

Reading:

“Anthem” by Leonard Cohen

The birds, they sang
At the break of day
Start again, I heard them say
Don't dwell on what has passed away
Or what is yet to be.

Yeah, the wars
They will be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
Bought and sold and bought again
The dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

You can add up the parts
You won't have the sum
You can strike up the march
There is no drum
Every heart, every heart
To love, will come
But like a refugee.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN
 A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
 Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City
 September 6, 2020

Labor Day weekend is a turning point. The end of summer, the beginning of the school season, just a couple of months before our presidential election. The word uncertainty is ubiquitous, it's a euphemism for fear these days. We grasp at hope that a COVID vaccine will enable life to return to "normal"; we grasp at hope that the election, one of unprecedented vitriol, will address our despair over justice issues. As we ride this roller coaster of fear and hope, where do we turn to look for the strength and courage to care for ourselves and care for the world?

Sunny Jacobs tells her story of despair in her autobiography, *Stolen Time: The Inspiring Story of an Innocent Woman Condemned to Death*. Sunny and her husband were wrongfully convicted of killing two police officers in Florida in 1976. At the time of her arrest, Sunny was a 27 year old hippie, mother of a ten month old daughter and a nine year old son. Both Sunny and her husband were sentenced to be executed.

Sunny writes about her first hours in prison immediately after being arrested, "I had to create a barrier between myself and these people. I set my jaw and hardened my eyes and turned toward my inner voice. There was silence." Sunny didn't belong in prison; she believed that she was separate from the mess she found herself in and that justice would prevail. She continues, "...at this point, I didn't even believe I would have to go to trial. I thought the truth will set me free. I hadn't killed anyone. I was disgusted by the whole process. I didn't understand why they were treating me like I was in some way responsible for what happened. I could not yet see the full picture. That would take a long time to become clear to me—to even become relevant to me."

Soon after her arrest, Sunny was moved to death row. She was the only woman on death row in Florida. She was completely isolated; the guards were instructed not to talk to her. Her food was delivered through a slot in the door.

The kind of hope Sunny turned to reflexively is “passive” hope, an irrational optimism that everything will turn out the way we want it to. Passive hope depends on something or someone relieving our suffering and making our lives easier. It’s based on the idea that we would be better off if we were some place else or if we were someone else.

Passive hope is about sizing up the past and deciding how the future should look. The result of this mindset is that we spend a great deal of our lives trying to arrange things as though we have much more control than we do—feeling that the only way that we can be fully at peace is if we and everyone we love are healthy and financially secure, if all our relationships are harmonious, if we have the job we want, the body we want. This is the kind of hope that we know best.

Passive hope forces us to constantly battle to hold steady the people, places and situations that feel good and eliminate or change the people, places and situations that feel uncomfortable or unfair. This is a stressful state of mind and an aggressive state of mind. Even the most wholesome hope for racial justice or climate justice often leads to hating those whom we perceive as our enemies. Because passive hope is predicated on optimism, it can also lead to despair derived from not feeling we can do enough to change the future to our liking. When our optimism wobbles or crumbles, our hope is threatened.

The stress, the aggression, and the despair that accompany passive hope are a result of fear. Fear is the fuel for passive hope—fear that our situations will not change for the better, fear of the people who are barriers to our vision of a better world, fear that we are failing if our hopes don’t come true.

The Tibetan word for hope is rewa and the word for fear is dopka. Mostly Tibetans use the word re-dok, a combination of rewa and dopka, because there is a cultural understanding that hope and fear are necessarily partnered. The direct-action climate group Extinction Rebellion has a slogan for this: “Hope dies, action begins.” Here they are referring to passive hope, the hope whose fear creates despair and blocks us from taking action.

There is another kind of hope: active hope. Active hope is different from passive hope in two important ways. 1) With active hope we accept the experience of here and now, we're fully present and 2) we recognize that we are not independently in control, that we are part of the interdependent web of all existence. When we have passive hope, we think of freedom as leaving behind everything that gets in our way, setting ourselves apart from life. When we have active hope we experience freedom as staying awake to everything that comes our way and responding by doing the best we can without counting on an outcome. When we don't count on an outcome, we let go of our fear of failing or of loss, and we open to possibility.

John Greenleaf Whittier was a 19th Century American Quaker writer. He worked tirelessly as an abolitionist. Several of the hymns in our hymnal are from Whittier's poems, including "My Psalm," which he wrote in 1859:

I mourn no more my vanished years:
 Beneath a tender rain,
 An April rain of smiles and tears,
 My heart is young again.

No longer forward nor behind
 I look in hope or fear;
 But, grateful, take the good I find,
 The best of now and here.

I break my pilgrim staff, I lay
 Aside the toiling oar;
 The angel sought so far away
 I welcome at my door.

That all the jarring notes of life
 Seem blending in a psalm,
 And all the angles of its strife
 Slow rounding into calm.

And so the shadows fall apart,
 And so the west-winds play;
 And all the windows of my heart
 I open to the day.

