

Conversations

Vol. 3 No. 4 July / August 2026 €7.50 £7.00

An Invitation to Prayer

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The Shape of Hope

Johanna Merry

In the midst of winter, I found there was within me, an invincible summer (Albert Camus)

We can all agree that in a breaking world like ours today the currency of hope is needed more than ever to bridge the gap between present bleakness and a better future. When hope resides in the mind's eye, it is like a dream – simultaneously casting the reality as is but also showing us possibilities beyond. But what is hope? How do we recognise it? How do we cultivate, nurture and sustain it?

Throughout the ages, people in all walks of life – artists, poets, theologians, philosophers – have tried to define hope. Take artist, Frederic Watts, who in 1856 depicted hope by the same name – *Hope*. In his painting a harpist reaches low to pluck the single remaining string on her lyre, which Watts later informed represented love.¹

Emily Dickinson translates the abstract by means of a relatable metaphor, the image of a bird – ‘the thing with feathers that perches in the soul – and sings a tune without words ... and never stops...’²

For Aristotle, hope was a waking dream, a conscious, active and imaginative desire for a better future. In one of his homilies sourced in the First Letter of John, St Augustine describes hope as a theological virtue which expands the desire of our heart to see God face to face, that stretches the

1 G.F. Watts and Assistants. *Hope*. 1886, Tate, London. <https://www.tate.org.uk>

2 Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson, London: Faber and Faber, 1975.

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capacity of our souls with the fulness of his presence.

Hope defies definition as it supersedes language. Linguists sometimes attempt to unravel abstracts, like hope, by way of referencing related distinctions. For example, positive thinking or optimistic thinking are correlates that lean towards a temperamental disposition that opposes despair; seeing the good, the best in situations, and banking these elements for tomorrow.

Although pessimism might tend towards seeing life as a half-empty glass, somewhat drained of hope, the philosopher, Mara Van Der Lugt, introduces a subversive reading of hope in offering a different way to think about pessimism – as something compatible with hope rather than the usual despair – pessimism not as fatalism or defeatism but as hopeful pessimism. She argues that pessimism need not be devoid of hope, that what we do today matters in shaping the future. Such a view involves sustaining a sense of hope, as different from adopting a positive stance that tends to over-ride present realities. Pessimism, in this sense, is not fatalism, nor cynicism, nor indifference, but hope blended with realism.³

Some theologians take another slant, alluding to hopeless pessimism as a condition of sinfulness (propensity to act ‘less than’, or a lost desire for light). Such nihilistic despair can indeed be intolerable, which may be the case with Judas Iscariot, to the point of taking his own life.

I resonate with Van der Lugt uncoupling hope from the impossible guarantee of successful outcomes, positing hope as an ethical basis for right action in the world no matter what is on the horizon;⁴ that where there is a will there is a way.

Form

Perhaps hope can be characterised by the small bird (Quetzal), the subject of many Mexican fables, who in one tale hurries back and forth between the nearest river and a raging forest fire, dropping small amounts of water to quench the flames. As all other animals flee to safety, an owl remonstrates with Quetzal that his actions will achieve nothing. The little bird halts in mid-flight and looks the owl head-on. ‘I am doing the best I can with the little I have.’ Like the Quetzal’s action, our agency is also what matters

3 Mara Van Der Lugt, *Hopeful Pessimism*. Princeton University Press, 2025. p. 1-22.

4 Ibid. p. 23-46.

even if by analogy, our effort resembles undertaking a slow scramble up a scree slope.

‘Hope that is seen is not hope at all ...’ (Rom 8.24-25). Although hope has a shape, and in a manner of speaking, a form that can be imaged, hope remains fluid and elusive, cannot be possessed, tamed, domesticated or brought to a still point long enough to be grasped.

