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Thriving Together The Rev. Christine Robinson

Introduction

We all, I think, aspire to thrive, a word that comes to us from the plant world and means at its base, “growing.” Applied to human beings over the age of infancy, however, it means a lot more than that. Thriving is a big umbrella of a human condition, different for different people. It takes some combination of factors: health and happiness, succeeding, connecting, learning, self esteem, feeling effective, having meaning and purpose, feeling loved and giving love. You don’t need all of these things to thrive, just some of them. It’s possible to thrive even when we are not healthy, when life is not totally satisfying to us, or when our stress levels are high. Thriving doesn’t look like what we think it looks like.

The media teaches us that Thriving means being young and healthy and fit and beautiful and accomplished, thin, well educated, financially secure and smiling with straight, white teeth. We are bombarded with images and stories about this kind of thriving, and it is sometimes hard to have any other picture in our minds about thriving, especially when we lack some of those qualities. And therefore, since at least some of these factors are out of our control, and others are, at best, long term projects, we start thinking that we are not thriving, or couldn’t thrive.

But thriving is a big umbrella. Some poor people thrive. Some kids with adverse childhood experiences thrive anyway. It is possible to thrive without a college education. It is possible to thrive while incarcerated, though much harder than it should be. It is possible to thrive with poor health, major disabilities, or while terminally ill. I learned about the big umbrella of thriving from my friend Peg.

Peg and I shared a music stand for four years as oboe majors at the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music...the last stand, as we were the lowest performing oboists in the program. We became friends, and stayed friends through the many phases of our lives, until her death two years ago.

My low-performing in my college years had to do with insufficient musical talent. Hers had to do with major physical disabilities, disabilities which became progressively more challenging over the years. When she graduated from college she graduated to an electric wheelchair. When she left her parent’s home for a graduate program, she hired her first full-time caregiver. At 40 she became dependent on a ventilator. None-the less, she absolutely thrived. In 2005, during a time of great public interest in issues of ‘artificial life support’, pulling the plug, and after reading one too many letters to the editor about what makes life worth living, Peg wrote an op ed piece for the Houston Chronicle. Here’s part of it:

Reader: As I type these words, a ventilator gently pushes air into my lungs, I sit comfortably in my motorized wheelchair while a removable sling suspends my arm over the keyboard, and a woman I hired sits in another room of my house ironing and ready to respond should I call for assistance. I am taking a break from the articles I am writing on the results of my research, all while in blissful appreciation of the house I have remodeled to meet all of my accessibility and aesthetic needs, the computer that opens my doorway to the universe, the people who do for me what my own body cannot, and the children and loved ones who fill my life with energy direct from God. I simply cannot imagine how anyone could label this lifestyle as not worth living.

Let us agree, once and for all, that life is not defined by physical functioning. Money is the real artificial life support; if you have it, you can have access to medical science and the personal assistance you need to compensate for any physical impairment. It is our mental functioning that enables us to accommodate the ever-changing physical and social context in which we live. It is our minds that enable us to receive and give love and joy, but even with extensive impairments of mental functioning, love and joy can still be experienced. It is when all ability to love and relate to others is gone that the value of living comes into question.

In my own advance directive, I have specified that I want all possible interventions that would sustain my physical existence, and when I no longer have the capacity to communicate by any means or respond in any way to those around me, then and only then do I want the artificial life support that has sustained me for the past 15 years to be turned off. To all those into whose hands my life may someday fall, know this: I WANT TO LIVE.

The subscript of this op-ed piece reads:

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Hope

You can google “how to thrive” and get a thousand links to articles and blogs and youtubes that will tell you to eat well, sleep enough, get your exercise, cultivate relationships, nurture your self esteem, keep good boundaries. Even go to church, which many studies show has a considerable statistical correlation to thriving, apparently because of the combined advantages of the focus of religious communities on hope and meaning, and on the way they gather and nurture community. And it is all pretty good advice, especially the “go to church” part(!)

But, it is all pretty focused on that image of the individual thriver, the beautiful, competent, healthy, successful person who mostly did it all by themselves. It’s a myth...none of us did it all by ourselves. And, it needs to be said that the greatest deterrents to more people thriving are social in nature, and by no means evenly distributed across the population.

- grinding poverty and the environmental, health care, and education problems poverty causes lifelong....
- the housing crisis and the shocking number of unhoused people in our society.
- The prevalence of dangerous street drugs.
- Racism and sexism and other kinds of prejudice contribute to lack of thriving and are extra burdens on those who are struggling.
- Childhood abuse and trauma which leave scars so deep they affect our very genes.

You know all this. It is a fact that some people have a much easier route to thriving than others. If you feel you are thriving, congratulations and....you have a lot to be grateful for. If you are not, don't add self-blame to your burdens. Just do what you need to do, one step at a time.

And here's my question: Since we are all connected, ...we believe that, right?

