

Slouching Toward Hope

A Talk by Larry Daloz

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*(These are elaborated notes; not a transcription of my talk,
nor are they an attempt at writing a formal article).*

The Challenge

This is a bit of charcoal that I picked up on the beach a couple of days ago [holding it up and handing it around]. It comes from the interglacial layer of organic material laid down perhaps 100,000 years ago. That makes it roughly the same age as us—that is, the latest version, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, as we like to think of ourselves. This is sequestered carbon, locked in a relatively stable form. But if we were to burn it, the carbon would be released into the atmosphere in the form of CO₂. And that's what we have been doing for most of human history. The problem is that for the last 150 years or so, we have been doing it at an increasingly faster rate than the earth's system can absorb it.

In 1884, a Swedish scientist named Svante Arrhenius first made a connection between rising CO₂ and warmer weather. At the time, carbon dioxide levels hovered at roughly 280 ppm, about what they had been for literally millennia. They are now at 385 and climbing fast.

A few decades later, a young Californian who had moved east as a boy to make his fortune, stood back on his native coast and watched the waves pound in.

Once By the Pacific

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.
The clouds were low and hairy in the skies
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
You could not tell but it looked as if
The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken.

Robert Frost

It was Frost, you remember, who thought the world would probably end in fire, though he knew enough of hate to know that “ice is also great, and would suffice.”

I won't take you through the whole litany of horrors. I assume you have long since read and learned enough to be adequately depressed. But just to bring us all up to speed, let me say that we are already firmly in what ecologists call “overshoot and collapse.”

[Explanation pointing out that when yeast overpopulates in grape juice, it dies from its own by-product, namely alcohol. That's overshoot and collapse]

It is already hot enough to melt the north pole. Within a very few more years, the permanent ice over the pole will be melted. This has not happened for 50 million years. Scientists do not know what the impact of open water at the pole will be, but it is bound to affect our weather significantly. Already we are experiencing more severe weather across the globe: fiercer storms, longer droughts in some places, floods in others, and a gradual sea level rise that will turn catastrophic to the tune of some 30 feet when the Ross ice shelf in the Antarctic and the Greenland ice sheets melt. James Lovelock, known for his “Gaia theory” suggesting that the earth should be viewed as a living being, complete with its own respiratory system, has written that by the end of the century, the human race will consist of a few thousand individuals nestled together at the poles [*The Revenge of Gaia*].

“We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather,” writes Bill McKibben. “By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial...A child born now will never know a natural summer...[she] might swim in a stream free of toxic waste, but never see a natural stream...” [*The End of Nature*, pp. 59-60].

[Small groups: How are you feeling? What are you feeling? NOT what do you think about this; not “yes but....” Just what feelings are coming up for you?]

[Harvest]

Into the Dark

Link with comments from group.

Let me suggest a somewhat “unQuakerly” activity for a moment. We Quakers love the Light. We remind one another constantly about that ocean of light flowing over the sea of darkness that George Fox famously saw. But consider for a moment these words of Carl Jung: “One doesn't become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but rather by making the darkness conscious.” Then he added, somewhat sardonically, I think, “The latter is disagreeable and therefore unpopular.” [*Alchemical Studies*, pp. 205-06].

The lights go off fairly frequently on Whidbey Island, and the first thing most of us do,

understandably, is to reach for a flashlight, or light a candle. In the dark, our automatic response is to go for the light. But what if we just sat there for a while? What if instead of turning on the lights to see better, we let our eyes adjust to the dark? What might we then see that we could not with the lights on? What might it mean to *befriend* the darkness? Here's Rilke:

Oh, you Darkness that I come from,
I love you more than all the flames that ring the world,
For the fire makes a circle of light for everyone,
Outside of which no one learns of your ways.

But the dark embraces everything:
Shapes and flames, people and nations,
creatures and me, just as they are.

And it is possible a great power is moving near me.
I believe in the Night.

I want to invite you now into a time of Silence. In the silence, try to *resist* reaching for the light. Let the difficult feelings be. Hold them gently, but don't try to stuff them under the rug. They are your children, as much of you as the Light.

[Silence]

Read Machado:

The wind one brilliant day called to my soul with an odor of
jasmine.

The wind said, "In return for the odor of my jasmine,
I'd like all the odor of your roses."

"I have no roses, all the flowers in my garden are
dead..."

The wind said, "Then I'll take the withered petals
and the yellowed leaves,"
and the wind left.

And I wept. And said to myself,
"What have you done with the garden that was entrusted to you?"

[Pairs]

[Harvest]

The Other Side of Despair

[Link with previous comments]

On the wall in my childhood home hung a coat of arms. On it, the slogan *Dum spiro, spero*: “While I breathe, I hope.”

