

Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.

—Martin Luther

Hope
eternal

By Ardis Whitman

Hope is the mechanism that keeps the human race tenaciously alive and dreaming, planning, building. Hope is not the opposite of realism. It is the opposite of cynicism and despair. The best of humanity has always hoped when there was no way, lived what was unlivable, and managed to build when there was little to build on.

“A merry heart does good like a medicine,” says the book of Proverbs, in the Bible. This ancient knowledge has gained new confirmation in our time. It was found after World War II, for example, that American prisoners of war who had been convinced that they would come out alive, whose mind and spirit were focused on life as it was to be lived in the future, emerged with much less damage than those who felt they would never go home again.

Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, of the University of Pennsylvania, has done much research on the causes of depression, the disorder that

affects millions every year. He has found that depressed people regard every minor obstacle as an impassable barrier. Responding to anything is felt to be useless because “nothing I do matters.” Successful therapy, he told me, starts when we begin to believe again that we can be effective human beings and can control our lives.

A man I knew had an alcoholic wife. Again and again she disappointed him. But he never lost hope. One night, she shamed him in front of old friends. Afterward, she broke into tears. “Why don’t you leave me?” she cried. “Because I remember a very beautiful person,” he answered. “And I believe she’s still there.” Ultimately, she did recover.

We hope as naturally as the seeds sprout and the sun rises, and perhaps for the same reasons. Hope’s signature seems to be written on earth and sky and sea and all that lives. But natural and vital as hope may be, we can lose it. With many of us, hope simply grows tired as our lives grow tired.

Precisely because hope is in the natural flow of life, it is unleashed naturally by removing the abnormal impediments that block it. Here are some suggestions:

Hope for the moment. There are times when it is hard to believe in the future, when we are temporarily just not brave enough. When this happens, concentrate on the present. Cultivate *le petit bonheur* (“the little happiness”) until courage returns. Look forward to the beauty of the next moment, the next hour, the promise of a good meal, sleep, a book, a movie, the immediate likelihood that tomorrow the sun will rise. Sink roots into the present until the strength grows to think about tomorrow.

Take action. “When I can’t see any way out,” a stranger wrote me some years ago, “I do something anyway.” This is good advice to anyone paralyzed by despair.

Believe in hope. Don’t be persuaded that the pessimists have a corner on truth. These people would rather live in the fog of skepticism than chance disappointment. It is the adult in us, not the child, which, when knocked down, gets up again and says, against the odds, “Tomorrow will be better.” Hope is not a lie, but the truth itself.

So, summon hope. It is as right as spring sunlight. It is a goal in itself, an exercise in gallantry, a frame of mind, a style of life, a climate of the heart.

When hope dies, what else lives?

—Ama Ata Aidoo (1942–), Ghanaian writer.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (The Bible, Romans 15:13 NIV).

Finally our hope and faith are strong and steady. Then, when that happens, we are able to hold our heads high no matter what happens and know that all is well, for we know how dearly God loves us. (*The Living Bible*, Romans 5:4b–5.)