...Since we do believe that, and understand that our thriving is at best incomplete unless those around us are thriving, how do I thrive when my neighbors have to beg at street corners for a living, when wars are devastating people's lives, when gun violence seems an insurmountable reality, when entire nations are drowning as the polar caps melt....and I could go on and on. These are enormous problems that I can't solve by myself or in any group I can join. They burden my neighbors terribly and you know that has to burden me, too. If I don't thrive alone and so many are not thriving, how do I cope?

I could just block it all out. I do do that, quite a lot, and it's not just denial. Getting lost in the depths of fury and despair does no one any good. But since another thing I believe...and I imagine you do, too, is that truth should be a guiding value in our lives, and "blocking it out," is a version of living with untruth, I don't think I'm actually going to thrive by denial. That would be fake thriving. Whatever thriving I do has to be along side of the troubles of the world, with clear-eyed understanding that I contribute to some of them whether I want to or not, just by living in this society, and that the things I do to help are drops in the bucket or mostly symbolic in their effect.

To thrive, clear-eyed and reality-focused, in this world, we need, I think, besides sleep and exercise and community and tending to our mental health and all that good stuff that we already know about, we need two things that are hard to find on Google. We need to be doing what we can for the world and our neighbors, and we need hope.

Hope is the foundation. Without hope, we have to choose between despair and a sort of fake thriving best characterized as "eat, drink and be merry in cheerful oblivion to the problems of the world". And that might be cheery, but it's not thriving, because it is not faithful to the values we hold about truth and connection, and we never thrive when we live contrary to our values. Since nothing we do can solve the world's problems, or even seem to everyone like the right way to start solving the world's problems, we do what we can and live by hope.

We sometimes think that hope is a gift of temperament..a careless belief that we don't need to do anything but that everything will work out in the end. But hope is more complicated than

that. Hope is not that “things will work out.”..that is, by themselves without intervention. Imagining that this global warming thing is just some sort of a coincidental blip of nature that will soon go back to normal is not hope, it is cockeyed optimism, which is a form of denial. And we’ve already agreed that we don’t want to live that way. But hope is something else. Hope is that things can CHANGE. Change if we change. Change if our institutions change. Change if we pay for it, learn about it, focus on it, if we work for it. Hope about climate change, say, is hope that some combination of

- human ingenuity,
- nations and institutions deciding to be a part of the solution rather than part of the problem
- and individuals buckling down to live satisfying lives in a new way,

Hope about climate change is that we can find a good life together in spite of the changes we have made to our ecosystem.

It is not impossible, but it is some days hard to be cheerful about it, I know. And that’s like so many problems, personal and social that don’t seem to have easy or obvious solutions that we can implement and bingo, make a difference. And the fact that we can’t be heroes doesn’t stop us from doing what we can. We continue to drop our own small, daily efforts into the bucket of change. We show up at marches. We do what we can, make our own little drops in the buckets of change. We take actual actions to live into our hope, and our actions make us hopeful and eventually the bucket tips into the dawning new world.

Or, it doesn’t. Or it doesn’t, yet. To stay hopeful, we have to remember that we don’t know everything...we don’t know everything about now, and even less do we know everything about the future. What we don’t know is, of course, where hope lies, where the unknown future can produce something unexpected.

It often has. People can bring about astounding change...

- The end of slavery, a particularly evil economic system, and we know how incredibly tenacious economic systems are.
- How women have moved closer, almost everywhere, to enjoying the freedoms men take for granted after thousands of years of oppression.
- Closer to our time, how the Gay rights movement came out of the AIDS crisis.
- Astounding things that looked like...and were, near certainties have also NOT happened...like thermonuclear war.

There are plenty of reasons to hope that as a species, we will continue to thrive. The fact that we don’t know how is just a problem we need to solve.

To be hopeless is to lose sight of the power of goodness and the impulse to survive and grow which is a part of every cell in our bodies. It is to hang on to the conceit that we know everything. It is also to have a small definition of the word, "thrive." To have hope is to have the emotional discipline to keep a place in our heart for the seemingly impossible good outcome and for the ways that human beings make good and worthy lives out of little beyond enough to eat and each other.

If you want to thrive in this troubled world with a clear-eyed understanding of all of it, you need hope. If you want to thrive in this world in which we are all connected, with integrity, you are also doing what you can to help.

I'm sure you already do. You look after each other in this congregation, I bet, and you support it not only because it is good for you but because it's good for others and the community of Taos that it be here. What else do you do? You might tutor, write letters to the editor, support the political party you think is most likely to bring us to a better place. You try to smile at your neighbors. Recycle your paper, donate clothing... What do you do? What drops do you make in the bucket of future goodness? Somebody?

There you are. You do your part. Maybe you could do more? Since doing your part, being a part of the solution feeds your hope, maybe doing more would not only bring more goodness into the world but make your life better. Or...maybe not. Only you know.

So. Eat your vegetables, Tend your people. Come to church. Do your bit. Remember that there is so much you don't know and so much goodness in the world. Thrive.