

Powered by Hope
by
Bob Rietschel, May 29, 2023

A few thoughts about hope if you will indulge me. My thesis will be that hope is what moves us forward more than any other “thing.” It underlies many things. Why do you get up in the morning and go to work? (If you don’t work, we’ll get to that.) You might tell me you wish to keep living and that you need to earn money to feed and shelter yourself. There’s no role for hope in that, or is there? You think that job will be there because it was yesterday, and you think your employer has money to pay you come payday. You don’t know if those things are true. They may have been true last month or last year, but come tomorrow, will it be so? Maybe the boss skipped town with all the company’s assets, and you will find the bank foreclosed and you are locked out of your place of employment. You don’t know if those things will happen. You hope they won’t happen. We ignore the role of hope in things that are repetitive. It is so implicit in our way of being that we fail to recognize how central it is to our being.

My second point would be that hope is always looking forward. It is our way forward. We make assumptions based on experience and we act as though that makes our actions fact-based. Yet, if we examine those assumptions, we find, as with my closed business example, we are ignoring all the many other things that might happen. We hope that things in the future will be enough like things in the past that we can plan. You know the old joke. Man plans, God laughs. We forget just how much we are hoping things will turn out either favorable to us or at the very least that things behave in the future as they did in the past. We are hoping something worse doesn’t happen. And there is that hope thing again. We don’t hope for the past. You might have something in your past that you hope won’t come back to haunt you. But that hope is really about how the future will turn out. Hope is about the future.

What gets you out of bed when you don’t have to work, and you are financially secure? Do you get up just to read the newspaper, shriek in horror, and go back to bed and pull the covers over your head? Or are you hoping to meet with friends for a game of golf, or a good meal? Are you hoping that somehow things will get better, even against all odds? Like maybe your health will improve or you’ll lose that weight or start that exercise program. Or maybe you hope medical science will find a pill that eliminates the need for diet and exercise. I can get on board with that latter hope. And that brings us to point number three.

Irritational hope is not the same thing as hope. You keep playing the lottery every chance you get because you hope that winning the jackpot will be the answer to your problems. There are countless examples of problems money won’t fix, beginning with health. And there are problems money can fix, like buying food when you are hungry. Of course, if you are in the middle of the Sahara Desert and have all the money in the world, it won’t make food appear. You can hope that you have a satellite telephone and can call for helicopter delivery of a pizza, but isn’t that an irritational hope? The military knows that hope is not a strategy. Irrational hope is not really hope so much as it is a flight of fantasy. Hoping to see a sunrise in the west is not the same as hoping the sun will be out for the parade instead of rain. You plan that parade hoping that the weather will be favorable. That is how hope moves us forward. We may have to move the start time of the parade if there is weather moving in and maybe we can still have our parade, just not when we hoped.

If you lift the hood on a lot of what you call plans, you find hope in there. It is the engine under the hood. Every assumption you make is hope-based. All plans have a hope component. Whether

recognized or not. If things go down in the future the way they went down in the past, the hope element goes unrecognized. That's fine with hope because it was running quietly in the background and didn't disturb your conscience's thoughts.

What happens when hope is lost? Didn't Dante tell us that when we entered "the inferno" to abandon all hope? What happens is despair and depression. A loss of inertia. Now we are just paralyzed and prone to inaction. Why bother? There's no hope. It's a lost cause. Like a sailboat when there's no wind to fill the sails and move the boat. It's called being in irons. Medicine has tried to invent pills for this. Sometimes they are very helpful, other times not so much. Loss of hope is serious stuff. In a different essay, I argued that evil is a loss of hope. Things that you might think of as evil happening to you instead of what you'd hoped for can make you feel that hope was nothing more than an illusion. We've all heard of false hope. Are all hopes false, but some accidentally get messed up so badly that we get the outcome we wanted? Only the double negative can save us? We have to wish for the opposite of what we want in order to get what we want? Are we now trying to use reverse psychology on ourselves in order to save ourselves from despair? I hope not. What is needed when hope seems to have left the building, is a different perspective. You know the saying that things can't get any worse, and then they do? Well, things keep changing. The universal constant in the universe is change. Nothing stays the same and so if things can always get worse, they can also always get better and that is the perspective that is needed when despair sets in. Everything changes with time. Mountains weather away to dust, and continents disappear. Just give it time and circumstances will be different. That nemesis that vexes you might just up and croak. I'll bet you thought they would never leave. These whimsical examples are just to illustrate how something unexpected might break your way and it is why hope can return to replace despair. The problem with despair is like the military problem, hope is not a strategy for moving on from despair. It is a tool. A plan is needed. Hope will necessarily underpin that plan as it does all plans. Hope is what powers us forward.

Do I make it sound easy? It is not and I know that. One of the hardest places to find yourself is to unexpectedly be without a loved one. Whether that person is older or younger, if the loss came out of the blue, you are blindsided. Hopes have been dashed. Grief and sadness rule the day. You wonder why and you wonder how you will get past this. At this low point, nothing looks promising or possible except continued grief and sadness. This is where I want to invoke perspective. Consider that it is you that died unexpectedly. Yes, you. Do you want those left behind to become glued to their shock at your passing, at the fact that you won't be there at the next holiday gathering, that you won't be going shopping together? Or do you want them to acknowledge the loss of hoped-for plans (Remember man plans, God laughs?) and move forward to new relationships and new adventures? Every one of us will die at some point and leave behind people who knew us and will miss us. There will have been plans that suddenly are not realistic any longer and the loss will sting. When our hopes are ripped from us by unexpected death, we feel cheated. We have anger but no appropriate place to direct that hostility. Would the departed want you to act like that? My guess is no. If you were the one who died and you were watching how your absence was causing people to behave, what would you wish for? Maybe a brief period of sadness to grieve the loss of companionship, and a return to normalcy in short order. The new normal of course. People often speak of closure, but I think what they really mean is that there is a time to move on. Put those dashed hopes in the past and start making new hopes for the future. As I've mentioned, hope powers the future. If this seems insufficient, perhaps a bit more time is needed before the future resumes its rightful place as demanding more of your attention than the past. When you let hope displace despair, you are back in the future. The immediate future which is where we live. Powered by hope.

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