

REASONABLE HOPE

By Kaethe Weingarten

How we think about hope has all to do with whether we can maintain our own. Unlike Nietzsche who wrote: “Hope is the worst of evils because it prolongs the torments of men,” I come down firmly on the side of hope’s significance. Hope confers many advantages but many ways of thinking about hope make it hard to feel and to sustain. I offer “reasonable hope” to this dilemma.

CHARACTERISTICS OF REASONABLE HOPE

The classic images of hope -- a butterfly, a rainbow, an undemanding bird that perches in one’s soul – set up expectations and standards that are without limit. Reasonable hope is both sensible and moderate, directing our attention to what is within reach more than what may be desired but unattainable. Hope refers to feelings one may or may not have.

Reasonable hope is about something we do, preferably with others.

Hope’s objective is most often placed in an eagerly awaited future, with the arc of time between the present and the future filled with anticipation. Reasonable hope’s objective is the process of making sense of what exists now in the belief that this prepares us to meet what lies ahead. With reasonable hope, the present is filled with working not waiting; we scaffold ourselves to prepare for the future.

Reasonable Hope is a Practice. Reasonable hope is something we do with others. It is a verb not a noun. Reasonable hope as a practice is not only about accomplishing a goal but also about aiming toward it.

Reasonable Hope Maintains that the Future is Open, Uncertain and Influenceable.

Reasonable hope knows that an uncertain, unknowable future is its best bet. In dire circumstances, for example, oppression, poverty, or fatal illness, it is precisely because we cannot know what the future may bring that reasonable hope helps us work toward something better than what we are living now. It is because we can join with others, because creative communal synergies can happen, because spontaneous actions do arise from collective commitments that an open future is full of possibilities.

Reasonable Hope Seeks Goals and Pathways to Them. We tend to feel hopeful when the goal is clear, the pathway known, and hopeless when the way is blocked, the goal obscure. Hopelessness arises from the conviction that nothing that one wants is within reach, whether love or security or health. Bolstered by reasonable hope, we realize we must define realistic goals and pathways to them. This is not simple. First, there is often a lot of trial and error. Goals and pathways to them may have to replace each other at a rate one would never have expected or wanted. Second, life deals us circumstances in which we have to select goals and pathways we never thought we could accept. With reasonable hope, we learn to be satisfied with less than what needs to be done in order to ensure that something be done.

Reasonable Hope Accommodates Doubt, Contradictions and Despair. Reasonable hope functions in a gray zone, where doubt, contradictions and despair definitely co-exist. One can feel despair and reasonable hope simultaneously, an experience that many people have. Reasonable hope accepts that life can be messy. It embraces contradiction.

Many activities sustain reasonable hope.

Resist Isolation. When we are hopeless, it is all too easy to withdraw. Yet the task is to resist isolation. Even though it may be the last thing we want to do, we need to join with others around issues we care about even if we are uncertain about what we have to offer. That will change.

Create a daily practice of awe. A daily practice of awe -- be it prayer, meditation, yoga, communing with nature or reflecting in community -- sustains reasonable hope.

Believe that the Small is Not Trivial. Sometimes we can become mesmerized by the enormity of the problems we face. With reasonable hope, we are not casting about for the perfect solution but are considering what may be good enough. From this perspective, we realize that small actions need not be trivial. They may also have ripple effects.

Understand Your Witness Position. We are all witnesses to violence and violation on a daily basis, whether we want to be or not. Only if we remain aware and empowered in relation to what we are witnessing will we sustain reasonable hope. Too often we feel aware but disempowered or even choose to become unaware, rationalizing that “numbing out” is protective. While “numbing out” may be comforting in the moment, it does not confer lasting hope. Only by taking action -- and having clarity about what actions to take -- can we feel competent and effective.

Welcome Joy. It may seem odd to feel joy or to allow oneself to feel joy amidst terrible conditions. Yet joy can support reasonable hope and in some circumstances contribute to it. Moments of joy nourish us and do not detract from the crucial work that needs to be done. Far from it. Joy is a foundation for alliance and solidarity, qualities that are vital to doing reasonable hope with others.

Enjoy Vicarious Hope. Hope confers many advantages. However, we cannot always maintain our hope. When we are hopeless, another channel may open for us: vicarious hope. Vicarious hope arises when we allow ourselves to be influenced by the hope that others express and join in on the actions that they take. This is a bit like drafting during a bicycle race. We accept that we do not have the resources to do reasonable hope and allow ourselves to be buoyed by others who do.

Accept proxy measures of success. We may not be able to solve our target issue, but there are often proxy measures of success. For example, homelessness may be too big to eradicate by a small group of people, but increasing public awareness of the needs of homeless people is not. In one community a single artful poster that stated “A Safe Bed Is A Human Right” jumpstarted a community response to issues of protection and shelter

for the homeless. The group could not immediately wave a wand and achieve its goal of safe shelter beds for all. But by accepting proxy measures to their goal, in this case publicity and community pressure, they came closer. Working with the idea of reasonable hope opens us to options that may previously have been viewed as too distant from exactly what we have wanted.

Seek inspiration in the arts. Inspiring work is out there. Artists are continually wrestling with essential dilemmas and finding ways to render them powerfully visible. Quieting ourselves to drink in the beauty and excitement of an artist's vision—whether music, dance, theatre, film, art or other – supports our own creativity and momentum.

Use global resources. Many of us bemoan the homogeneity of globalization. But there are also extraordinary benefits. Globalization permits conversations across identities and boundaries in thrilling ways. The Internet links us creatively to thinkers everywhere. Take advantage of that.

Look for courage. These are times that require courage of all kinds. Reasonable hope depends on people taking chances, on having the courage to take risks. But doing hope together means that it is incumbent on us all to notice, reach out and support the whistle blowers, the risk takers, the brave so that they do not stay out on a limb, but instead are joined there, like birds on a telephone pole.

Stretch the boundaries: These times create dis-ease. In response to this dis-ease, many of us will pull in our heads, turtling. It doesn't help. Instead, consider taking a leap of faith: push your boundaries, whatever they have been. Do something radically different. Stretch your boundaries and support others who are stretching theirs.

Embrace Resistance. We must resist what is unjust to realize what is just. Recognizing and resisting unfair conditions sustains a practice of reasonable hope. It feels good to notice what is unjust and to work for what is just. Grounded in principles, anchored in commitments, resisting can feel like our roots are deep in the ground and are hearts are soaring. This form of resistance is not about rejection but about connection. It seeks what people deserve, namely a just society. Resisting what is not just and pursuing what is just activates and promotes reasonable hope.

For the unabridged version of this paper see "Hope in a time of Global Despair" at <http://www.witnessingproject.org/our-projects> and *Family Process*: 49:5-25, 2010.