

HOPE IN HARD TIMES

--by Paul Loeb

From Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time

Working toward sometimes difficult dreams of social justice requires hope. At times we gain it from seeing tangible results from our efforts or the efforts of others. More often, it's a way of viewing the world that can be strengthened and refined through experience, helping us persevere despite all the obstacles. "You have to draw a distinction between hope and optimism," writes Cornel West. "Vaclav Havel put it well when he said 'optimism' is the belief that things are going to turn out as you would like, as opposed to 'hope,' which is when you are thoroughly convinced something is moral and right and therefore you fight regardless of the consequences." Given the meanness of our time, West isn't sure optimism is warranted, that we can necessarily count on a better common future. But his hope won't let him give up.

Hope, in this view, rarely springs from certainty. Instead, it begins and ends in what stirs our hearts, where we place our trust, how we conduct our lives. The more we voice our beliefs and speak to these longings, the more hope has a chance to emerge. We talk with new people, hear inspirational stories, build bonds with new communities. We no longer sit passively, immobilized by despair. Religious social justice activist Jim Wallis captures this self-fulfilling quality when he says, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change."

Those who are hopeful experience as many frustrations and disappointments as anyone else, but they're better equipped to withstand them and thus keep on for the long haul. Some of us believe in a divine spirit that's always present to support us, and in a promise that acts of courage, faith, and compassion will sooner or later make an impact--a promise that as Martin Luther King said, during the Montgomery bus boycott, "the universe bends toward justice." Because this light is always and everywhere imminent, ready to reveal itself, our religious traditions remind us that we're never completely alone and forsaken. Much as human destructiveness can ravage individual lives, communities, and even ecosystems, it cannot destroy the fundamental source of life and, thus, of hope.

Most religious traditions consciously address the question of hope, placing it within the larger spiritual framework of our lives. For those of us who don't believe in a transcendent force or being, the ultimate sources of hope are sometimes more slippery. But they also involve a sense of larger connection, drawing strength from the complex majesty of the natural world, a shifting dance of creation that existed long before humans inhabited the earth, and will exist long afterwards.

When I despair of our culture's greed and cravenness, I often go for a walk on my favorite Seattle beach. It's a long arching cove, with red-barked madrona trees growing on the tall bluffs that rise behind it. Across the water, I see the snowcapped Olympic Mountains. The sun sparkles on the waves. Ferries and freighters go by. After a short time there, I feel calmer, less frenetic, connected with something larger and more enduring. I remember that we inherit a rich and generous planet, which if we treat well, should offer enough to sustain us all.

Even if the past holds no guarantees for the future, we can still take heart from previous examples of courage and vision. We can draw hope from those who came before us, to whom we owe so much. We can remember that history unfolds in ways we can never predict, but that again and again bring astounding transformations, often against the longest of odds. Our strength can come from a radical stubbornness, from savoring the richness of our journey, and from the victories we win and lives that we change. We can draw on the community we build.

Whether religious or secular, social justice activists keep going because we know participation is essential to our dignity, to our very identity, the person we see in the mirror. To stay silent, we say, would be self-betrayal, a violation of our soul. "That's why we were put here on this earth," we stress again and again. "What better thing can we do with our lives?"

"There'll be nobody like you ever again," said legendary environmentalist David Brower. "Make the most of every molecule you've got, as long as you've got a second to go. That's your charge."

This means responding to the ills of our time with what rabbi Abraham Heschel once called "a persistent effort to be worthy of the name human." A technical editor who chaired her local Amnesty International chapter felt demeaned just to know about incidents of torture. To do something about it helped her recover her spirit. "When you stand in front of the creator," says a Long Island grandmother active in challenging sweatshops, "you want to say I tried to make a difference. It isn't going to be what kind of car I had or how big a house. I'd like to think I tried."

Being true to oneself in this fashion doesn't eradicate human destructiveness. We need to live, as Albert Camus suggests, with a "double memory--a memory of the best and the worst." We can't deny the cynicism and callousness of which humans are capable. We also can't deny the courage and compassion that offer us hope. It's our choice which characteristics we'll steer our lives by.

Historian Howard Zinn explores the tension between our best and our worst in terms of how we view America's past. "What we choose to emphasize in this complex history," he writes, "will determine our lives. If we only see the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places--and there are so many--where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction." Zinn continues, "History is full of instances where people, against enormous odds, have come together to struggle for liberty and justice, and have won--not often enough, of course, but enough to suggest how much more is possible."

By deciding which side of history we want to be on we also decide what kind of community we want to part of. "Every day presents infinite reasons to believe that change can't happen," says Sonya Tinsley, a young African American activist in Atlanta, "infinite reasons to give up. But I always tell myself, 'Sonya, you have to pick your team.' It seems to me that there are two teams in this world. And that you can find evidence to support the arguments of both. The trademark of one team is cynicism. They'll tell you why what you're doing doesn't matter, why nothing is going to change, why no matter how hard you work, you're going to fail. They seem to get satisfaction out of explaining how we'll always

have injustice. You can't change human nature, they say. It's foolish to try. From their experience, they might be right."

Then there's another group of people, Sonya believes, "who admit that they don't know how things will turn out, but have decided to work for change. I see Martin Luther King on that team, Alice Walker, Howard Zinn. I see my chaplain from college and my activist friends. They're always telling stories of faith being rewarded, of ways things could be different, of how their own lives have changed. They'll give you reasons why you shouldn't give up, testimonials why we've yet to see our full potential as a species. They believe we're partners in God's creation, and that change is really possible."

"There are times when both teams seem right. Both have evidence. We'll never know who's really going to prevail. So I just have to decide which team seems happier, which side I'd rather be on. And for me that means choosing on the side of faith. Because on the side of cynicism, even if they're right, who wants to win that argument anyway. If I'm going to stick with somebody, I'd rather stick with people who have a sense of possibility and hope. I just know that's the side I want to be on."

Hope may be elusive in the current political time, but only hope allows us to act with dignity and strength. And when we join together and persist, we never know what we might achieve.

Paul Loeb is the author of *Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time* (<http://www.soulofagitizen.org>) and three other books on citizen activism.