George Herbert in his poem *Hope*, dialogues with hope as a figurative presence, a mystical concept acting as an anchor, hinting at security and stability, or as a telescope, reframing perception. For Herbert, clarity arises in seeing things from an eternal viewpoint, rather than focussing narrowly on the immediacy of concomitant rewards.⁵

The biblical Job, rebellious and restless, ranting at the injustice of his sufferings, never gave up on hope, a theme repeated in a Brendan Kennelly poem: ‘something that will not acknowledge conclusion insists that we forever begin.’⁶ Dickinson portrays the rebellious tenacity of hope, an unbreakable element embedded in the human spirit, in her metaphor of the bird.

‘True hope is swift and flies with swallow’s wings.’⁷ Mark Coreth, a British sculptor, gave form to this intimation that he named, *Tree of Hope*, located in the Old City of Jerusalem, featuring a bronze olive tree with a canopy of swifts in flight, spreading a message of hope across the world.

World religions testify to the centrality of hope. For Buddhism, hope is a mindful and compassionate way of living in the present, not a frenetic longing for a specific or favourable outcome, trusting in the capacity to grow, change, and achieve enlightenment. For Islam, authentic hope is not passive but is paired with striving to obey Allah by doing good deeds, rather than just wishing for rewards without effort. Characterised by a threefold formula: obey ‘higher power,’ live righteously, and turn to good actions for a better world. Hindus hope that living righteously influences one’s destiny, a belief that life is a purposeful journey towards spiritual liberation (*moksha*) and ultimate unity with the divine.

5 George Herbert, ‘Hope’. *The English Poems of George Herbert*, edited by Helen Wilcox, Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 450.

6 Brendan Kennelly, ‘Begin’. *Familiar Strangers: New & Selected Poems 1960-2004*. New York: Bloodaxe Books, 2004.

7 William Shakespeare, *Richard III*. Act 5, Scene 2, lines 23-25.

Christian hope

The triadic virtues of faith, hope and love together exemplify the Christian ethos (1 Cor 13:13). Christians yearn for what remains unfulfilled in this life, inspired by New Testament revelation of divine promise, a longing seen through the prism of the resurrected and returning Christ, and the believer's duty to transform the present for a better world. That God is in us but also before us, guiding our efforts that we might prosper and not come to harm, hoping for the *Parousia* (Jer 29:11).

'But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently' (Rom 8:25). Perseverance increases desire, enlarging our capacity to receive what is bestowed. Christians are encouraged by the belief that God, when sought, is present in the wreckage of human history whose essence is constantly unfolding through human initiative, reinforcing resistance to forces of darkness and evil. Asked of us in the waiting is to be cooperative with God in renewing the face of the earth, stretching us to grow and mature as creatures of consciousness in response to the challenges of our time.

As a Christian, I believe that hope witnesses to the character/nature of God as Love. Resident as a dynamic force within us, and fuelled by faith and love, hope energises the restless pursuit of securing a world in which God-given life in all its forms prospers. The habit of the heart, motivated by Love to act in harmony with a Greater Wisdom 'whose knowledge spans the past and future' (Wis 6. 13).

Secular hope

I submit that secular hope is a pragmatic, this-world, proactive mindset – doing the noble thing for its own sake, creating personal meaning in fostering human connections through right relationships and working towards tangible improvements in this life. An emphasis on self-reliance, the power of reason, scientific progress, portrays a world order independent of supernatural intervention. Embracing the present includes sound values, a moral stance, taking on board life's challenges – its joys, sorrows, opportunities, threats etc. Put succinctly by Jean-Luc Nancy, being 'faithful to faithfulness.'⁸

8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-closure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. New York: Fordham University Press 2008. p. 41-42.

Cultivating and nurturing hope

Although ‘hope springs eternal in the human breast’ (Alexander Pope, 1733), it requires steadfast care and attention to thrive.

Our interaction with hope is not straightforward but can be fraught with frustration and personal disappointment as hope tends to reciprocate differently from what is asked. Over time the relationship can sour, pressing us to eventually abandon hope as was the case with Herbert: ‘Ah Loyterer! ... no more, no more will I’le bring ...’ (line 6 -7). However, commentators attach a certain freshness to the poet’s reference to ‘green cares’ insinuating that hope needs to be nurtured by due husbandry, wary not to indulge hope as a comfort or consolation or leave it to rewild at its own accord.

