What does it mean to hope?

# Hope holds us in our time. Without it, we have no place in our own history.

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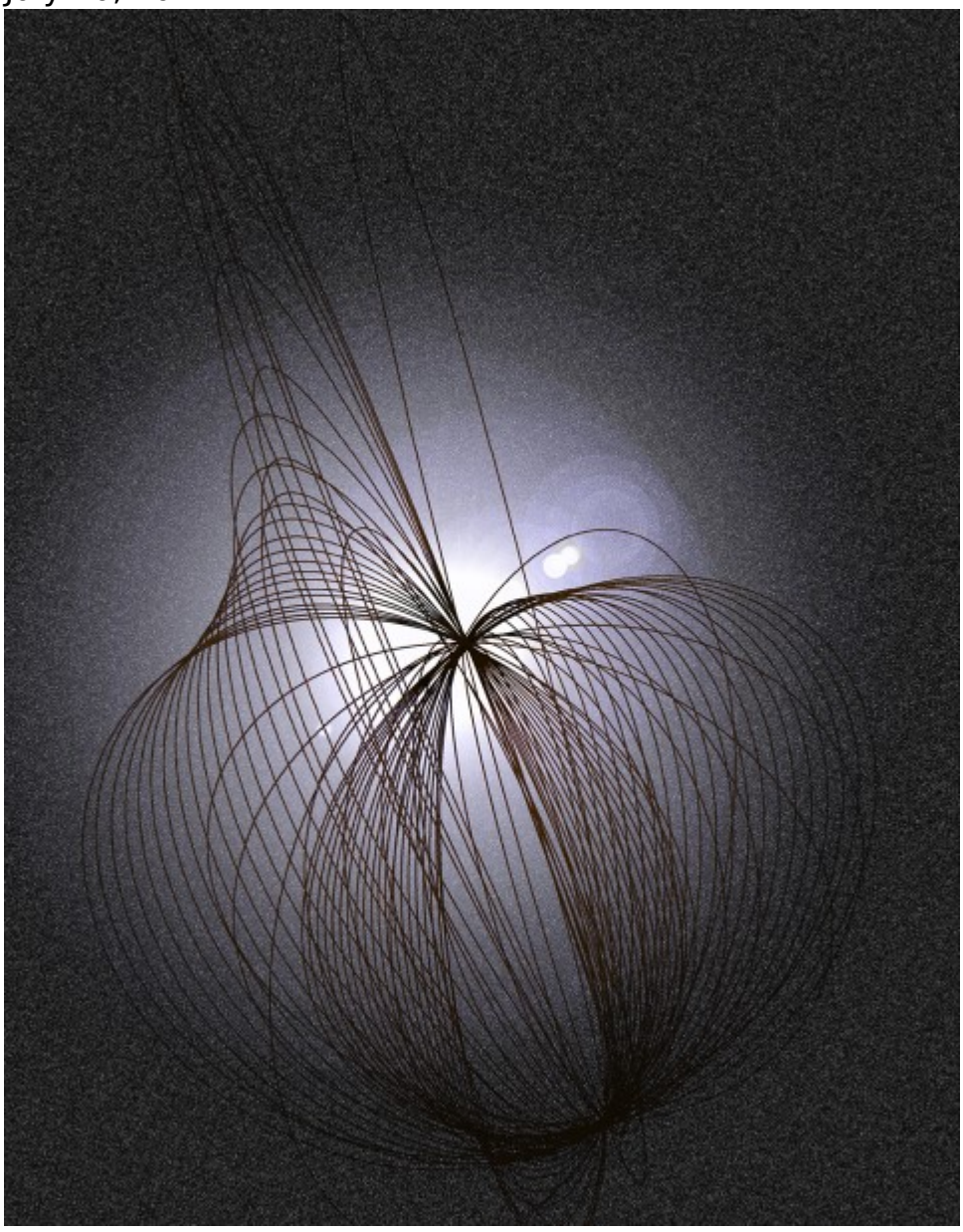

Illustration by Daniel Richardson

Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Nation guided his people through the deep crisis brought by the invasion of the white man. Shortly before his death in 1932, he said to his biographer: “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.” Jonathan Lear, author of *Radical Hope*, is haunted by this phrase. What did Plenty Coups mean by “after this nothing happened”? As Lear interprets it, “there is no importantly first-person narrative to tell of this [subsequent] period. It is as though there is no longer an ‘I’ there.”

