

HOPING ONE'S WAY TO MEANING

by Eric Stevenson

Brain surgeon, Dr. Charles Teo, reports that tumours kill more kids annually than any other disease and are claiming the lives of an increasing number of young people. Yet medical research to improve the quality of treatment is the least funded. Dr. Teo has devoted himself to extending the life of patients with brain cancer using aggressive surgery. He has also founded the Cure for Life Foundation which organised the fun run to raise funds for medical research last weekend. Dr. Teo has a hope which drives his medical and social endeavours. It is that one day a procedure will be discovered which will enable him to say to his patients, "Do this and this and this and you will be cured for life."

Like most hopes, Dr. Teo's hope was born out of crisis – the crisis of the brain cancer death toll. It meets a pressing need; it inspires the hopeless; it is realistic in the world of medicine; it elicits his full co-operation and it is open to redefinition and expansion with each new discovery in cancer research and each successful extension of the life span of his patients. That is why Dr. Teo's hope is so meaningful. Without this kind of hope, his surgical and social endeavours would be meaningless.

And I doubt very much whether an individual or a group could perform any meaningful activity without something like it? *Hope has to do with an expectation of an ideal set of circumstances which will inspire you to keep beavering away until you arrive at where you want to be.* In hoping for something I therefore have to decide initially what and where I really need to be. Then as a rational human being I will conceptualise and act on a hope which will motivate me to strive towards that chosen destination.

For the purpose of this religious talk, we are avoiding the luxury of indulging in our wonderment concerning the sublime beauty of nature, our transcendent enjoyment of the arts, the mind blowing intricacies of micro-biology and nano-science, the expansiveness of the universe, and the sanctity of our loving relationships. All these things almost completely enrich our days. I suspect however that we also use them to avoid facing up to life's difficulties and as the antidote for our depressive reaction to the dark side of human existence. I am not trying to placate the whingers and complainers who think the world owes them a living. I am talking about our responses to those times when our morose spirits seem to be perfectly consistent with our broken dreams, and our unfulfilled ambitions, our dissatisfaction with our performance and our disillusionment with what is happening in the world. I hesitate to call them depressive episodes; they often are triggers for genuine depression, but are they not more like reality responses to the world the way it is? As we heard in the reading, David Tacey disagrees. He says that our failure to give traditionally religious justification for the dark side is the cause of neurosis. To the contrary I am suggesting there would be something wrong with us if we were not depressed by it, and that traditional religion is not a meaningful cure for our existential anxiety. So,

have we been misguided into seeking an antidepressant for it? *Is there a more meaningful way for religion to deal with what seems to be a normal state of mind?*

I think religious hope has to be like Dr. Teo's, only a thousand times over. It is important because it is the thing that gets us out of bed in the morning and gets us through each new day. A meaningful ultimate religious hope must be based on a person's urgent ultimate needs, not their wants. But this Holy Grail is not to be confused with our hope. I suspect that is why so many people are standing at the bus stop of life for a bus that never comes. It is because they have been easily tricked into wanting things and substituting those things for their hopes. The later gospel writers of the Christian story got their ultimate hopes tangled up with their ultimate needs. Their vain hope was that Jesus would come back again in person, in their lifetime, live his life among them and rescue them from poverty and servitude. Like all of us they wanted their loved one back again. They also formulated their hope within parameters which we no longer believe in. We have no theistic God, no physical after life, people don't come back from the dead, and there is no spirit world within which to realise such desires. So our challenge in hoping our way to meaning is in *firstly deciding what are our most important and ultimate needs* and then *formulating a hope which can be realised and which fits within the post-modern parameters of our post-modern world.*

"The most important things in human experience are not things". Not even happiness if most of the things that give rise to that happiness are temporary! Not even having popularity; those who have been betrayed, stigmatised and persecuted for swimming against the tide of greed and self-aggrandisement have achieved more for the people of this world than popularity. Not even good health; having courage in bad health is more important than that! Not even having all our faculties; Helen Keller went blind and said after that as a result she saw something more precious than the things of this world. Not even Freedom from anxiety; as I have said, there would be something wrong with you if you did not feel anxious about some of the current world events....

It is what we as living conscious creatures can do with life that is the object of hope; the object of despair is what we let life's circumstances do to us. I think we can help each other so much in deciding what is supremely and ultimately worth wanting. It is difficult to do so, but so special when in our searching we can share with each other our sense of loss over what we mistakenly thought were the most important things. It is so good being in this place together working through to the position of defining our priceless treasure.....When every superficial thing has been stripped away, what do we really want to be as individuals and as a fellowship of faith around the world? I presume that for Unitarians it has to do with valuing the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and justice equity and compassion in human relations. For us they represent the precious ingredients of a life finely tuned.

