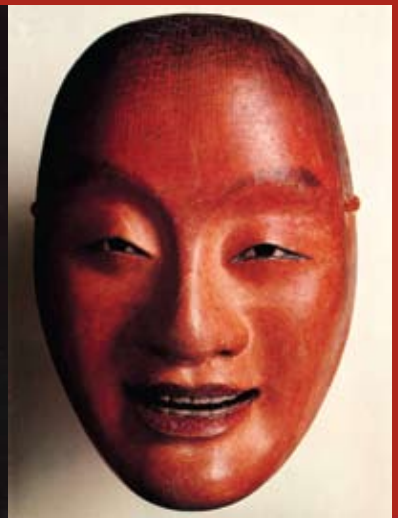




The Place Beyond Fear and Hope

In difficult times it takes effort to stay grounded in the present, but it is only there, says Margaret Wheatley, that we will find a place unclouded by hope and fear.



HOPE AND FEAR HAVE BEEN IN THE NEWS—and in our experience—a great deal of late. We had watched for years as the future disappeared under disabling clouds of fear. Then suddenly, we again could see the sky, bright with hope and the possibility of change.

President Obama's election was heralded as the triumph of hope over fear. But since that glowing dawn of last November, the world's dilemmas and terrors have again cast their long shadows. We continue to be confronted by the complexities of our interconnected fates, resisting solutions. Our hearts continue

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to be challenged by the terrible things that humans should not be doing to other humans. Our Western worldview of material ease and endless progress has been shaken. Economic failures have worsened life not only for ourselves but everywhere in the world, among those who knew abundance and those who knew only poverty.

Many of us have worked hard for many years to create a better world. We have worked for a world where more people would be free from suffering—the physical suffering of poverty, disease, and loss, and the emotional suffering of ignorance, misperception, and invisibility. In this time of rekindling hope, we must also acknowledge that suffering everywhere, both material and spiritual, has increased.

For me and most of my colleagues, life these days is a roller coaster ride between hope and fear, oscillating wildly between what's possible and what is. Like all roller coasters, this one is both exhilarating and terrifying, often simultaneously. We are fully engaged in being part of the solution, and then we plunge into despair at the enormity of the challenges and the fear that our efforts will fail.

And yet, such a wild ride between hope and fear is unavoidable. Fear is the necessary consequence of feeling hopeful again. Contrary to our belief that hope and fear are opposites where one trumps the other, they are a single package, bundled together as intimate, eternal partners. Hope never enters a room without fear at its side. If I hope to accomplish something, I'm also afraid I'll fail. You can't have one without the other.

Those of us raised in Western culture were never taught that fear is the price of hope. Rather, we can't envision life without hope. Hell, according to Dante, is the place devoid of hope; he warned Christians condemned there to "abandon all hope, ye who enter herein." The Hebrew prophets warned that without vision, the people perish.

Hope is what propels us into action. We've been taught to dream of a better world as the necessary first step in creating one. We create a clear vision for the future we want, then we set a strategy, make a plan, and get to work. We focus strategically on doing only those things that have a high probability of success. As long as we "keep hope alive" and work hard, our endeavors *will* create the world we want. How could we do our work if we had no hope that we'd succeed?

Motivated by hope, but then confronted by failure, we become depressed and demoralized. Life becomes meaningless; we despair of changing things for the better. At such a time, we learn the price of hope. Rather than inspiring and motivating us, hope has become a burden made heavy by its companion, fear of failing.

So we have to abandon hope, all of us, and learn how to find the place "beyond hope and fear." This is a familiar concept in Buddhism, yet little known in Western thinking. Liberated from hope and fear, we are free to discover clarity and energy, but the journey there demands behaviors we're not familiar with or have actively avoided. Here are a few markers of this journey, blessed wisdom gleaned from the experiences of those who have persevered and maintained steadfast focus even when their efforts have yielded little or no results.

Rudolf Bahro, a prominent German activist and iconoclast, describes the first step: "When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure." Bahro offers insecurity as a positive trait, especially necessary in times of disintegration. Yet is it conceivable to think that feeling insecure would increase our ability to stay in the work of creating something new?

I don't know what Bahro meant by "insecure"; however, I've noted that those who endure, who have stamina for the long haul and become wiser in their actions over time, are those who are not attached to outcomes. They don't seek security in plans or accomplishments. They exchange certainty for curiosity, fear for generosity. They plunge into the problem, treat their attempts

as experiments, and learn as they go. This kind of insecurity is energizing; people become engaged in figuring out what works instead of needing to be right or worrying about how to avoid failure. Whenever they discover something that *does* work, there's a huge rush of energy, often accompanied by laughter.

A willingness to feel insecure, then, is the first step on the jour-

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ney beyond hope and fear. It leads to the far more challenging state: groundlessness. This is also a core concept in Buddhism—knowing that nothing ever remains the same, learning to live with the unrelenting constant of change, realizing that even the good things won't last forever, accepting that change is just the way it is.

Life now insists that we encounter groundlessness. Systems and ideas that seemed reliable and solid dissolve at an increasing rate. People who asked for our trust betray or abandon us. Strategies that worked suddenly don't. Groundlessness is a frightening place, at least at first, but as the old culture turns to mush, we would feel stronger if we stopped searching for ground, if we sought only to locate ourselves in the present and do our work from *here*.

