



Sharing hope in a cynical Age

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Oscar Wilde once said, 'There are two tragedies in life. One is not getting what you want. The other is getting it!' The writer Barry Morrow tells about receiving a Fax from a friend, which said, 'Life is a test. It is only a test. If this were your actual life, you would have been given better instructions.'

It is in the movies and the media that we so often get a pulse or insight on the mood or feeling of our times. Thomas Hibbs in his book, *Shows About Nothing*, gives a telling insight into the use of humor in many modern sitcoms, yet tinged with an edge of anger or frustration, he speaks of the MAGISTERIAL USE OF COINCIDENCE, and the general sense of absurdity, meaninglessness and pointlessness of almost all human effort or pursuits that is often portrayed. It is as if the universe is run by a 'dark demonic anti-providence'. Impersonal, malevolent and cruel.

I wonder if the humor serves as a mask for our pain and confusion. Tom Willett in the US gleaned several useful quotes, reflecting on the modern condition.

§ 'Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends.' ~ Woody Allen

§ 'I don't believe in God. I believe in cashmere.' ~ Fran Lebowitz

§ 'Most people past college age are not atheists. It's too hard to be one in society, for one thing, because you don't get any days off. And if you're an agnostic, you don't know whether you get them off or not.' ~ Mort Sahl

§ 'Millions long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.' ~ Susan Ertz.

America is still haunted by the lingering memories

of a once dominant Christian culture, but here in Europe, the deep sense of emptiness, futility and fatigue make any claims to ultimacy, coherence and hope deeply suspect.

However, we cannot so lightly dismiss the quest for hope, as if it is a nice 'accessory', but a non-essential component of daily life. Helena Birenbaum, a Holocaust survivor, joins with others such as Viktor Frankl when she titled one of her books, *Hope is the Last to Die*. David Aikman, the TIME magazine journalist, describes hope as 'the hearts deepest longing.'

Perhaps we need to ask, what do we hope in? What do we hope for? Is there any or sufficient reason to have hope? Before we go any further, let us consider what we might think of when we use the word hope.

We may mean, a wish, a desire, a vague or general longing. Like the desire to be famous or thin or a Nobel Prize winner. We don't do anything or make any effort to attain any of these things, but we think it would be nice to get them or experience them. In this sense, hope is really an illusion or a dream.

OR

We may mean that we have paid a 'down payment' on a house or a car and we are hoping to take possession any day. Or we have planted some vegetables and we are hoping for a crop in due time. In this sense, hope, though involving delay, is a real expectation.

Which brings me to my first point.

I. The Demand for Hope in the Human Heart

The hunger for transcendence, for meaning, for some kind of explanation as to life, its purpose and goal, is seen across history, cultures and in every facet of human enterprise.

A. Camus's Challenging Question

The Existentialists force us to face the emptiness of life on modern terms and insist that we deal with 'dread and anxiety'. Albert Camus suggested that there is one question above all others, 'Why should I not commit suicide?' (See *The Myth*

of Sisyphus)

If there is no REASON to live, why bother? Of course, not all feel this question with the force that many of these writers did, but they raise the issue of looking for an answer or solution in a world of non-transcendence.

B. Hope Then, Through Heroic Acts and Grand Strategies

The work of Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and especially Ernest Becker, explore the ways and means of 'meaning creation' that is central to societies. Becker informs us that at the heart of our heroism and heroic attempts is 'The denial of death'. It stares us in the face, it awaits all of us, it shortens our pleasure, interrupts our illusions and confronts our self-confidence.

Sam Keen puts it well, 'Society provides the second line of defense against our natural impotence by creating a hero system that allows us to believe that we transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth. We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book, to establish a family, to accumulate a fortune, to further progress and prosperity, to create an information society and global free market. Since the main task of human life is to become heroic and transcend death, every culture must provide its members with an intricate symbolic system that is covertly religious. This means that ideological conflicts between cultures are essentially battles between immortality projects, holy wars.'

What am I saying? That even when we 'feel' things are pointless, meaningless or difficult, we still reach out for hope or try to act 'AS IF' we had it anyway.

C. The Hunger for the Ideal, for Perfection

Mark Twain once said, 'You don't know quite what it is you want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache to want it so.' We all sense the deep and pervasive desire to experience real life. We want things to go well, we want to be happy, we want to be satisfied, we want it all to work out, but it so seldom does! Unhappiness, restlessness, discontent characterize our lives. Here are

some witnesses:

§ 'And I still haven't found what I'm looking for.' ~ U2

§ 'Everybody's looking for something.' ~ Eurythmics

§ 'I can't get no satisfaction.' ~ The Rolling Stones

Let's stop and reflect a moment.

