

The Importance of Hope



Mark 5:25 "Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all (the money) that she had; and she was no better, but rather (she) grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she (saying to herself), 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'"

That unnamed woman in today's Gospel story apparently never gave up hope that she would recover from her bleeding, though her hemorrhages lasted for twelve years, and though she spent all her money consulting with physicians and seeking a cure, and

still was no better for it, but was actually grew worse off. And yet she never gave up hope.

Last summer, I read a piece in the Washington Post where the author, even though she was journalist herself, admitted that she had been selectively avoiding contact with the news. I know others who are now doing the same these days, especially in this election season! Indeed, almost four in 10 people worldwide (39%) said they sometimes or often actively avoid the news, compared with 29% in 2017, so a 10% increase in the last 5 years, according to a report by Oxford University's Reuters Institute. Traditional news coverage, as she and others have slowly come to realize, was depressing and hopeless. Then she suddenly recognized that most of our news coverage was missing half the story, distorting our view of reality. It frequently overlooked and/or underplayed storylines and dimensions that humans need in order to thrive in the modern world – with the three most notable missing elements being hope, agency, and dignity.

The column that she wrote about this observation sparked an unexpected response. The reporter heard from thousands of her readers caught in the same struggle – wanting to be informed about the world, but not bludgeoned into fatalism. Many of her readers reported that they had taken matters into their own hands. One man, after listening to devastating stories on the

radio, does his own Google searches to find examples of people trying to solve the very same problems. Then he shares the links he has found with his friends and family on Facebook, basically doing a job reporters don't seem to want to do.

Others urged the reporter to check out alternative news sources they had found, including the Progress Network newsletter, which curates stories of human cooperation and ingenuity, and the 1440 daily briefing, which attempts to strip bias from the news. Still others said they have sought refuge in sports, or hyperlocal news, or Wordle, and, for one reader, medieval history.

This year, that same reporter would like to revisit each of the missing elements, starting with the most controversial of the three, hope. So, what is hope? Hope, she writes, is more like a muscle than an emotion. It's a cognitive skill, one that helps people reject the status quo and visualize a better way. If it were an equation, it would look something like: hope = goals + road map + willpower, she concluded. "Hope is the belief that your future can be brighter and better than your past, and that you actually have a role to play in making that so," according to Casey Gwinn and Chan Hellman in their book, "Hope Rising."

Decades of research have now proved that hope, defined *this way*, can be reliably measured and taught. Using 12 questions,

called the Hope Scale – more than 2,000 studies have demonstrated that people with stronger hope skills perform better in school, sports, and work. They manage illness, pain, and injury better, and score higher on assessments of happiness, purpose, and self-esteem. Among victims of domestic violence, child abuse, and other forms of trauma, hope appears to be one of the most effective antidotes yet studied.

Still, there is some much resistance to hope within our culture, even among those who know it best. For a long time, Hellman, a psychologist by training, did not think giving people hope was his job. At conferences, he would wave people off when they asked him how to build their capacity for hope. “I don’t do hope. I study it,” he’d tell them.

The reporter recognized herself in that story. As a journalist, trying to look smart in story meetings, it always felt safer to remain skeptical. It was easier to pitch stories about buffoonery than about human progress. It’s a strange trick of the mind, especially because it’s the news media’s relentless negativity that has led so many people to give up on our institutions – or on journalism. Cynicism feels protective, even when it’s not. Hope seems foolish.

About a decade ago, Hellman decided to stop sitting on the sidelines – partly because of his own life story, where all through high school, he had been homeless, always on the

precipice of catastrophe. And specific people had helped him imagine another life and felt as if he was capable of getting there (remember: goals + road map + willpower). So, he decided he had an obligation not just to study hope but to teach it.

So far, he and his colleagues at the Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa have trained more than 22,000 government employees in Oklahoma, California, and Washington state to cultivate hope on purpose – not just among individuals but across entire systems, in welfare programs, school districts, and prisons, among other places. They have found that it reduces burnout and improves outcomes for workers and those they serve. “It literally is strategic planning,” Hellman says. “Hope is the process. Well-being is the outcome.”

As it is, when journalists try to do hopeful stories, they often end up insulting our intelligence – with stories about small acts of kindness, often involving animals, our journalist notes. There is no goal or road map in these stories, just tender emotions.

But if this other, more muscular kind of hope is critical to human flourishing, then why can't journalists make it part of their job, she thought? It would mean asking totally different questions, just as doggedly as ever: What are realistic goals in the face of the persistent problem? What are some of the ways

other communities have tried to find a solution? And how did they manage to press on, even when things didn't go as planned?

I know it is difficult for many of us to make this shift from despair to hope, but I think our Christian vocation calls us to be agents of hope, to help transform our communities and the world about us, especially in this election year! The more hopeless news we consume, the harder it is to see hope in the wild – and no one consumes more news than journalists. But the research also shows that it is possible. That “Hope is malleable,” says Matthew Gallagher, a clinical psychologist who studies hope at the University of Houston. “It’s not a static thing, like how tall you are. It can change.” We can change, if we want to.

St. Paul wrote a lot about hope. In his epistle to the Romans, he said: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” Do we? Or do we just gripe?

For many of us, hope is a defiant way of being in the world today: ever on the lookout for what is, but also always alert to what might be. We have hope in God, in each other, and in ourselves. We have hope in the goodness of creation and a firm commitment to human kindness.

We religious people mustn't lose our hope, rather we must teach it, and spread it abroad! As St. Paul writes: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Let us all strive then to be like that unnamed woman in today's Gospel, and never give up hope. Amen.