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The nature of hope

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Introduction

The word *hope* is often used in everyday language: “I hope the traffic isn’t too bad, I’m late for an appointment.” “I hope you get that new job.” “I hope it doesn’t rain today.” “I hope you have a good day!” But what do we mean when we use the word hope? Is hope a form of wishful thinking born out of the desire to find certainty in life?

Beyond the use of the word *hope* in everyday language, Tad Dunneⁱ argues that intrinsic to human nature is the “silent” question of “hope or despair.” The question remains silent until events in the life of an individual demands that it be aired. Any adverse circumstance may trigger the raising of this question into consciousness. The question of hope or despair then becomes a stark reality. Within this context, what is the nature of hope? And, where is hope to be found?



the nature of hope ~ three perspectives

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In response to such questions, this article will firstly outline three perspectives on the nature of hope. The disparity within the perspectives is evident. Nonetheless, each writer offers insight into the nature of hope and where hope may be found in times of despair. Secondly, a definition of the nature of hope will be offered. Such a definition will draw from the three perspectives. Thirdly, a connection between hope and resilience will be introduced. Finally, the article will offer one practice for nurturing hope.

Three perspectives on the nature of hope

1. Pema Chödrön:ⁱⁱ hope as an external mechanism

The first perspective on the nature of hope comes from Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön. Within a nontheisticⁱⁱⁱ framework of Buddhist philosophy, Pema Chödrön teaches: “hope and fear is one feeling with

two sides. As long as there is one, there is always the other." She continues: "hope and fear come from feeling that we lack something, they come from a sense of poverty . . . we hold on to hope, and hope robs us of the present moment." Within such an understanding, hope and fear are so entangled that an individual is required to "abandon hope" if they want to live fully. To *live fully* within this context means to fearlessly live with life's uncertainty, with wisdom and compassion.

The teaching to abandon hope is premised on the notion that "suffering is part of life." Consequently, the experience of suffering is to be expected as a natural part of life and does not mean that something is fundamentally "wrong" with an individual or their life. This line of teaching continues by emphasizing the human species "addiction to hope" which manifests as a drivenness to "avoid pain"^{iv} at all costs. As such, hope is utilized as a way of negating the emotional affects associated with adverse circumstances.

The focus of such an addiction to hope is upon an external intervention. Within such a context, hope is viewed as an external mechanism, taking form as some kind of intervention by someone/something else, which will solve, or 'fix', a situation. Such external intervention may take the form of an omnipotent and interventionist God; medication; meditation; drugs of addiction. It is the focus on *hope* as an external intervention which is viewed within this teaching as: "the root of [an individual's] pain." It leads an individual away from living the present moment fearlessly, with wisdom and compassion.



stay with the present moment reality of suffering

photo by Kaye Twining

Within this understanding of hope an individual is at best, simply marking time in the present. Such a stance can give rise to an experience of inner imprisonment, whereby the individual feels they cannot move on with their life until something/someone comes along to unlock the door to freedom. At worst, they can turn to patterns of behaviour which become addictive, as they try to numb and/or repress their emotional response to their present moment experience.

In contrast to seeking an external intervention, Pema Chödrön encourages individuals to *stay with* the present moment reality of suffering, and by so doing, allow life to be their teacher. Within such a context, when an individual comes up against a disturbing circumstance, they gently pose the question: "how may I grow in wisdom and compassion through this."

It is important to clarify that growing in wisdom and compassion through lived experience does not limit an individual from taking necessary action when facing a disturbing circumstance. For example, an individual would not stay in an abusive situation so as to grow in wisdom and compassion. Rather, as they take the necessary action, they may ask themselves the questions: "How may I grow in wisdom and compassion through this action?" "How may I express wisdom and compassion through such necessary action?"

Pema Chödrön: abandon hope

There is truth to the blunt teaching: "abandon hope." When hope is viewed as an external mechanism which drives an individual away from the experience of their uncomfortable reality, then hope deprives them from being able to attend to such experience in a way that generates the conditions for acceptance; for taking the necessary action; and continuing to grow in wisdom and compassion. Viewed in this way, hope is detrimental to an individual's well-being.



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2. Andrew Solomon:^y hope as meaning making

The second perspective on hope comes from Andrew Solomon. He writes from the context of someone living with depression. Solomon states: "In depression, the meaninglessness of every enterprise and

every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance.”

Solomon's book has a chapter entitled Hope. The chapter does not define *hope* explicitly. Rather the central focus revolves around an individual's choice to stay alive even when their thoughts and mood would suggest suicide. For Solomon, such a choice for life, while being rooted in a: “certain survivor impulse to keep going,” also stems from being able to eventually reframe the experience of depression in a meaningful way. *Meaningful* here refers to the self-knowledge an individual can attain by being forced to see their world clearly.

