say, I discovered that my limits are - my finitude is - very real, not far off in the future. I have been very thankful for that realization – it woke me up from my living in a daze that I didn’t have to decide about my life; that it was always in front of me waiting. No longer could I wait. I had to decide what my life was to be about. Here and Now. The operation became a gift.

Now at the age of 73 this comment seems even more real. Particularly since I am now designated as a “high risk” person in the vocabulary of the pandemic. (I also have a heart condition). The Hope that will not disappoint is not in the future; it is in the present. It is taking a relationship to the current circumstances and claiming them for what they are – without any illusions that should and will be something other than what they are. You will never be disappointed by embracing your present circumstances, whatever they may be.

2. “Hope for the Best; But Plan for the Worse”

The Coronavirus has brought this old adage home full force. Things are going to get worse before they get better. You know it; I know it. Only those who have their head in the sand are blind to the new world that has been delivered to us.

I'll not share with you the worst case scenarios I have conjured up in my mind; they are too gruesome to share. But you know what I am talking about. You've seen those horror movies about the end times.

The Hope that is sought somewhere in the past is an illusion; living in the past has always been the least likely option even though many, many people long for it. They long for certainty and security and the comfort of the familiar. They will be – and have always been - disappointed. Maybe they experienced a temporary relief, but it never lasts. "Going back to Normal" is an illusion.

Yes, we should Hope for the best; but we'd be stupid if we put all our eggs in that basket. We have to take precautions and be smart. Even the medical consultant to NBC contracted the disease by taking a plane flight with people who didn't wear their masks even though he himself in addition to his mask, wore gloves, had Purell, and disinfected his seat with wipes, etc. He thinks he contracted COVID because he did not wear goggles over his eyes and that's how he was infected (i.e., through his eyes). If you are cavalier, you will likely get this virus and some folks will die because they were stupid enough to think they are invincible to reality.

Hope, then, is not found in the illusions about one's situation, but by taking an affirming relationship to one's circumstances.

3. "Having Hope vs. Feeling Hopeless"

From time to time, I don't know about you, I find myself falling into a total funk about this COVID19 thing and can't see anyway out as I am cooped up in our condo. I feel as if I am a victim to circumstances beyond my ability to have any influence. I'm trapped by the four walls of our home, or, at least, the four streets surrounding our block. This is pointed in my case with needing to be well enough for the upcoming surgery.

There is a concept in psychology known as "locus of control," which holds a pertinent life lesson for me and others who feel similarly trapped. It says that when one feels as if one's freedom is restricted, it can be the result from either external limitations on their freedom, such as being a prisoner in jail or from the governor's "stay-at-home" dictates, or from internalized limitations, such as being "brainwashed" by parental teachings or obstinate supervisors that say one is a failure or from the feeling like I am experiencing being cooped up. People with limited freedom, no matter what its source, have the following options: succumb to their circumstances, rebel against their circumstances, or transform their circumstances by taking a new relationship to them. The more positive response comes from staring reality in the face and coming to terms with it.

Some people whose freedoms have been controlled by external limitations can and have developed a sense of internal locus of control, that is, a sense of their own personal freedom. For example in some maximum-security prisons there are inmates with no possibility of parole but who have put together constructive lives that include such activities as volunteering as tutors for other inmates, attending twelve-step meetings and church, and working. These inmates find their freedom to respond in how they relate to the situation they find themselves in rather than the "trappings of the environment" of the situation itself.

My favorite movie that captures the essence of this idea of the internal locus of control is *The Shawshank Redemption*. The two kinds of limitations are vividly displayed with the external being the conditions of Shawshank prison. The internal limitations become part of the movie dialogue surrounding how certain "lifers" become "institutionalized" so much by the prison that they were unable to survive once having been released on parole. Here's the pivotal dialogue that expresses the central message of the movie when, Andy, who had just been released from spending a month in solitary confinement for playing a Mozart recording over the prison's loudspeakers, shares his feelings with fellow inmate, Red:

Andy: That's the beauty of music. They can't take that from you... Haven't you ever felt that way about music?

Red: I played a mean harmonica as a younger man. Lost interest in it though. Didn't make much sense in here.

Andy: Here's where it makes the most sense. You need it so you don't forget.

Red: Forget?

Andy: Forget that... there are places in this world that aren't made out of stone. That there's something inside... that they can't get to, that they can't touch. That's yours.

Red: What're you talking about?

Andy: Hope. Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I guess it comes down to a simple choice: Get busy living, or get busy dying.

In other words, the victim image is a choice that one makes whether conscious of it or not. People who are internally victimized or sense themselves with restricted freedom have the same options: succumb, rebel, or transform. Those who choose to transform realize that in spite of all they have experienced, they still have valuable contributions to make to society. By focusing on their internal capacity to have power over their relationship to the past and present, they are able to face the future with hope. They do not find their freedom externally, but rather in an internal locus of control; in other words, from within themselves.

I am not always able to remember these life lessons and find myself feeling as if I am trapped by the Coronavirus or have to play by the strict rules of my governor or mayor which limits my freedom. The fact is, these are not limitations to my freedom at all. I still can decide my relationship to them. I don't have to merely succumb or rebel. I can choose to transform myself by realizing the valuable contributions I can make while doing creative things, such as writing up this piece. I can become "at peace" with my situation.

In my case, I have had a bit of a burst of interest – call it a rebirth of interest, if you will – in music and creative writing. I just finished eight weeks of lessons on the soprano recorder and, if I don't say so myself, can play a mean rendition of "Memory" from the musical, Cats. And, I took an online webinar offered by DePaul University on Creative Writing that has helped – I hope – my writing abilities. I look forward to continuing this new creative expression while being holed up. And, as a side note, I am amazed at how the Zoom and other like platforms have increased my social interactions which I very much have appreciated. I even subscribed and viewed two online trainings in how to make them effective.

This same concept - "one's locus of control" reminds me of the story in the Bible (John 5) about Jesus confronting the Man at the Well who was crippled and couldn't get into the pool in time when it had the capacity to cure him. Someone else always beat him to it. The man had been victimized by his inability to get into the pool and by his belief that this inability was the root of his problems. Jesus did not tell the man anything he didn't already know. He confronted him with the fact that his relationship to his situation was out of balance. He told him what he needed to hear to heal himself. All Jesus said was, "Get up." But also to take his crummy past wrapped up in his bed and walk into the future. The Bible says that the man immediately got up, picked up his bed and walked.

That's our challenge as well – embrace the hand we have been dealt with and use it as the power to move into the future. In that decision is the source of our Hope.