

What Is Hope?

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What is hope? If you were to ask Emily Dickinson, she would have replied in prose:

“Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops, at all

And sweetest in the gale is heard
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That keeps so many warm

I’ve heard it in the chillest land
And on the strangest sea
But never, in extremity
It asked a crumb of me”

This poem was published in 1891, at a time when the word “hope” was used nearly twice as often as it is today, if the internet is to be believed. Perhaps this should be reassessed, after all, there seems to be a resurgence of hope right now in the face of seemingly insurmountable evil. It seems that hope surges at times when evil is the most apparent. If you recall the time when the Westboro Baptist Church darkened our doorstep, they brought forth an awe-inspiring unity between congregations here in Harrisburg who may have otherwise ignored each other’s existence or called one another evil. But in the presence of the real evil of extremism, hope was born.

If you ask Google the meaning of hope, you are immediately blasted with dozens of websites explaining hope with relationship to religion, but it's preposterous to think that any belief system has exclusive rights to the concept. This human construct is the basis for moving through the most daunting situations in history, regardless of who they have involved or where the situation may have been.

I asked Alexa, and she told me "hope is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or in the world at large."

It was interesting that the word "expectation" was found within the definition of hope. I have always believed that hopes, expectations and wishes are 3 distinctly different creatures, even though we interchange them like they are all the same thing. You may hear phrases like: "I hope my children will be happy" or "I hope you cleaned your bedroom" or "I hope I will be a princess in a pink castle when I grow up." See, these are three VERY DIFFERENT types of hoping. The first, "I hope my children will be happy" is a more general statement expressing a desire for a positive outcome. But when we say "I hope you cleaned your bedroom" we aren't really expressing hope, so much as we are implying that said cleanliness is expected—or else! And the last statement about hoping to be a princess in a pink castle—in France to be specific, was actually a wish expressed by one of my childhood friends. She would wish upon a star and birthday candles or any other wishing device, that she could be a princess in a pink castle in France—and she wished this all the way into her 20s.

Personally, I like to think of hope as a back-up generator for our souls. That which carries us when we have no energy left. The unexplainable force that pushes us forward when we want to give up. That thing that prods us to hold it together when we want to burn it all down.

Even when it may seem that hope has been lost – that there is no reason to hold onto it – hope still follows the law of energy—it cannot be created or destroyed, only converted from one form to another. We can actively reinvent or restructure hope. One example of this is when patients are admitted into hospice care. Some may say that this is a point where the person has given up hope. But this phenomenon is actually a situation where one can make a new kind of hope out of the remains of the old one.

As a nurse caring for both oncology and hospice patients, I have witnessed hope in all its miraculous glory, but have also met its nemeses: Doubt and denial. Doubt is probably the simplest to define—because doubt is that little voice that says—yeah, right! You're being unrealistic. Or maybe doubt is helpful and says, Hey! This sounds great! But IS this great? Are you sure? And sometimes, this doubt allows us to have a clearer understanding of what is truly happening in situation where you may have overlooked subtle details if not for the aid of doubt.

But doubt can also snuff out hope and make us see in shades of gray where brilliant hope could bring us to a brighter state.

Denial, though, that's a bugger. This is a state with great importance where grief is concerned, and its temporary existence shields us from emotional and psychological pain. But eventually, it becomes a hope-blocker. In the instance where someone swears until their dying breath that God will cure their disease and no one can tell them anything contrary. This is where denial is prevailing over hope. Where denial masks itself by calling itself hope or faith. But this disguise is only useful for so long until it's mask falls away, and the reality of the situation shows itself. Denial can rob us of what a more realistic hope could have granted – peace, healing and connection to what is, instead of clinging to a false future that could never have been attained.

The worst part in my experience, was being an oncology nurse and witnessing the death of the hope of survival. This type of mourning is the most torturous. But when that hope was laid to rest, in most instances, a new hope would emerge—the hope of being at peace, the hope of seeing loved ones one more time, the hope of those you love moving forward and flourishing even after you have gone. This is a different kind of hope than that of survival, but it is just as real, just as pure, and most certainly, it is more unconditional than the hope of surviving a terminal diagnosis, because it is a hope that is much more difficult to quash. It is what we call “realistic hope.” This is realistic both in that the hopes are more likely to be realized and also that it indicates that the person with the hope has accepted the reality of what CAN be. The real, the likely, the attainable are now integrated components of the new hope.

