

Some kind of tomorrow

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [March 7, 2001](#) issue

How can hope be sustained when traumatic memories of conflict or oppression haunt a person or group? This question has become central in a course I am teaching with an African-American colleague. In “Remembrance and Reconciliation,” we are examining the legacies of racism and racial division in South Africa and the U.S. Not surprisingly, our discussions quickly focused on issues of despair and hope. Traumatic events and the remembrance of them can transform optimism into despair and occlude any sense of hope for a different and better future.

Toni Morrison’s classic novel *Beloved*, one of the texts we’ve studied, pointedly addresses such issues and has compelled us to ask whether, in the wake of horrifying suffering and sin, hope can be discovered and sustained as an antidote to despair. Early in the story Paul D and Sethe, both former slaves living in the 1870s in Ohio, are discussing some of their experiences. But they do not get very far.

Paul D had only begun, what he was telling her was only the beginning when her fingers on his knee, soft and reassuring, stopped him. Just as well. Just as well. Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn’t get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut.

They both knew that memories of the past might take them to a place from which they would not return. So Paul D kept them in the only safe space he knew—inside the tobacco tin in his chest that had replaced a beating heart.

Similarly, Sethe’s “brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.” Indeed, it was never too early for Sethe to start the day’s serious work of “beating back the past.”

Paul D and Sethe both search for some kind of sanctuary or “safe space” where they can cope with memories and find hope. There are brief moments where they begin to glimpse such a space. But they are unable to stay there; the safe space can’t be

sustained. Why not?

In part, the problem seems to be that Paul D and Sethe understandably but mistakenly look for some timeless place where there is no threat. They are searching for a way of coping with the overwhelmingly *time-full* memories of the past—but no timeless space exists. Hope can be found only if there is a way to deal with the past. Consequently, the haunting, unresolved memories intrude unless resolution, perhaps even forgiveness, can be discovered.

This problem is made more intense by the recognition that even well-intentioned communities that seek to offer sanctuary may not have the strength to cope with the threat of someone's psychic disintegration. As my colleague asked, "When people reach their breaking point and face the threat of disintegration, can a community keep connected to them? If so, how?"

The novel suggests that many communities will not keep connected because they fear their own disintegration. They will expel, or at least marginalize, those among them who are broken, in order to try to preserve even a fragmented identity and coherence.

Can hope be discovered and sustained for those who have gone beyond their breaking point? It would be trite simply to suggest that the answer lies in Jesus.

Even so, the haunting questions of *Beloved* offer an opportunity for a faithful Christian response. After all, at the end of the novel, Paul D tells Sethe, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." Christians believe that through Jesus Christ, God provides all people that "some kind of tomorrow" that makes life today possible.

This tomorrow happens not as an escape from time, but through the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ who breaks into time and redeems it. We will not find authentic hope, much less sustain it, by trying to flee time, but only by finding the resources to bear, and bear witness to, the past.

Where can we find those resources? How can we cultivate Christian communities capable of bearing authentic witness to Christ, of sustaining hope even for those who are haunted by memories? A first step is to recognize that such communities are fundamentally time-full, and need to be attentive to their own fragility. Communities as well as individuals can reach their breaking points, and communities

as well as individuals can end up holding tobacco tins with lids rusted shut in those places where a red heart used to be.

Might we find those resources in the timeful practices and friendships of communities that know their vulnerability because they are marked as the body of (the crucified and risen) Christ? In communities that gather not to provide illusory “order” but rather to be re-membered by the audacious grace and forgiveness of God in Christ?

We’ll find what we need in communities that gather to remember that *all* of us have had too much yesterday, and thus need redemption to sustain us in hope, and in communities that rediscover hope each day in prayer. These communities represent not timeless spaces, but redemptive relationships in which people refuse to abandon those who have suffered and are suffering. These communities offer a tomorrow.