Solomon’s post-episode reflection on his experience of depression has allowed him to reframe it into one of meaning, whereby he has come to recognize in himself: “a heightened awareness of the joyfulness of everyday existence,” “the value of intimacy,” “vitality in life rather than happiness,” and “a deeper experience of love.” Therefore for Solomon, hope is directly related to being able to reframe the experience of depression into one of meaning.

While an individual cannot change their past, they can change the way they identify with, or are defined by, their past experience. It is for this reason that Solomon fuses hope with meaning in response to the lived experience of depression. Hope is found and sustained through finding meaning in the experience of depression. Conversely, if an individual cannot find meaning in their experience, they will not find hope, i.e., the impetus to stay alive. Solomon concludes his chapter on Hope with the comment: “Every day, I choose, sometimes gamely and sometimes against the moment’s reason, to be alive. Is that not a rare joy?”



hope: reframing past experience into one of meaning

photo by Kaye Twining

While recognizing the gift that can come out of the experience of depression, it is important not to over spiritualize the experience. Depression in-and-of-itself is not an experience that an individual would choose to undertake for the sake of personal growth. Solomon himself is quite unequivocal in this regard writing: “major depression

is far too stern a teacher.” As such, he would rather not have experienced it. Nonetheless, he also writes: “having been given it, those of us who have survived stand to find something in it.”

Andrew Solomon: fuses hope with meaning

3. W. Lynch:^{vi} hope as an interior response to the potential in life

The third perspective on the nature of hope comes from William Lynch. Lynch writes within a western Christian context. He argues that hope: “comes close to being the very heart and center of a human being” and is tied to an individual being able to: “imagine a future of possibilities.” Whilst not denying present moment experience, hope allows an individual to also: “look to the next step, whatever it is, whatever form the step may take.” Hope is experienced as the recognition that: “what [is] really need[ed] is possible, though difficult.”

Within this context, hope is perceived to be an individual's interior response to the potential in life, rather than an external mechanism. Such an interior response then sustains the individual as they attend to their experience of the present moment and thus grow through it towards self-realization. As a consequence, this notion of hope does not quash personal transformation in response to lived experience.



hope: to see a future of possibility

photo by Kaye Twining

Lynch offers a further critical insight regarding hope. He asserts that while hope is an individual's interior response to the potential in life, there are times when an individual's lived experience gives rise to deep despair. At such times it is unreasonable to expect the individual to be able to reclaim hope on their own. What is required at such times, is a community which can hold hope for the individual until they are ready to claim it for their own. Consequently, while hope is an individual

interior response to the possibilities in life, community may be necessary for such an interior response to arise.



while hope is an individual interior response to the possibilities in life, community may be necessary for such an interior response to arise

photo by Andrew Twining

Lynch also offers insight into the role of hopelessness. He argues that despair is usually acknowledged as the antithesis of hope in that: “hopelessness means to be ruled by the sense of the impossible.” As such, when an individual is overwhelmed by hopelessness, they “cannot imagine beyond the limits of what is presently happening.” Nonetheless, Lynch contends that hopelessness has its place in that it also can assist in self-discovery. Such self-discovery takes into account the acceptance of what is not possible. Therefore, the experience of hopelessness which is sensitively and gently engaged with can bring about acceptance of present reality, without locking an individual into that present reality. Attending to the experience of hopelessness can therefore open the way for what is truly possible.

William Lynch: hope is an interior response to the potential in life

A definition of the nature of hope

.Drawing from the three perspectives, it can be affirmed that when *hope* is viewed in the form of an external mechanism, it drives an individual to avoid and/or deny their present moment experience, and in so doing, gives rise to fear. It also quashes engagement in the ongoing process of personal growth/transformation. Conversely, when hope is perceived to be a dynamic interior response to the possibilities in life, hope is foundational to living fully, i.e., continuing to grow towards self realization in response to lived experience.

Hope, in the form of a dynamic interior response, includes an individual's past, present and future. Hope allows an individual to continue to reframe past experiences of personal suffering into ones of meaning; to continue to grow in wisdom and compassion in response to their present experience; to continue to imagine future possibilities. Therefore, the definition of the nature of hope for the purposes of this article is: the possibility of personal transformation – grounded in reality.



hope is foundational to living fully

photo by Hayley Cornish

the nature of hope: the possibility of personal transformation – grounded in reality

The connection between hope and resilience

In light of the nature of hope as presented, hope and resilience^{vii} could be viewed as two sides of the one coin. In a similar manner to the nature of hope, resilience is known to be an innate capacity to survive, adapt and flourish in response to adverse change. Such an innate capacity within the human experience involves three particular qualities:

1. endurance 2. determination 3. acceptance.