So this type of hope can be one that we have for ourselves regardless of whether that hope is related to illness. The hopes we have for ourselves as individuals are complex. If hope itself is like a backup generator for the soul—when we feel that there is nothing left in us to keep us moving forward -- there is where hope lives. In that space between “I can't do this anymore” and “but...”

Realistic hope requires a tremendous amount of honesty. If you cannot be honest with yourself—brutally and radically honest, there is no way you can realize the type of hope that will ultimately be helpful.

There is the magical transformation that occurs when we allow one hope to float away like a paper lantern into the night sky and let a new hope finds its way in and rest in the heart to cover the open wound. Nothing is more spiritual, more magical than that moment where acceptance of what can be is let in. This can be applied in circumstances of all variations. When we express hopes for ourselves, we can take the time to examine them and ask ourselves if that hope can truly be obtained, and if we are willing to work for it.

You follow the adage of hoping for the best and planning for the worst, but this is a drastic underestimation of the effort required to meet a goal. You need to hope and you need to plan, but you need to plan for the effort it will require to attain a goal, especially if that goal is life-altering. Hope for the best and plan for what you can. (The words to live by that rhyme are the best, right?)

For instance, if your goal is to lose weight, how do you plan for it? How do you plan for the effort required? You may need to have a little “come to Jesus” meeting with yourself if you have a realistic hope of getting this done.

With any goal to make a significant change, ask yourself: What will it take? Am I willing to do what it takes? Am I ABLE to do what it takes? Repeat steps 2 and 3 several times and make sure you get the same answer. As the wisest woman I ever met once said—you can only take people where they are willing AND able to go. You can apply this to yourself, as well—you can only take YOURSELF where you are willing AND able to go.

Hope without action is potential energy that never becomes kinetic. It sits there, waiting for its moment. And maybe we do the same, sitting there with hope, or a wish, or an expectation. But at some point, hope isn't enough. You have to get up and out of your comfort and take action. Hope is vital to human survival, but it cannot operate on its own merits, it must be driven by courage and transformed into action, otherwise it is just a warm, soft, comfortable blanket. And a comfortable blanket feels lovely and safe, but it will not bring about change, it will not improve your life and it cannot protect you from real, tangible, corporeal danger. The blanket can always be there wrapped around you, but you have to stand up, you have to take the steps to turn the potential energy of hope into kinetic, productive action.

On this eve of hope, with a new year only a day away, we can choose to believe again in ourselves. We can use the potential energy encapsulated in our hopes to drive us to effective action.

In the words of Dian Tinio:

“This year, I am believing again. I am believing in myself, that there is beauty inside me, that I am a work of art. I am believing that I can do the things I've always wanted to do. This coming year, I am believing again in people, that there are those with good intentions, with kind hearts. That there are people who actually want to love me for all I am flaws and all. This year, I am going to be honest with myself, with people. I am going to be honest with life, with what I want, with what I feel – and maybe life will give it to me.”

I would like to make some revisions to her words, and so with Dian's words as my inspiration, I propose the following:

“This year, I am believing and hoping again. I am holding on to the hope that I will see the beauty in myself and accept that I am a work of art. I am believing that I can do the things I’ve always wanted to do, and that I can be honest with myself about my limitations and work with them to meet my goals. This coming year, and at all times regardless of the date, I will hold onto the hope that there are still good people with good intentions and kind hearts, and I will align myself with them. I will hold the hope that there are people who will see the good in me and accept me for my imperfections. When I am honest with myself and the Universe and I am willing to work for what my hopes point out to me, I will trust in life to allow me to have it.”

In each Order of Service, you will find a purple bookmark with a feather post-it at the top. I invite you to take this with you today, and to write on the feather a hope you have for yourself. May it be a reminder to you that hope lives in you always, and that giving acknowledgment to that hope by writing it and making it known to the Universe can give it life and draw it to the surface when you need it the most.

May you all have the hope that will point you toward truth, the truth that will point you toward hope, and the support of your own heart and the hearts of those around you to realize your hopes.

May it ever be so. Blessed Be you all.