

Spiritual Practice: The Hope Journey

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Readings

Hebrews 11: 1, 3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.

From *Christ Beside Me, Christ Within Me: Celtic Blessings*
by Beth Richardson

Welcome, Spring

Long nights and cold days,
Fallow fields and dormant trees,
A journey of the inner world.
I open my eyes and see light.
Warmth breaking through,
Promise of new life
Coming out of death.
Resurrection.
Welcome beauty.
Welcome, buds.
Welcome, newness.
Inside and all around me.
You, God, source of hope,
Source of healing,
Source of life.
Welcome, welcome.
Make your home in me.

One of the things ministers know is that providing space for God talk is a delicate matter. Places of worship are among the few locations where it's possible to have regular conversations and to entertain thought-provoking ideas about how to live in and help make this a better world. You and I know for a fact that there are those among us who struggle to believe, have doubts about believing, waver back and forth about it: sometimes *yes*, sometimes *no*. We look for ways to discern and understand God's presence, particularly when things are not going the way we would like them to. The reading from Hebrews is a case in point. "Faith in God is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." This is one of the ancient ways of saying that to believe in a larger reality (Creator, Force, Energy, Power, God) working for good in the larger global picture is indeed a necessary step. To believe in something that is basically intangible but integral to our well-being requires a "leap of faith." It can help also to learn from others who believe in something, to understand how they experience its existence, especially when it cannot be seen or felt.

The medical field is one of the places where one can have experiences that pull one into the mysteries of life. Being present in a delivery room when a new life came into being was always one of the most miraculous, sacred moments of my life. Watching that little entity, sucking in that first breath, fully becoming a human made me a believer in "something larger." Those experiences have helped shape my own image of God to be the very air that sustains all of us, and they have given me other concepts about that vastness to think about. But let's go back to believing in the intangible presence and identifying some of the ways we might experience the intangible presence in tangible ways. We know you can't dish up compassion, drink empathy, wash with love, or apply a peace lotion, but you may have personal experiences of feeling all of these things as your own life unfolds. I am adding *hope* to this list for us to think about this morning.

Before going on, I have to tell you a true story. I was literally at this point in writing the message at my computer on Tuesday, thinking about examples I could use to talk about experiencing the intangible presence in tangible ways, and my cell phone rang. I answered it and the person at the other end said:

Hi Ann, it's Hope. While I am calling to thank you and Bill for the good work you have been doing as our bridge ministers, I am also acting on a guidance I received that I have learned I must follow to also tell you that both my sister and I survived devastating diagnoses of TB and polio and that you too are supported in your total healing!

I was speechless for a bit, as this synchronicity caught me by such surprise! I recovered enough to thank Hope and tell her what I was doing and how it related to what I was trying to find words to say in the message. I was struck by so many things all at once, all I could say was *I think God has both great timing and a sense of humor*. Hope in turn related how this guidance had come to her as a notion which at first she didn't want to act on. But of course she did act on it, and she said "I've learned when I feel such guidance, I better act on it, which in my 95 years I've always tried to do." I can't think of a better example of how an intangible higher power can be made tangible in our lives than this exchange I had with Hope. Thank you, Hope, for being the conduit and giving me permission to share our story!

To continue on a bit more about the path of hope, I want to borrow a few thoughts from author Diane Eshin Rizzetto and her Zen guidance book *“Deep Hope.”* Rizzetto begins with the notion that “hope is a journey, not a destination.” She says the most common assumption about hope is that it is a kind of optimism or belief that particular events and conditions will unfold in a way that results in a particular outcome. Deep hope springs from the energy of life itself. Because it is embedded in the journey, not the destination, it sustains us no matter the outcome of a particular course of events. Deep hope is what comes forth when we open our hearts and minds to what we can offer and what we receive. It arises when stepping forward in skillful action with fortitude and courage that is grounded in patience and clarity. It asks us to turn our hearts toward the good that is possible, whatever the good may be. Deep hope is more than simple optimism or wishful thinking for a specific outcome. Rizzetto reminds us that it was in deep hope that Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraged us to keep raising our voices in solidarity and marching, step by step. Hope understood in this way goes beyond the probable to the possible. It encourages us to carry on in spite of what things might look like at the moment.

So that we don’t get lost in words, let’s say what we mean by hope. Simply put, it’s the belief in something greater helping make something better. When do we need it? Throughout our lives we find we need hope as we experience: our first days of school, our teen and young adult years, entering love relationships and marriages (or leaving or losing them), becoming parents, facing medical issues, injuries and losses, what we face whenever we take a risk or embark on new starts. Through all these experiences, we have hope for what will happen.

Today being Mother’s Day, let’s look at the hope journey that occurs with becoming a parent. From Lisa Miller’s book *The Spiritual Child* we read:

At some point when you arrive into parenthood, you know you have arrived into something much bigger. Planned or unplanned, joyful or heavy with uncertainty, it is a threshold passage in the deepest sense. A child is a wake-up call from the universe. A child is the universe saying, “it’s time to reconnect with this.”

Mothers and fathers have hopes for their children and their futures. One only has to look at the large crowds at the southern border this week to see thousands of folks with children seeking and hoping for a different, better future for themselves, their children and the family members they left behind. They hope that here in the United States they will find something different from what they have been experiencing in their home countries. We can go down a pathway of hope for our children, even without having a particular destination in mind other than arriving somewhere better than where we are. Parenting fills us with hope on almost a daily basis, no matter what age our children are.

How and where do we find hope or engage it? Again, our Buddhist author is helpful in pointing out that

hope invites us to engage our capacity for perseverance, determination, wholeheartedness in whatever life sends our way, fueled by intention to engage in our life and world in a way that is beneficial and supports life. We may feel helpless and hopeless, but if we are patient and hold our desires to help others, that engaging effort will support us in continuing to move forward.

Rizzetto makes a distinction in regard to making the effort. She says, "Oftentimes our effort is fueled by the belief that if we just push hard enough with the right effort, we can create the life we want." Instead of pushing something forward, she suggests we think of hope as taking a step in what seems like the right direction. Wholehearted effort is about fully engaged living. It encourages us to question our beliefs about what we think our life should be and to turn our effort toward being full present in our lives. Being fully present means being present to everything, and that takes effort and perseverance. From a state of presence we can take the first step toward living for the joy of living, and into what is still the unknown future. Doing this takes practice and patience.

With her Buddhist understanding which I share, Diane believes having hope takes a commitment, a personal vow which becomes the "engine that drives human aspiration, advancement and accomplishment." It helps us meet life with open hearts and clear seeing. Thinking of the message I offered several weeks ago on the notion of being "woke," calling us to wake up and do what we can to meet the suffering of the world with wise action, we can see how taking this kind of a vow can fuel a commitment to a life force greater than our self-centered forces.

In closing, I want to point out the path of hope we are walking as a faith community as we await the arrival of our new leader. Through the labor and support of our Board members and the Search Committee, we can dare to hope for the right pastor to come to us, but of course none of us knows the destiny in store for CCC. We know who we have been and who we are right now, but we don't know who or what we will become; there are many possibilities before us. The path forward means we must leave some things behind, so as not to be encumbered by things we no longer need. We have to let go of being comfortable and satisfied with the status quo.

Watching the folks on their paths of hope at the southern border, it's pretty clear that with only the clothes on their backs and maybe a bottle of water someone has given them, they are moving forward with determination and hope in their hearts. They are making radical moves. We too, as a community of hope, are opening ourselves to expand our vision toward the unknown future. Faith in God is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. My friends, we are indeed on a path of Hope.

Amen