

Forward House Community Society

PRESENTATION ON HOPE

by Carol Richardson, ED

A moment spent with the evening news or listening to conversations around us, a glimpse at the state of our physical world, evidences that we are in trouble, and we are troubled. The violence committed toward each other, our planet and ourselves is rampant. And violence isn't a set of events separate and distinct from us, although we may individually be peace loving and non-polluting. Violence creeps into our living rooms and our consciousness and our personal relationships to become part of who we are. If we do not commit violence, we are casualties of it, and if we are aware of it and do nothing about it, then we are complicit in it.

What hope, one may well ask, have we got? As has been said, I spend my days with people who live with serious, chronic and pervasive mental illnesses. While I am first - I had better be - to acknowledge that their illnesses do not define them as human beings nor negate their worth and myriad abilities and strength, there are undeniable attendant limitations.

For example: In addition to having the same worries as all the rest of us about their physical health and relationships, and taxes and war, they are also visited by hallucinations; they see, hear and feel things the rest of us don't, things that are usually violent in nature. They may be unable to remember from one moment to the next what someone is saying to them. Their days are ordered around times to take medications, medications that have debilitating side effects. They are plagued by anxiety: they are afraid to go outside and they're afraid to be shut in. They're afraid to be with others and they're afraid to be alone. Their TVs and radios talk to them and telephones and computers are sinister spying devices. They cannot wear certain clothes that will identify them to an enemy. They cannot touch others, or money, or doorknobs, and they cannot eat because they fear their food is poison. Various sounds and movements instill panic. They cannot sleep at night and they cannot get up in the morning. And that's not the worst of it.

These good people can't afford decent housing, or they have neighbors who won't speak to them. Too many have families who shun them. Some have religious leaders who have convinced them they are possessed by the devil and are therefore evil. All of them live in a society that as a whole does not understand their challenges and does not want to, a society that points out to them, relentlessly: "You are different. You are not living by the prescribed set of rules and standards. You don't live like me. You don't fit in. And because of all that, you are bad." Given all of that, what hope, indeed, have they got? So, what is hope? How do we define it?

Thomas Merton defines hope as a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the heart. David Suzuki says hope is freedom from a destructive mindset. The concept of hope exists in most theologies as a kind of faith. Buddhists say hope is an aspect of, rather than the opposite of, hopelessness. It is awareness of what simply is, a detachment from positive outcome and a making sense of things no matter how they turn out.

Some of my friends and family tell me hope is the thing you hang on to during difficult times, the reason we find for carrying on. Hope, they say, is all there is right now - except for the ones who say we're beyond hope, there isn't any. My folks at Forward House tell me that hope is wishing for something you don't have. And there, I think, is the crux of it. If hopelessness is not the opposite of HOPE, as the Buddhists suggest, then FEAR must be. We don't hope for better things when times are good. When we are strong and healthy and in love and the bills are paid, we do not busy ourselves with hoping; we are aware of and celebrating what is.

We hope at times such as we are experiencing right now. Especially, we are hoping war will not erupt because we fear that it will. Hope and fear are opposites, and yet they co-exist. There cannot be one without the other. Therein lies the conflict, the trouble with hope.

Hope is an antithetical pair of feelings, coinciding. The moment we begin hoping, we introduce an element of fear, or at the very least an acknowledgement that we may not get what we're hoping for. We hope to recover from illness, we hope for a promotion, we hope the kids will be OK. At the same time, we fear illness, poverty, rejection, loss, troubled kids, failure.

Hope is necessarily fear based. Still, what's the matter with hope, you may ask? At least there's an awareness of what is, a concept of what's acceptable and what is not, knowledge of right from wrong AND a vision for something more positive. Arguably, without the "bad" stuff, we would be unable to imagine good, or better. But hope always speaks to the future.

The thing we hope for is always a step or a breath away. We can probably agree that we no longer have the past. What's done is done and what's been said has been said and we don't get to re-write history. Similarly, we don't have the future. It hasn't happened yet. The future never really happens, tomorrow never comes. We can have vision, we can have foresight, we might even have ESP, and these qualities we have in our present. That's what we've got: right NOW.

We don't create future, but we can create a present that will influence the future. We make choices every moment of every day that immediately impact our present. Our present choices may influence our choices of tomorrow, but the future's not ours. Hope speaks to the future. Creating speaks to now. And I am remembering that what we fear we tend to attract. If we fear getting caught cheating on an exam, for example, there is belief in the possibility that we could be caught, and we may, consciously or otherwise, say or do things to give ourselves away.

If everyone around us is ill - and a lot of people around us right now are ill - we may fear becoming ill too. We believe in the possibility of communication of disease. What we fear we must also believe is possible, and what we believe tends to become manifest. Losing fear seems to be the answer. It is important to be aware of what is, but fearful? No. And I believe, as we stand at the brink of global warfare, that fear, bar none, is most powerful weapon in the collective arsenal. Not the bombs and missiles and chemicals, but the fear that drives people to use them. We can see how the world is responding to the current fear mongering: with duct tape and plastic, with so-called "real TV" show that exploit the basest, most fearful human traits.

We see fear manifesting as illness. I believe it is time to lose the fear. Odd as it must seem, this means it's also time to stop hoping. Start living instead. Stop fearing: start creating the present we value. Stop believing in, fearing, and thereby investing in the power others would have over us, and start believing in our SELVES.

How does one translate all that into behavior? Referring back to the mentally ill: what hope have they got? Their fear is that their neighbors and families and government might be right about them and that they'll never fit in. They fear being indefinitely estranged and ridiculed, and they fear life lived indefinitely at a subsistence level. They fear it because they believe it's possible, and they believe it because it has always been true. And without changing the belief system, it will continue to manifest. Their hope lies in belief in their own capacity and worth. In order to help them recover their sense of personal dominion, belief in self, we are creating a community in which the following are true:

1. All persons, despite their apparent differences, BECAUSE of apparent differences, are celebrated and presumed to have inherent ability, dignity and worth.
2. All persons are responsible for their own words and actions towards self and others.
3. All persons are entitled to opportunities to explore their skills and interests and relationship with self, others and spirit.
4. All persons in this community are safe.
5. All persons can create a present environment consistent with belief in self that is positive, respectful and fulfilling.

Choices are made every day to create our NOW. What signs of hope are there in Oceanside? Hope is evidenced every time a person makes a positive, respectful, love-based decision in the present, for the present.

I see hope in living life unafraid - aware, certainly, but not fearful of what is going on in the world that is beyond our control. Stillness, so that one can achieve awareness of what is, and creation of a positive NOW by making choices from love rather than fear, are things that will influence the future. Our only HOPE is NOW.

Thank you for this moment.