“Hope is compelling,” writes Julie Neraas, “because it is universal. It crosses all human boundaries: age, race, class, gender, ethnicity, and religious, political, or any other persuasion. Everyone needs it, and almost everyone exhibits at least some measure of hope if they have made it as far as this day., For where there is hope, there is life. And where there is no hope, life is greatly diminished. In fact, to live without hope is barely to live at all. The capacity to hope is an indispensable human quality; even in times of crisis when confidence and trust have been broken, hope sustains us in our living.”
[*Apprenticed to Hope*, p. xii.]

It has been said that like cynicism, despair is “a luxury of the privileged.” For the severely oppressed or poverty-stricken, hope may be all you have.

But hope can also be a trap. There are many kinds of hope, some truly nourishing, and some mainly junk food—feeding only denial, distraction, or impotent paralysis.

- Let’s distinguish hope from mere optimism: “Everything will work out.” “It’s not as bad as you think.”
 (“When optimism dies, hope is born.” – Wm. Sloan Coffin)
- Let’s not confuse it with shallow hope, either : “Don’t worry, we’ll get back to normal soon” or “Maybe they miscalculated and it won’t actually turn out so badly.”
- Nor is it what we might call “small hope”: “I (or we few) will make it, even though most won’t”
- And especially, it is not false hope: Someone will save us—technology, free enterprise, Obama, Santa Clause, Jesus...)

Realistic hope insists on playing the ball where it lays. It demands a fierce fidelity to Truth.

Here’s the Truth: We are in overshoot and collapse. The projections are not too pessimistic; in fact, most are far too optimistic. There is no return to normal. No one is going to come from outside and save us. The tsunami offshore is now fully in view and headed this way. It will strike. Even Jesus lost hope in the end. If you are hoping that we will squeak out of this mess somehow, there is no hope.

“No understanding of hope,” writes Scott Sanders, “can be honest unless it reckons with the absence of hope, the dark night of the soul when nothing comforts and nothing reassures.” [*Hunting for Hope*]

“There is no hope!”

Someone once said that to Joanna Macy.

“So you say there is no hope?” she replied. “So what?”

Note that she did not say “There is too!” nor did she ask what he meant by that. She neither agreed nor disagreed. She said, “*So what?*” ignoring the premise itself—that somehow one had to “have” hope. What’s that about? Isn’t hope something we either *have* or *don’t have*?

Listen closely:

- There is a story that when Carl Jung was speaking to a group of university students once, he was asked, “Do you believe in God?” “No,” he answered, and the students elbowed one another chuckling self-righteously. He waited a moment, then said, “I *know* God.”
- When the people of Le Chambon [story and explanation] were asked why they risked their lives to harbor over 5000 Jewish children during the holocaust, they replied simply, “Because that’s who we are.”
- In our *Common Fire* study, we asked people why they spent their lives working on behalf of the common good. Frequently they would simply answer in a double negative: “*Because I can’t not do it.*” They are inextricably bound to life; deeply connected to one another and to Creation. It is through that fierce knowledge of our connectedness that love flows and commitment follows. There’s nothing more to say.

You just do it. In the end, we keep on against all odds not because we might get out of this fix, but simply because we are Life. We hope the way every life form “hopes”: the way that blade of grass just keeps coming, with dumb, relentless urgency. It will keep coming as long as the life is in it to generate more green cells. It will keep coming in the face of murderous frost, of endless rain, of months of drought. And when it can no longer put up a blade, it will retreat into its roots, keeping a tiny handful of cells alive beneath the earth until the rain returns. And then those cells will take in the moisture, swell, and begin to do their relentless arithmetic again, dividing and multiplying: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64... and so on. It does that because that’s the nature of life—it just keeps going. We don’t “have” life, we *are* Life; we don’t “have” hope, we *are* Hope.

The Buddhist sage, Pema Chodron, puts it this way:

Spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak we transcend all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all the others behind. In the process of discovering our true nature, the journey goes

down, not up... Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt... We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we will let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of compassion. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover that love will not die. [*The Pocket Pema Chodron*]

Let's close with a poem by Mary Oliver.

The Poet With His Face in His Hands

You want to cry aloud for your
mistakes. But to tell the truth the world
doesn't need any more of that sound.

So if you're going to do it and can't
stop yourself, if your pretty mouth can't
hold it in, at least go by yourself across

the forty fields and the forty dark inclines
of rocks and water to the place where
the falls are flinging out their white sheets

like crazy, and there is a cave behind all that
jubilation and water-fun and you can
stand there, under it, and roar all you

want and nothing will be disturbed; you can
drip with despair all afternoon and still,
on a green branch, its wings just lightly touched

by the passing foil of the water, the thrush,
puffing out its spotted breast, will sing
of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything.

Mary Oliver