While the Crow remained alive after the buffalo went away, their lives had no place in their own history. This is a fitting way to characterize a life without hope: having no place within a history. To find life again, the Crow needed a “radical hope.” Plenty Coups was guided by visions he had had at age 11. In one vision he saw buffalo covering the land—but they suddenly disappeared and were replaced by cow-like creatures; in another, he saw himself as an old man settled near water at the base of the Arrowhead mountains; in still another, he saw the forest blown over by the force of a great wind, with one tree yet standing, the one that is home to the chickadee, believed by the Crow to be wise about the future. Plenty Coups cited these visions as he proposed a new future to his people. Other leaders listened to him, and the visions became something of a bridge over the loss of the buffalo. The Crow began trying new ways of doing things. They cooperated with the white man, taking advantage of the education they provided. Some, like Plenty Coups, even converted to Catholicism while continuing to practice many traditional Crow rituals. Compared to other western tribes, the Crow survived well in the new age.

We tend to think of hope primarily as a feeling that arises in our hearts. It comes to us in many circumstances: we hope to score the goal, pass the test, or recover from the illness. Taken in this sense, hope is a passion that quickens us. For Thomas Aquinas, a “natural hope” arises in a dog when a hare races by: the dog springs forth hoping to catch it. The example shows us that hope moves us to action; it reaches out actively to a hoped-for future.

But for human beings, who live by memory and understanding more than by smell or sight, hope does more than send us off in pursuit of some object we might like to have; it accompanies us on the full journey of our lives. It connects our past with our future. By hope we reach from one to the other. Hope holds us in our time. When hope is removed, time is cut off, as for the Crow Nation. Then nothing can

happen—unless time's dangling ends can somehow be reconnected.

We have a term for life without hope: *despair*. Aquinas calls it the greatest sin. That judgment is something of a surprise, since hope is not the greatest of the virtues: charity is. So why would despair, which opposes hope, outrank hatred, which opposes love (charity)? Aquinas believes there is something about despair different from either unbelief, which opposes God's truth, or hatred, which opposes God's goodness. While hatred and unbelief oppose God directly, despair, says Aquinas, "consists in a man ceasing to hope for a share of God's goodness."

Despair concerns God indirectly; it detaches us from God's story. Despair does not so much deny or oppose God's truth or story directly, but rather says: whatever the truth is, or whatever the story may be, there is nothing in it for me.

When we speak of hope in connection with love and faith, we are placing it among the three theological virtues. As with the passion of hope, the theological virtue called hope is linked to action or movement. Hope is a good habit by which we move forward toward a future good that is both possible and difficult to attain. This good is fellowship with God and full participation in our share in God's goodness.

Difficulty is part of the definition of hope. This makes the phrase "difficult hope" redundant. Yet Wendell Berry uses this phrase helpfully in the title of an essay on how to speak out against injustice. Hope is what sustains us when the stories in which we have a share turn unjust and require our dissent. The Hebrew prophets were soaked in hope; it is because they can envision and even live toward another future that they can speak out in protest against the mistaken future toward which the Israelites were living. By contrast, says Berry, in our day "much protest is naive; it expects quick, visible improvement and despairs and gives up when such improvement does not come. . . . Protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one's own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence" (*What Are People For?*).

In the current political climate I receive at least two online requests per day to sign a petition in protest. Occasionally I do so, which of course keeps the requests coming. Yet this is not the difficult work of hope. We should not suppose that we are imitating the profoundly hopeful life of the biblical prophets with an occasional click. Hope is not optimism. Optimism rests not on truth but on positive spin. Unlike hope,

it does not arise from Berry's deeply rooted spiritual strength, which refuses acquiescence. Hope's work is not to deceive or trick; it is rather to hold on firmly in the midst of trouble.

Hope cannot give up; if it does it is lost. But as Berry suggests, hope stays with us only if we have hold of ourselves, only if we can connect the story of who we are and where we are headed to a "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Heb. 6:19). Conversely, it is the work of despair to unmoor us, another reason why Aquinas believed despair to be the greatest sin. It is dangerous to become so unmoored. "When hope is given up, men rush headlong into sin, and are drawn away from good works." Despair disconnects us from the weight of goodness. Goodness is lost to us, or we to it. So what is the use in struggling to uphold and preserve goodness? Why not instead embrace whatever small pleasures I can find?

