

Sometimes when I set out to write a sermon, I end up in a different place than I intended to. This is one of those times.

As I listen and read about what is going in the world, I find it harder and harder to be hopeful, to be optimistic, and that got me thinking about hope, and what it means to hope, and what it means to give up hope.

I've spoken about a little about hope in the past, and the work of Joanna Macy, and the book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*.

I'd made the assumption that hope is always a good thing. Now I'm beginning to think that this isn't always the case, and that the proper response to the mess we're in is to go crazy.

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It's important that we understand the complexities of hope.

Human beings have been thinking and writing about it for centuries. Hope is an emotion, a cognitive skill, a healing mechanism, and a myth.

We hope for many things. For better life for ourselves and our children. For a pony for Christmas. Some hope in the Resurrection. Some hope to be cured of cancer, or released from addiction.

Hope can help us heal, and get through the crises of life.

There are many kinds of hope, depending on who you talk to. Lazy hope and authentic hope. Goal oriented future hope. Desperate Hope. Borrowed Hope. Bargainers Hope. No Hope, Lost Hope, False Hope and Real Hope.

Hope springs eternal in the human breast.

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Many of us probably first learned of hope from the story of Pandora's Box, that misogynistic tale that lays all the ills of the world at the feet of women.

In classical Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman on earth. Zeus ordered Hephaestus to create her. So he did, using water and earth. The gods and goddesses endowed her with many gifts: Athena clothed her, Aphrodite gave her beauty, Apollo gave her musical ability, and Hermes gave her speech.

When Prometheus stole fire from heaven, Zeus took vengeance by presenting Pandora to Prometheus' brother Epimetheus. She brought with her another gift from Zeus, a jar she had been warned not to open. Of course, she opens the jar, which contains death and many other evils which were released into the world. She quickly closes the container, but the whole contents had escaped except for one thing that lay at the bottom – Expectation, or Hope, depending on the translation.

It appears that theft and vengeance and deception were already loose in the world, and weren't considered evil. And at the end of the tale, hope is still in the jar.

Is the jar a home for hope, or a prison? Is Hope the expectation of good, or of evil?

These questions still resonate, and many scholars and philosophers have spent a lot of time debating the meaning of the tale.

What we know is that hope did not fly away.

As Emily Dickenson noted in her poem of the same name, "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all."

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Hope can be defined as an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes. More technically, hope is expectation moderated by probabilistic estimation of a desired positive event.

That probability lies on a scale from zero to 100%. At the lower end of the scale we feel pessimistic, and as our estimation of a positive outcome goes up, so does our sense of optimism.

But one hell of a lot of research has shown that human being consistently over-estimate the chances of positive outcomes, and under-estimate the chances of negative outcomes.

Which actually makes a certain amount of sense, if you think about it. It's to our advantage to believe that our thoughts and actions will benefit us. It allows us to act with confidence in the face of the uncertain future.

Otherwise, we might be paralyzed with fear. Fear is negative hope, the certain expectation of loss.

The Buddhists say that “Hope and fear chase each other’s tails,” and we are constantly trapped in that vicious cycle.

How are we to escape?

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How many of us remember President Obama’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention?

I confess I don’t. I wasn’t paying attention at the time. But here’s part of that speech.

In the end, that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope? John Kerry calls on us to hope. John Edwards calls on us to hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism here — the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't talk about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. No, I'm talking about something more substantial. It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!

Four years later, he was elected to the presidency of the United States.

And most of us got lulled into complacency, into the false hope that things had finally changed for the better.

Meanwhile, the enemies of democracy and social progress plotted, organized and acted. They played a ruthless strategic ground game, taking over state governorships, legislatures, and local school boards.

Meanwhile, the economic situation got worse for millions of Americans, setting up the conditions for a populist groundswell against the status quo.

Hope lulled us. Hope lead us into disaster.

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I’ve given up hoping.

Hoping that our species will stop defiling the earth. Hoping that our leaders will do the right thing. Hoping that things will somehow turn out right. Hoping that our political and economic systems will change.

It's strangely liberating.

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Derek Jensen, the author and activist, has this to say about giving up hope:

A wonderful thing happens when you give up on hope, which is that you realize you never needed it in the first place. You realize that giving up on hope didn't kill you. It didn't even make you less effective. In fact it made you more effective, because you ceased relying on someone or something else to solve your problem, you ceased hoping your problems would somehow get solved through the magical assistance of God, the Great Mother, the Sierra Club, valiant tree-sitters, brave salmon, or even the Earth itself, and you just began doing whatever it takes to solve those problems yourself.