All fear (and hope) arises from looking backward or forward. The present moment is the only place of clear seeing unclouded by hope or fear. The nineteenth-century Tibetan master Patrul Rinpoche stated this perfectly: "Don't prolong the past, don't invite the future, don't be deceived by appearances, just dwell in present awareness." Of course, trying to be present when everything around you is crashing down is not easy, but then, nothing is these days. It takes enormous effort and discipline to keep recalling ourselves back to the present moment, especially when we see that decisions being made in the present are harming people or will have disastrous impacts in the future. Yet only in the present moment, free from hope and fear, do we receive the gifts of clarity and resolve. Freed also from anger, aggression, and urgency, we are able to see the situation clearly, take it all in, and discover what to do. This clarity reveals "right action"—those actions that feel genuinely appropriate in this moment without any concern about whether they will succeed or not.

Vaclav Havel describes hope as an attribute we carry in us always, a state of being that is not dependent on outcomes. He led his nation, the former Czechoslovakia, to freedom from Soviet rule in the "Velvet Revolution." As a poet-playwright-activist-leader, he has given the world many choice and compelling insights. Here's his description of hope: "Hope is a dimension of

the soul ... 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. ... It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.”

Hope is not related to accomplishment. It is, quite simply, a dimension of being human. To feel hope, we don't have to *accomplish* anything. Hope is always right there, in our very being, our human spirits, our fundamental human goodness.

If we know that we *are* hope, it becomes much easier to stop being blinded or seduced by hopeful prospects. Instead of grasping onto activities that we want so desperately to succeed, we can see clearly and simply what to do. Grounded only in who we are, we discover those actions that feel right, rather than those that might or

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might not be effective. We may not succeed in changing things, but we choose to act from the clarity that this is right action for us. People who endure and persevere for their cause describe clarity as a force arising within them that compels them to act. They express this by saying, “I couldn't *not* do it.”

Thomas Merton, the famed Christian mystic, counseled a despairing friend: “Do not depend on the hope of results ... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. ... you gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. ... In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.”

Merton's advice is completely contrary to current career coaching. Don't worry, he says, that our work will be worthless, achieve no results, or might even create results contrary to what we want.

Many years ago, I took Merton seriously and abandoned all hope of ever saving the world. This was extremely heart-wrenching for me, more difficult than letting go of a love relationship. I felt I was betraying my causes, condemning the world to a terrible end. Some of my colleagues were critical, even frightened by my decision. How could I be so irresponsible? If we give up saving the world, what will happen? Still today, I have many beloved colleagues who refuse to resign as savior. They continue to force their failing spirits and tired bodies back into action one more time, wanting angry vehemence to give them vigor.

I didn't give up saving the world to protect my health. I gave it up to discover right action, what I'm supposed to be doing. Beyond hope and fear, freed from success or failure, I'm learning what right action feels like, its clarity and energy. I still get angry, enraged, and frustrated. But I no longer want my activities to be driven by these powerful, destructive emotions. I've learned to pause, come back to the present moment, and calm down. I take no actions until I can trust my interior state—until I become present in the moment and clarity emerges undimmed by hope and fear. Then I act, rightly, I hope.

Merton spoke truthfully. It isn't outcomes that matter. It's people, our relationships, that give meaning to our struggles. If we free ourselves from hope and fear,

from having to succeed, we discover that it becomes easier to love. We stop scapegoating, we stop blaming, and we stop being disappointed in each other. We realize that we truly are in this together, and that's all that matters.

I know this to be true from my work, through The Berkana Institute, with colleagues in very desperate places. Zimbabwe has been the most compelling teacher—watching our friends and colleagues there deal with the descent of their country into violence, terror, and starvation, the result of a dictator gone mad. We've stayed in close contact by e-mail, phone, and periodic visits. We've learned that no matter how despairing the circumstance, it is our relationships that offer us solace, guidance, and joy. As long as we're together, as long as we feel others supporting us, we can persevere. A Zimbabwean, in her darkest moment, wrote: "In my grief I saw myself being held, us all holding one another in this incredible web of loving-kindness. Grief and love in the same place. I felt as if my heart would burst with holding it all."

Thomas Merton was right. We are consoled and strengthened by being together. We don't need specific outcomes. We don't need hope. We need each other.

Liberated from hope and fear, we find ourselves receiving the gift of patience. We abandon the pursuit of effectiveness and watch as our urgency fades and patience appears. Patience is, perhaps, this journey's destination. St. Augustine taught this infuriating truth: "The reward of patience is patience." Years ago, the Dalai Lama counseled a group of my colleagues who were depressed about the state of the world to be patient. "Do not despair," he said. "Your work will bear fruit in 700 years or so."

Can we do our work without needing to see results? Can we be content that our work *might* bear fruit, but not in our lifetime? Can we cheerfully plant seeds with little concern for the harvest? Consider the visionary leadership of Moses and Abraham. They carried promises given to them by their God, but they also knew they would not live to see these promises fulfilled. They led from faith, not hope, from a relationship with something greater beyond their comprehension. T.S. Eliot describes this better than anyone, in "Four Quartets":

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

My heart holds the image of us journeying in this way through this time of disintegration and rebirth. Insecure, groundless, patient, beyond hope and fear. And together. ♦

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