I recently attended the funeral of a man who was once a Christian but gave up his faith. He died in his seventies; the change came when he was well into middle age. When it happened, he found a new lover, bought a new house, and enjoyed new pleasures. From all appearances, his life in those last 20 years was smooth sailing. On his deathbed he instructed his friends to celebrate his life with a party: to eat, drink, and be merry. And so we did: there was plenty of wine, and happy speeches laced with humor and double entendre. Only a few of us had known him in his Christian days when he was connected to another community, another family. Those earlier days were filled with struggle; you can't be a Christian and not struggle if your marriage starts to crumble. But at the funeral there were no signs of struggle. It was wiped away by those who raised their glasses.

Many small convenient comforts can oppose hope. If most things are easy for us, we are tempted to wish they all were easy. But hope is about important, difficult goods. Dean Brackley, an American Jesuit who served most of his life in El Salvador at the Jesuit Universidad Centroamericana, counseled those of us who teach in North America to become aware of how comfort can confuse us. In a speech given in 1999 he said, "Perhaps 90 percent of all the people who ever lived have struggled every day to keep the household alive against the daily threat of hunger, disease, accidents and violence. By distancing the non-poor from the daily threat of death, the benefits of modernity have induced in us a kind of chronic low-grade confusion about what is really important in life, namely life itself and love."

By hope we struggle to point our life in one direction—to stay on one path.

Partly in response to Brackley's points, my university began offering a class that includes a trip to Uganda in East Africa. Students who go are initially overwhelmed by the extent of the poverty they encounter. They yearn for a comprehensive and decisive fix as soon as possible—and they express this as a hope. As we continue to travel, however, they admit this is not possible. They also recognize that the people they meet in Uganda, many of them Christians, are filled with hope. So how is hope possible in the midst of such struggle? The first lesson is that hope is precisely about the struggle, about difficult goods.

If we hope in this life, it will be difficult. We will struggle. At the very least we will struggle to connect one part of our life with another. Keeping continuity even with ourselves is not easy, for we are often tempted to become someone else. We need to be one person to hope, the subject of one story from cradle to grave. By hope we struggle to point the whole of our life in one direction—to keep on one way. Hope for Christians has always involved a movement forward toward a unifying end, a share in God's kingdom. As such it also involves a passage through time and in a particular earthly life. It is the virtue of *homo viator*, the wayfarer.

The passage can also be conceived of as a way between dangers. Despair opposes hope by assailing it from the side; it seeks to pull us off course. Aquinas tells us that sloth, for example, can convince us that the difficult work of love can and should be avoided—which leads to despair. On the other side of despair lies presumption, which supposes that the object of our hope can be easily attained. We underestimate what is required in hope because we underestimate God or overestimate ourselves. God is infinitely holy, and we are full of ourselves and captured by our daily preoccupations. By despair we say, "I cannot share in God's goodness; it is too difficult." By presumption we say, "I can easily share, there is nothing to it."

How can we navigate this passage? Unlike Odysseus, who must be tied to the mast as he passes by the Sirens, the passage for Christians involves being tied to a person, to God, or even to Christ upon whom, says Aquinas, "we lean." This feature of the Christian virtue of hope reminds us that it comes as gift, as infused by the Holy Spirit. The difficulty in hope is borne through accompaniment by Christ.

Because my story is only mine, my hope is only my hope—and there is loneliness in this. This is well conveyed by the gospel folk song "Lonesome Valley": "You got to walk that lonesome valley, / You got to walk it by yourself, / Nobody here can walk it

for you, / You got to walk it by yourself.” Aquinas anticipates this experience by speaking of hope’s movement as always “towards its own term, which is proportionate to the subject moved. Therefore hope regards directly one’s own good and not that which pertains to another.” However, Christian hope reaches for support from others who walk close by. Travelers in hope lean on one another.

The film *Of Gods and Men* (2010) tells the true story of nine Trappist monks of Tibhirine in rural Algeria, seven of whom were beheaded in the 1996 civil war. Of particular importance in the story is the relationship between Christian, the community’s leader, and Christophe, a younger member who agonizes about the threats the community faces. The two men are obviously close; in almost every scene when the brothers are gathering, at mass or for a meal, the two men sit side by side.

From the beginning Christian speaks strongly against leaving Tibhirine, an option that is pressed on the monks by outsiders as the danger grows. Christophe does not share his mentor’s resolve. At the first meeting at which the monks discuss their options, Christophe strongly favors leaving. “I did not come here to commit collective suicide,” he says.

The monks’ cells are close so they hear one another at night. Christophe anguishes in the dark: “Don’t abandon me! Help me!” He is reaching out but cannot catch hold. He is struggling to hope. Christian aches for his friend, but he can only lift his eyes in prayer for him. He cannot do Christophe’s hoping for him.