Those principles for living no doubt gained their sterling value for us from our cultural heritage. It therefore makes sense to go back in history to the source of goodness in whatever religious culture one belongs. So let me to go back to the very beginnings of my traditional Christian culture, to the historical Jesus who never founded a church and who didn't think he was dying to save anybody. He left a beautiful example of a life finely tuned. It ended in surrender for him and in tragedy for a minority of Jewish people who were hoping in vain for his non-material Kingdom to materialise. His vision of an imminent realm in which love ruled was at first misunderstood by everybody with the possible exception of a prostitute.

For all life's mystery our ultimate hope depends on learning to value and practise the loving and compassionate ways in which LIFE* can be embraced, and to find in it something more pervasive and more purposeful than its apparent injustices and its pain, or even its un-intentional pleasures. It seems that the first Christian communities were not established by Jesus but by people like us who were endeavouring to hope their way to meaning. It is apparent that these early grief stricken and disillusioned disciples did not renew personal contact with their friend through physical resurrection as recorded by the later writers of the gospel narrative. They simply went on coping and living in the confidence that the abundant life which Jesus demonstrated had been "raised" to transcendent heights. Their desire was for a fullness of living to which they could aspire *and into which it was possible for them to enter*

TIME OF SILENT MEDITATION. Let's become more aware of this abundant life.... Is our ultimate desire for a world in which it can be experienced here and now? If so, where do we begin? I suggest in defining our ultimate goal we start where the original disciples of Jesus started – in our situations of crisis - when all of life's superficialities have been revealed and stripped away. It is there that we will gain a passionate desire that has been purified and refined by the fires of desperation and by not a little suffering. It is there that we can let go of our resentments and regrets, relinquish the things that have been forcibly taken from us. and find release from the things which we have clung to for a pseudo kind of fulfilment. In order to inspire us to live life to the full, let us consider whether our hope has to be based on a realistic ideal? – an ideal which is nothing less than rational, practical, attainable, flexible and achievable? Or can it be only some of these things? Or none of them?

ADDRESS PART B

It is what we as living conscious creatures can do with life that is the object of hope**. The object of despair is what we let life's circumstances do to us. Millions of people, despairing of the means of sheer human survival have been and still are desperately reaching out for their dream *of something better*. Who knows how many have already sunk into the slough of despair? But a dream has been believed in by many others of all religious backgrounds whose circumstances have almost completely overwhelmed them. They have tried and are still trying to 'hope' their

way above an existence which most of the time we would regard is devastatingly tragic. They do so by believing in a real and future perfect set of circumstances for living. – if not for themselves, at least for their children. For some it is after they die. Their conviction is that those ideal circumstances exist. Their hope is that they are attainable and will be a welcome relief for their present dire state of destitution.. Far be it for me to attempt to disillusion them. We cannot dare to sit in our middle class arm chairs and tell starving, diseased, tortured, people around the world how to hope. It is they if we let them who will speak to us.

Some conservative churches dictate what one's ultimate hope should be, and have been doing it within a set of parameters that have passed their use by date.*** i.e. that there is a space-time dimension of existence beyond the upper atmosphere in a super natural world which will be a future compensation for the pain of our present existence. It is a seductive doctrine. It not only does not fit a post-modern world view. It also offers conditional materialistic benefits to the poor, the sick and the victims of injustice provided they keep the faith and do good - benefits which have already proven to be ultimately unsatisfying and unethical, and a phony foundation for hope.

*The early Christians' hope was radically different. It was that the kind of living exemplified by Jesus in the midst of abject poverty and servitude could be recognised and embraced universally and could be put into practice in the real world by the second coming of the Christ as soon as their God thought it was time to do it. Failing that, they eventually hoped their way to meaning by accessing the supernatural (the power of the Holy Spirit) which for us can be gospel-speak for taking personal responsibility for life . Can we hope like that without the help of an imaginary Saviour? I believe we can! Don Cupitt, without attributing it to Jesus, calls it *Solar Living* – living like the sun which is continually expending itself, radiating its light and warmth for the benefit of all creation.("The Old Creed and the New")*