When you give up on hope, something even better happens than it not killing you, which is that in some sense it does kill you. You die. And there's a wonderful thing about being dead, which is that they, those in power cannot really touch you anymore. Not through promises, not through threats, not through violence itself. Once you're dead in this way, you can still sing, you can still dance, you can still make love, you can still fight like hell, you can still live because you are still alive, more alive in fact than ever before. You come to realize that when hope died, the you who died with the hope was not you, but was the you who depended on those who exploit you, the you who believed that those who exploit you will somehow stop on their own, the you who believed in the mythologies propagated by those who exploit you in order to facilitate that exploitation. The socially constructed you died. The civilized you died. The manufactured, fabricated, stamped, molded you died. The victim died.

And who is left when that you dies? You are left. Animal you. Naked you. Vulnerable (and invulnerable) you. Mortal you. Survivor you. The you who thinks not what the culture taught you to think but what you think. The you who feels not what the culture taught you to feel but what you feel. The you who is not who the culture taught you to be but who you are. The you who can say yes, the you who can say no. The you who is a part of the land where you live. The you who will fight (or not) to defend your family. The you who will fight (or not) to defend those you love. The you who will fight (or not) to defend the land upon which your life and the lives of

those you love depends. The you whose morality is not based on what you have been taught by the culture that is killing the planet, killing you, but on your own animal feelings of love and connection to your family, your friends, your landbase, to your family not as self-identified civilized beings but as animals who require a landbase, animals who are being killed by chemicals, animals who have been formed and deformed to fit the needs of the culture.

When you give up on hope, when you are dead in this way, and by so being are really alive, you make yourself no longer vulnerable to the cooption of rationality and fear that Nazis inflicted on Jews and others, that abusers like my father inflict on their victims, that the dominant culture inflicts on all of us. Or is it rather the case that these exploiters frame physical, social, and emotional circumstances such that victims perceive themselves as having no choice but to inflict this cooption on themselves?

But when you give up on hope, this exploiter/victim relationship is broken. You become like the Jews who participated in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. When you give up on hope, you turn away from fear. And when you quit relying on hope, and instead begin to protect the people, things, and places you love, you become very dangerous indeed to those in power. In case you're wondering, that's a very good thing.

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There is a paradox at the heart of hope.

Admiral James Stockdale was the highest ranking US military officer in the Hoa Loa prisoner-of-war camp during the Vietnam war. He was brutally tortured more than twenty times over the eight years he was imprisoned from 1965 to 1973. During that time he dedicated himself to helping the other soldiers survive the ordeal. Jim Collins, author of the book *Good to Great*, asked Stockdale how he endured, and who in the camp failed to endure. In answering he said: *"This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you cannot afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever that may be."*

Jim Collins summarizes this wisdom as the "Stockdale Paradox":

Retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, and at the same time, confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they may be.

That's a hard prescription. But these are hard times, and they are going to get harder.

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Our political and economic system is corrupt and out of control, and it uses hope and fear as weapons, as tools of manipulation.

Some part of us still believes that the opposition will play by the rules, listen to reason, act for the common good. That niceness and moral rightness will carry the day. That Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security will be there for us. That the social contract hasn't been torn up and thrown away. That we have history on our side.

We can no longer afford such illusions.

If we are to prevail, we must, like Admiral Stockdale and his companions, confront the brutal facts of our current reality, while staying faithful.

We must stay faithful. And faith is not hope. Faith is a psychosis, so to speak; it forces whoever is faithful to be completely reliant on the notion of a particular outcome, rather than the probability that the outcome will happen despite the environment.

Ultimately, all faith is blind.

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It seems that I ended up in a rather difficult spot. In the dark and without hope, so to speak.

What to do? What to do?

As I said at the beginning, I believe the proper response to our situation is to go crazy.

Crazy faithful, to start. Although faith may be blind, it does not leave us in the dark. Rather, it illuminates everything in us and around us.

Crazy creative. When we realize that the systems we relied on have broken down and no longer act in our best interests, we are free to imagine and try out new ones.

Crazy hopeless, liberated from the cooption of rationality and fear that keeps us caged. Stripped of our illusions, we can act with clarity and compassion.

Crazy compassionate. Ruthlessly compassionate. To quote Dr. Marcia Sirota: *True compassion has nothing to do with being nice and everything to do with doing the right thing for ourselves and others.*

To be ruthless is to be unrelenting, adamant, relentless. With ourselves and others. We can no longer afford the luxury of misguided niceness. Too much is at stake.

And make no mistake, these are also spiritual practices. They will test us. They will tear us down, and rebuild us.

I realize that's a scary proposition. It's scary for me. I've been complacent. I've staked too much on false hopes. I have a good life, and I don't want it to change.

But I'm more scared of the alternative, and I have faith that you are to.

Let's go crazy. Together.