Instead of letting fear drive him to a passive hope, Whittier accepted the present, “No longer forward or behind I look in hope or fear, but grateful take the good I find the best of now and here.” Whittier wrote this poem two years before the outbreak of the Civil War.

Another American crusader for justice, environmental activist Joanna Macy, is the author of *Active Hope: How To Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy*. She offers a four step approach to active hope, called the spiral practice. The four steps are: Gratitude, Honoring our Pain for the World, Seeing with New/Ancient Eyes, and Going Forth. Step one is to offer gratitude for all that we have to be thankful for. The second step is to accept difficult emotions such as despair and to be curious about how we experience them rather than avoiding them or wishing they would go away. In doing so we accept the despair about our threatened planet or whatever suffering is most heavy for us; we see that our suffering is part of the human condition. The third step is where the creativity arises because we have opened our minds and hearts with the initial steps of gratitude and honoring the pain. The freedom that accompanies the spiritual and emotional opening allows us to see possibility. The fourth step is how we bring the process into our everyday thinking, our speech, and our action, how we contribute to our communities by doing the work that supports individual and societal change.

Sunny Jacob's story is extraordinary for many reasons. She begins to get in touch with her potential for active hope even on her first days on death row. She writes on day one: “Turning to my left I noticed a window in the wall above the bed. I had to kneel on the bed to look through it. A cruel joke—the window looks out onto another wall. At just the right angle though, through a window a few yards down the hall to the left, I can see a small slice of the compound and the fence beyond. I feel some relief from this... Taking small steps, placing one foot directly in front of the other, I paced off the length of the concrete floor. Six steps. It was six steps from the door to the toilet, which had no lid and gaped at me. I turned back toward the door again. Six steps. I could walk these six steps as much as I liked and there was nothing to stop me... All I did for those first days and weeks was pace the six steps from the solid metal door to the [toilet]. Back and forth I walked, burning a path through the despair... I had been given a Bible and a pencil and paper. So I paced, and I read, and I wrote, and I waited for a bird to land on the bit of fence I could see if I angled myself right at the small

window. I felt the need to make contact with another being that didn't hate me."

Sunny is miraculously finding a way to be free in the most horrifying circumstances. In her early weeks on death row, she decides that she will not surrender her spirit or her death to those who control her sentence and her circumstances, and she turns her cell into a spiritual sanctuary. She begins a daily practice of yoga, meditation and prayer.

She describes a striking moment that serves as the catalyst for this decision. She has just received her dinner tray through the slot in her door, and she discovers that someone has neatly folded a napkin over the utensils. She interprets this as an affirmation of her existence and her dignity, and she describes her heart swelling with this blessing.

Sunny's gratitude and the way in which she honors her pain, leads her to a sense of possibility and creativity in instilling in herself an active hope. She demonstrates this magnificently when she notices a tomato seed in her salad. The tomatoes themselves are consumed by the kitchen staff and not included in her salad, but she spots the seed and decides to plant it. She carefully tended to the seed, keeping it moist so it would sprout. She convinced a kind guard to give her a handful of dirt and a nurse to give her a medicine cup.

She writes, "One day they came to my room to measure the window. They returned with a drill and a set of bars that they proceeded to install. What was this all about? What had I done? Later on it was explained to me. They had found bullets hidden inside a cigarette pack in a box sent to someone from the outside. That person blamed Judy... Since Judy and I were known associates from the law library, and since a birthday card from me was found in her desk drawer, and since bullets were considered escape paraphernalia, by their particular brand of logic it followed that I should have bars installed on the window....

I trained my plant to grow up the bars like a trellis, weaving in and out of the diamond shaped openings. And it was a trellis just as it was bars. Both were correct and you had your choice how to see it. I chose trellis."

Sunny chose a life of active hope, and in doing so she let in every sliver of light.

After five years Sunny's sentence was changed to life in prison. Now she had cellmates, constant social interaction, and job responsibilities. She was filled with gratitude, compassion, and creativity in this new setting. Sunny spent another 12 years in prison. In 1992 the real murderer confessed, and Sunny was set free.

Years later Sunny married another exoneree, Peter Pringle, and they now run the Sunny Prison Project in which recently released exonerees come to live with them for several weeks. Sunny and Peter treat them like family; they know better than to wish for specific goals or healing for their guests whose trauma and anguish they understand so well. Sunny and Peter find solace and courage, not in creating brand new lives for their fellow exonerees, but in their relationships, in caring for each other.

In practicing gratitude, in honoring our suffering, we find possibility and creativity, and a way forward. We do not need optimism to engage hope. We need to stay awake to our full experience. And we need each other.

Closing Reading

"The Present" by W.S. Merwin

As they were leaving the garden
one of the angels bent down to them and whispered
I am to give you this
as you are leaving the garden
I do not know what it is
or what it is for
what you will do with it
you will not be able to keep it
but you will not be able
to keep anything
yet they both reached at once
for the present
and when their hands met
they laughed