Adopting hope for the journey is extremely personal. I venture to say that no two person's ultimate religious hopes are exactly the same. Even in a middle class Fellowship like ours where we have no imposed doctrine or dogma it is unlikely that we will agree. But our united passion for fullness of life can bind us together. This is where we can begin to hope. Assuming that *all we have is life*, this life, and the opportunity to live this life here and now, then all of life (including the life of the historical Jesus) becomes infinitely more precious than if it is regarded merely as a pre-cursor of eternal life or of a physical resurrection. If this life is all there is and all therefore that we can have then it has been under valued, under preserved, under protected, under cultivated, under respected, and under lived. If only it can continue to exist, be recognised, be promulgated and exemplified as each day dawns.! Let us celebrate it with the same adoration that the Moslems celebrate Mahomet and the same reverence with which the Christians attribute to Christ.

*My hope therefore is that fullness of life is “doable”. Life, as i am using the word is not the tragedies which it involves (or its joys). It is not to be confused with the nasty things which some people do with it, or how they refuse to benefit from it. It is something which persists regardless of what we think or do. It is like a staff on which the high and low notes of a musical piece are written; it is the potential carrier of compassion and indifference, of faith and unbelief, of reconciliation and estrangement, of natural disaster and rejuvenation. If it were not valued as such people would not have anything on which to write love’s score. Hope has to do with our determination to endure the indifference, the unbelief, the estrangement and the disaster and to believe in the persistence and achievement of reconciliation, renewal, faith and love. *****

** In writing this address, I have endeavoured to clarify the confusion over the common usage of the words “life” and “living”. The popular usage for “life”(Life Mark One) is as a collective noun for the train of specific random events and the variety of circumstances involved in one’s human existence. This generally includes the self imposed or self generated ones, but more particularly, it is about the unscheduled, temporary, passing away things that happen naturally and beyond our control and without any moral judgement, and regardless of humanitarian consequences. C’est la vie! “Living” is used as a verb and adjective for existing under those conditions and coping with them.(Living, Mark One) Another popular meaning of “living” is as an antonym for “dead” i.e. animate, alive. (Living Mark Two) However, there is a Life Mark Two in which “life” is also used more generically to describe the potentialities of all “Living Mark 2” things. Life Mark 2 as I understand it is possessed by every organism which has the capacity at its optimal level of existence to be fully functioning within the boundaries of its particular species. There is also an extension of the use of this “life” word, (Life Mark Three). That is, by inferring that it is a kind of animating spirit - that there is a superior or co-existent force or energy called “life” which is orchestrating the events and circumstances which I have alluded to above. We sing about it in our Unitarian theme song, “Spirit of Life”. I have therefore endeavoured to be consistent and use Life Mark 2 and Living Mark 1 in what I have had to say.*

***In talking about an ultimate hope, I am questioning the reality of traditional religious hope involving an after life and a supernatural world. In this sense I am an “unrealist”. i.e. traditional religion’s hope is unreal. For me ultimate hope must be about how best to inspire me to reach and practise a demonstrable and attainable goal in this present world. The object of my hope will need to be perceived and appreciated with at least some of my faculties, or require the use of additional faculties which as yet I do not utilise. It will also be subject to progress and change with the evolution of knowledge. e.g.nano-technology and will require my full co-operation in achieving it.*

*** *Are things really controlled by a benevolent “out there” god? Does that provide sufficient meaning for us? If not we have no recourse to hope of a supernatural*

something better now or beyond the grave! To be meaningful it would have to be provided by a different kind of God. Assuming that she exists she would have to be something supra intelligent and non-personal of which we cannot conceive and which we are unable to perceive with our limited and subjective human senses or communicate with in our own language. On record she does not appear to be intentionally malevolent or reliably benevolent. The big challenge about thinking like that is “what about my faith?” Can I still believe in the existence of a pervasive life force? I think we should let people believe in something like that if they choose to. They haven’t necessarily lost their faith; they have just launched out on to the ocean of life refusing to stipulate the details of something beyond their present knowledge and experience. Much of the mystery and wonder of life which others have attributed to a personal transcendent being, they share but have chosen to live with that mysteriousness and wonderment rather than make a dogmatic statement about it.

****Our mission therefore is so to live in hope that life, being finely tuned, will always be recognisable and valued and demonstrable among us. We are inspired by the hope that it will always be possible for us and our friends to passionately foster an enhanced sense of reverence for and admiration of all life and to promote it and live it to the full. Our challenge, despite the threat of depression and disillusionment is to spend ourselves in preserving, cultivating, loving and celebrating it within ourselves and all of nature.