The three qualities listed above do not equate to an attitude of "this is a cross that I must bear." Such an attitude leads toward the experience of stoically shouldering a heavy burden, the weight of which becomes more onerous as the years progress. Rather, resilience is known to be life affirming and the qualities of endurance, determination, and acceptance are qualities which assist an individual to healthily respond to the changes taking place in their outer circumstances and inner being.

When faced with an adverse life circumstance, an individual may well experience a sense of loss, giving rise to a range of emotions including: anger, sorrow, helplessness, guilt, fear and even dread. Such feelings are a natural response to loss. A healthy response to loss is to grieve,

to grieve consciously that is. When an individual grieves consciously they are being emotionally honest. According to Anne Deveson,^{viii} emotional honesty nurtures resilience and by association, nurtures hope.

In line with Deveson, Michael Neenan^{ix} contends: “resilience is not characterized by the absence of emotion. The only way that you can have an unemotional response to an event is if you truly don’t care what has happened to you because the event has absolutely no significance to you.” Therefore, *resilience* and by association *hope*, are not characterized by a lack of emotion. Rather, an individual's emotional response becomes the entry point for nurturing resilience and hope, i.e., engaging in the practice of personal transformation ~ grounded in reality.



resilience, and by association *hope*, are not characterized by a lack of emotion

photo by Kaye Twining

One practice for nurturing hope

(drawn from [www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative practices/ Compassionate Self enquiry](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative%20practices/Compassionate%20Self%20enquiry))

The following practice involves a contemplative orientation. A contemplative orientation differs from analysis. Analysis involves qualities such as scrutinizing and dissecting. In contrast, a contemplative orientation involves a gentle, receptive attitude of non-judgmental exploration and includes such elements as: noticing; letting be; gently opening up; curiously wondering about; asking open-ended questions of; patiently listening for inner wisdom’s invitation towards self realization in the form of personal wholeness and authentic communal belonging.

The Practice

Commence this practice with some form of relaxation for the body/mind. This could take the form of tightening and relaxing each part of the body, or some form of stilling meditation, or listening to music, or . . .

When you are ready . . .

Drop the inner storyline^x you are telling yourself and gently *lean into* your present moment affective experience, by non-judgmentally noticing:

- Bodily felt experience e.g. ~ relaxing/tightening; warmth/coldness; opening up/shutting down; drawn towards/repelled by . . .
- Emotional response e.g. ~ delighted; sad; angry; joyful; stressed; fearful; alive; challenged . . .
- Thinking e.g. ~ judgmental; compassionate; circular; racing; calm; stuck in a habitual pattern . . .

Note: Pema Chödrön teaches that *leaning into* our affective experience may seem counter-intuitive. Nevertheless, while it may seem difficult or unpleasant, the practice allows us to experience emotional honesty while at the same time, releasing the pressure of our emotional response. So rather than acting out of, or pulling back from, our affective experience, we metaphorically *lean into* it.

Letting be . . .

As you are able . . . allow your present moment affective experience to be metaphorically held within the gentle light of loving kindness . . . breathing through your experience without denying/resisting/seeking change

If and when you are ready, pose some open ended questions to yourself . . .

- What may inner wisdom be inviting you to see or see afresh through this experience?
- Is there any insight arising for you?
- Are you being invited to stay; move; change; grow?
- Are you being invited to embrace your current view of Selfhood or perhaps surrender some attachment to a fixed identity?

Conclude your practice by resting in Stillness for a few moments

Note: Do not try to manufacture a response. Simply wait for a response to arise – metaphorically try it on and see how it fits. Do not worry if there is no discernible response initially. Simply pose the question and live into the response (Rilke).

ⁱ Tad Dunne, "Experience" *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1970): 365-376, p. 371.

ⁱⁱ Pema Chödrön: *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theism is categorized as "a deep-seated conviction that there is some hand to hold: if we just do the right things, someone will appreciate us and take care of us. It means thinking there's always going to be a babysitter available when we need one. We all are inclined to abdicate our responsibilities and delegate our authority to something outside ourselves." p. 39. Nontheism is categorized as "relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves." Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart* p. 39.

^{iv} Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Lovingkindness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991) p. 3.

^v Andrew Solomon: *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*.

^{vi} William Lynch: *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*.

^{vii} For more on the nature of resilience see [www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/nurturing resilience in the carer journey](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/nurturing%20resilience%20in%20the%20carer%20journey)

^{viii} Anne Deveson, *Resilience*

^{ix} Michael Neenan, *Developing Resilience*

^x Pema Chodron, *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Lovingkindness*