

## “How Could We Tire of Hope?”

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*We have only begun  
to imagine the fullness of life.  
How could we tire of hope?  
So much is in the bud.*

### **First reading**

*Hebrews 11:1–3 (New Revised Standard Version)*

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

### **Second reading**

*Vaclav Havel*

*Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.*

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Denis Levertov asks: How could we tire of hope when there is so much more of life before us, so many more possibilities bursting in the bud?

We tire of holding onto hope because sometimes life overwhelms us with too much pain to bear, too many losses and disappointments. Too many defeats. We hang on to our hope for a return to civility in our politics and an end to the toxic rhetoric poisoning our daily lives. We hang on and work to support policies and programs that are fair and just. But sometimes we find our capacity for hope exhausted. Compassion fatigue finally catches up with us and we find ourselves too tired to hope. Many of us hope the mid-term elections coming up will change the calculus of political power in Congress and check some of the corruption and mean policies doing so much damage to our democratic practices and institutions. But what if that doesn't happen? How long can we breathe life into our hopes when setbacks mount?

Those lines, “We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life. How could we tire of hope? So much is in the bud,” come from a Denise Levertov’s poem entitled “Beginners.” She dedicated the poem to activist Karen Silkwood, who died in November, 1974, in a mysterious one-car crash. Karen Silkwood blew the whistle on faulty safety practices at a plutonium fuels production plant and paid for it with her life. This is a poem, I believe that speaks to all of us who find it difficult some days to hold on to our hopes.

## Beginners

Denise Levertov

(dedicated to the memory of Karen Silkwood and Eliot Gralla)

*“From too much love of living,  
Hope and desire set free,  
Even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere to the sea”*

– A. Charles Swinburne, 19<sup>th</sup> century poet

But we have only begun  
To love the earth.

We have only begun  
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?  
–so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?  
–we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,  
only begun to envision

how it might be  
to live as siblings with beast and flower,  
not as oppressors.

Surely our river  
cannot already by hastening  
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot  
drag, in the silt,  
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet–  
there is too much broken  
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other  
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know  
the power that is in us if we would join  
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must  
complete its gesture,  
so much is in bud.

I believe Denise Levertov gives us in this amazing poem the way to revive our hopes when they falter – the way to renew our capacity to imagine and work for justice and peace. There is great transforming power in us when we “join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.”

The biblical text for this morning from the Letter to the Hebrews was written by one of the great missionaries and church leaders of the early Christian Church, Priscilla. She and her husband, Aquila, were close friends of Paul, and he lived with them for nearly two years as they established the Christian Church in the city of Corinth. In this letter, Priscilla addresses the leaders of the church in Rome and urges them to stand fast in the faith. She reminds them how the generation of Christians before them, namely their parents and grandparents, were persecuted and suffered when Nero blamed Christians for the burning of Rome in 64 AD, how they reached out to help the poor and immigrants who were also blamed for the fire and persecuted. Now, as another Emperor, Domitian, demands emperor-worship and threatens persecution, some in the Christian Community in Rome are leaving and joining other religious sects that are under the emperor’s radar. So Priscilla writes in chapter 12:

*So, don't sit around on your hands! No more dragging your feet! Clear the path for long-distance runners so no one will trip and fall, so no one will step in a hole and sprain an ankle. Help each other .... Make sure no one gets left out of God's generosity.* – (Hebrews 12:12ff, *The Message* by Eugene Peterson)

In other words, Priscilla is saying “keep the faith, don’t give up your hopes for living in community and serving others.” In fact, like Denise Levertov, she is reminding those first century Christians of “the power that is in us when we join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.” My friends, it is the same for us today. It is in joining our solitudes in the communion of struggle that our hopes are renewed.

I close with another poem by Denise Levertov.

### **The Fountain**

Don't say, there is not water  
to solace the dryness at our hearts.  
I have seen

the fountain springing out of the rock wall  
and you drinking there. And I too  
before your eyes

found footholds and climbed  
to drink the cool water.

The woman of that place, shading her eyes,  
frowned as she watched—but not because  
she grudged the water,

only because she was waiting  
to see we drank our fill and were  
refreshed.

Don't say, don't say there is no water.  
That fountain is there among its scalloped  
green and gray stones,  
it is still there and always there  
with its quiet song and strange power  
to spring in us,  
up and out through the rock.

May it be so.



Denise Levertov