Christian theology postulates that faith and hope will pass away but love remains eternal (1 Cor 13:13). In this regard, prescient seeds of hope are sown in ‘a hard land to till and of heavy sweat’ (10.16.25),⁹ a metaphor used by St Augustine to convey the existential difficulty of being human, softened by God’s Love. and trellised on the faith narratives of the Incarnation (Jn 1:4) and the Resurrection (John 10:10). Not unlike other farmers, we too must wait patiently for ‘autumn and spring rains’ for the saplings to mature, blossom and fruit in due season. When Love flourishes, joy and gratitude overflow, funding our zeal to continue to partner with God in realising his promises. (Rom 15.13).

I offer below a few practices that might encourage us to be attentive to hope in the everyday moments of our lives.

- » Remembering: be mindful of in-dwelling hope, create a hospitable space with changing symbols of hope *e.g.*, a candle or a poem, to coincide with personal experiences; create a hope garden with seasonal plants – spring bulbs, summer flowers, evergreen perennials etc. to correspond to the natural cycle of life which may invite creative/reflective writing.
- » Noticing: create a hope journal, jot down experiences that alert our eyes to see hope’s presence in our day-to-day activities, *e.g.*, acts of kindness of a stranger, bird song. Punctuate your day with intentional pauses to notice hope in the midst of noise and frenetic activity. Utter a greeting or mantra *e.g.*, ‘give thanks’.
- » Enlarging: light a candle mindful of a particular ‘darkness’ in our world; join with others in communion with a common intention to light

9 Augustine, *Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding. New City Press, 2001.

a candle for known despair; share your own story of hope with others to unmute their yet untold story to create a chain of 'hope stories'; surprise someone by reaching out with an act of thoughtfulness to awaken hope that God is close by, within reach e.g. send a card, make a phone call.

Living creatively

Hope strengthens faith and anchors a believer into living a life of love, casting reality for what it is, hinged to a passion for proclaiming future possibilities. As such, hope-filled faith unsettles inertia, is restless and impatient, does not calm the unquiet heart but is itself the unquiet heart in humankind.

Terry Eagleton posits that the world needs people with minds that are both 'mirror' and 'lamp', faithfully reflecting their surroundings while shedding transforming light upon reality that envelops us. He opined that this demands a strangely hybrid kind of human being – one perhaps who can embody the uncomfortable blend of scepticism with a trust in a transformed future.¹⁰ In other words, persons who are able to live creatively in the space between denial (things are not as bad) and despair (things are desperate) and can effect capacity to make good judgements in practical, real-world situations.

I fall back on Jürgen Moltmann's timeless view and shared with theologians of the day, that Christian hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus dwells within this vision as an active, expectant and forward-looking force which protests against injustices and suffering ... a transformative unquiet force that compels believers to work for a better world, sustained by a stubborn confidence in God's promises to prosper us.¹¹

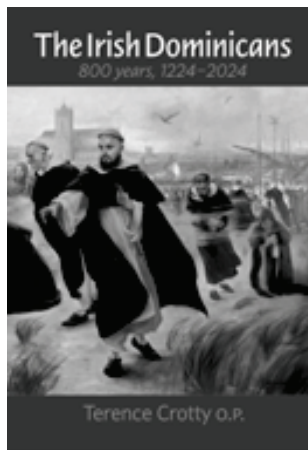
Many today, of all faiths and none, are emboldened to the point of risking their lives in calling attention to a world exponentially self-destructing. Striving for change without certainties, they are not expecting anything from their efforts other than knowing that we must act as moral agents in a time of change.

Could it be that persons motivated by visceral awareness of a breaking

10 Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*. London: Verso, 2005, p.88.

11 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Khol. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

world are the first responders as bearers of hope in a world where too many have become habituated to relentless horrors? Assuming that only those who already feel the pain of humanity and can hear their haunting lament are actively doing something to make a difference will somehow suffice for the rest of us is hardly what Christian hope is about?



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