There seems to be a deep and gnawing hunger in the human heart that longs for some kind of fulfillment beyond the usual range of satisfactions normally accessible to us.

We all live with the desire to pursue this vague 'something', and our explorations, though many and varied, do not seem to hit the mark.

Frustrated by the lack of success, we often turn to humor or cynicism as an expression of our anger, fear or despair.

II. Hope? You Must Be Joking!

The prophets of suspicion, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and their successors, have given us ample reason to question the 'illusions' of hope. The dark motives that conceal hidden agendas, the abuse of power, position and privilege, the misuse of 'truth' as a weapon of dominance. For these, and other reasons, hope would seem a childish pursuit. Three reasons to reject hope.

A. The Witness of History, Especially the 20th Century

Alexander Pope declared, 'Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.' Lily Tomlin put it this way; 'Things are going to get a lot worse before they get worse.' Where would we begin?

§ The 1st World War and over 13 million dead.

§ The Bolshevik Revolution and over 70 years of oppression.

§ The rise of the Fascists and the illusions of strong men.

§ The 2nd World War and over 55 million dead.

§ The Iron Curtain and the Cold War.

§ Nuclear weapons.

§ The Korean, then Vietnam Wars.

§ The Bosnian, Kosovo conflicts, etc.

Whatever hope is, it would have to be of such a

KIND as able to deal with people in these situations and needs.

B. I Wish You Hadn't Told Me That!

The information explosion and the democratization of knowledge has given amazing access to data, facts and, up until now, concealed resources. New books, biographies, exposés continue to shatter previously held 'images'. The more we learn, the more we discover, the more the 'hidden' comes to light, the more we believe HYPOCRISY is endemic. Lies are everywhere and TRUST is impossible. The success of the deconstruction project is seen as we find ourselves as Francis Shaeffer once put it, 'with our feet firmly planted in mid air'.

C. Phony, Phony, Everything is Phony.

The movie, *Fight Club*, is a dark window on the absurdity of the consuming lifestyle and the impersonal and life destroying patterns that come to mark our postmodern times. Raging against the slow but sure 'emotional and spiritual death' sucking life from us, the answer is directed to violence, aggression and anything that will let us experience REAL life. However, it offers no real or lasting answer, only a personal escape with social chaos as the price.

So where does this bring us, what options do we have?

§ Hope within this life, but all attempts can really be shown to have failed.

§ Hope through transcending life. The Buddhist or Hindu way of denying desire, pursuing detachment and attaining Nirvana. An option that some are seriously pursuing.

§ Hope through a source and way greater than ourselves, greater than the challenges and able to provide an answer and a way.

III. Living and Lasting Hope

G.K. Chesterton once said, 'Christianity is often rejected not because it has been tried and found wanting, but because it is difficult and has been left untried.'

Is there wisdom in the Bible? Are there resources potentially available that though constantly ignored, in fact speak to our human need and the

question of hope better than the alternatives? In the Gospel of John 1: 1-5, we have an answer.

A. There is a God, and He is There and is Not Silent.

God is the Creator and, according to the Bible, the very source of what we seek and need. Light and life. The Biblical message is that hope lies beyond me and in a source and way that I must receive rather than earn or create. The universe does have coherence and, though damaged by sin and death, there is an answer. There is a solution, there is a way out.

B. There is a Power Which Can Change Me and Help Me.

The Bible calls this salvation through the work of God's Holy Spirit. My struggle with guilt, shame, emptiness and meaninglessness, can be addressed by receiving the benefits of Jesus voluntary sacrifice for me, and by a living, active and ongoing relationship with God. However, I must abandon all the empty pursuits and vain attempts to have hope on my own terms or to simply live in avoidance of the question and need.

C. My Present and My Future Can Rest Secure in God's Care,

God's Provision and God's Promises.

According to the Apostle Paul, 'Eye has not seen and ear has not heard.... All that God has prepared for those who love Him.' 1 Corinthians 2: 9 ~ The hope revealed in Scripture and brought to us through Christ and the Holy Spirit is more than able to meet our intellectual and existential concerns. As C.S. Lewis put it, 'We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it... At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendour we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.'

(The Weight of Glory, C.S. Lewis)

As John said in a letter to the early Christians, 'He that has the Son has life.' It is this life that can truly bring lasting hope in a cynical age.