Christophe’s daily work is hoeing, planting, and keeping the bees. At one point he is furrowing the earth with an old tractor and a plow. The plow digs too deeply into the earth and becomes stuck. The tractor wheels spin. After a pause, Christophe backs up and begins again; this time the earth yields to the plow.

The scene is emblematic: Christophe is stuck in the earth and cannot see a way forward. Later, as Christian and Christophe walk together in the tree garden, Christophe confesses that he has reviewed his life’s choices and says his agony has led to self-doubt, and that he has begun to wonder if there is any purpose after all in the life that he is living.

Christian does not so much offer new insight as remind Christophe of what is already his path. “Remember that you have already given your life, when you decided to follow Christ.” What Christophe needs is to see the connection between who he was

before and who he is now—and who he will continue to be. It is the same path, steered by the same hope, now deepening in understanding. Christian goes on to assure him that up to the end they must seek to avoid death, for they are not in Tibhirine to die but to share Christ's love and his life. His last line of encouragement is this: "We remember love is eternal hope." And the two embrace, leaning heavily upon one another.

Christophe is changed after the encounter—or perhaps we should say that he now sees the way ahead. He has renewed his hope. The brothers gather for a meeting to bring their deliberation and discernment to its final conclusion. The camera follows each person at the table as they speak with unanimity, saying things like "leaving would lead to nowhere," or "running off makes no sense." Christophe says, "Let God set the table here, for everyone, friends and enemies." And the trouble is gone from his face.

The reference is eucharistic but also eschatological. For as Jesus himself says at the Last Supper with his disciples, "I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). Indeed, it is the marriage supper of the lamb (Rev. 19:9) that guides the deepest Christian understanding of hope in the heavenly life shared with God and in the company of the saints. Christophe's hope has been restored just as he has reclaimed the connection between his life lived out in Tibhirine with his fellow monks and their death and the life to come. Hope does not divide one part of our life from another, as if heaven were a ticket to a Disneyland escape, as if it had nothing to do with earth. Rather by hope our lives are knit together in a continuous narrative, with one unified and unifying destination.

The final gathering of the brothers is a common meal with a special extravagance: they share two bottles of fine wine while listening to a recording of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. The camera again moves around the table, lingering on each face lit with joy, then sorrow, and finally resolve. These are not shifting moods or changing sentiments, but the internally connected parts of each human life, individually and corporately lived out toward hope.

Christian hope reaches for support from others who walk close by.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is known for saying, "I have never been an optimist. I am a prisoner of hope." The latter phrase originates in Zechariah 9:12, a passage often

read on Palm Sunday. Freedom is promised for the prisoners with the coming of the king, but they are also instructed to “return to your stronghold.” The implication seems to be not simply that the prisoners can be hopeful but also that hope in some sense imprisons.

Tutu locates his hope as a Christian in the resurrection that comes after the great sorrow and anguish of Christ’s passion and death. Unlike optimism, which is always sunny, genuine hope is formed in the darkness. As such it endures great evil—and calls us to endure with it. This is how it imprisons.

Christian hope frees us to point our lives toward a fuller future. As for the monks of Tibhirine, the freedom includes waiting in patience. It does not force what it looks forward to. In this way, genuine hope never provides a quick and easy way out. The monks placed their hope in a love that repudiates violence, and this led to their violent deaths. As they discerned, there was no other way.

This movement forward cannot be mistaken for a continual reaching toward what is novel, as if when something we hoped in fails, we move on to hope in something else. This is not the hope Paul has in mind when he says, “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). It’s only a semblance of hope that keeps us forever moving on to the next best thing, as if hope were a series of projects.

In fact, as the monks discover, hope frequently is to be found by remaining in one place. The *homo viator* that characterizes our human life encompasses also the *stabilitas loci*. In her book *Glittering Vices*, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung tells us that the Desert Fathers counseled those who are prone to sloth, which has strong links to despair, to “stay put.” Christian hope is a gift of the Spirit. We are not to hunt it down and capture it but to discover it as something already present and renewed.

Hopeful Christians are anchored in the life they have been given to live. This means that acts of hope need not all be large and monumental; most will be small and mundane. Living in hope means really living, day to day. These many acts, if they are hopeful, are patterned toward our rightful end. They commit us, or *imprison* us, in the best sense, as the slaves of Christ (Eph. 6:6). Christians who were placed on this path by their baptism can, by hope, claim it as our one true destiny.

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