

Hope in a Time of Global Despair¹

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Abstract

Hope may be the most laden shorthand term of all time. Everyone wants it; few know how to articulate what it is. I present a new conceptualisation of hope—reasonable hope—that makes it easier for counsellors to sustain their own hopefulness when working with clients who have lost theirs. By subscribing to reasonable hope, clinicians enhance their ability to offer accompaniment and bear witness to clients. I suggest supports for counsellors who practise reasonable hope that make it more likely that one can engage in the co-creative process necessary to encourage doing reasonable hope.

Thank you for inviting me to be your keynote speaker today. I am honoured to be speaking to you and grateful to have the opportunity to share with you some ways in which my thinking has evolved since the last time I was in New Zealand, in February 2002. During my previous visits, I was moved by how carefully people situate their introductions to a particular place. I would like to join you by weaving observations about place into the theme of my talk today: hope in a time of global despair.

Let me begin, then, by sharing with you where I come from, in some of the many ways one can address that question. Let me start close to the land, since I believe that is something many New Zealanders care about deeply. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, the daughter of first-generation Jewish immigrants for whom Yiddish, in my father's case, and Hungarian, in my mother's, was the first language. Brooklyn is one of New York City's boroughs, home to 2.5 million people. It covers 72.8 square miles and 38% of its residents were born outside of the USA. New Zealand, by comparison, has a population of 4.1 million people and covers an area of nearly 104,000 square miles. It is almost 1400 times larger than Brooklyn, but its population is less than twice as large.

But where do I come from? I live in Boston, which is about a four-hour drive north of Brooklyn, and I have always felt that I am a visitor there. Strangely, the place to which I am truly a visitor is the place on earth I feel most at home. This is a place five hours north of Boston, on an island in waters near Greenville, Maine. The Penobscot and Norridgewock branches of the Abenaki tribes were the indigenous inhabitants of that land and their names grace towns and rivers.

I feel at home on a 13-acre island on a lake, in a part of the world where there are very few people “like me.” Although many Jews visit the spectacular coastline of Maine in the summer, very few have settled in the northern woods of Maine. For 26 seasons, my family and I have come to this island. Despite having had no exposure to this geography in the previous 36-plus years of my life, the moment I saw these mountains and lakes, I said, “Stop the car, I am never leaving here.”

And, like you, as the moving pōwhiri demonstrated, we have elders, kaumātua, in Greenville. A town elder, Ed Walden, a dear friend, had coffee with us in August. At 87 years old, he is one of the oldest men in town and his great, great, great grandfather, Nathaniel Haskell, founded the town of Greenville in 1824, when he cut 10 acres of land on a hill overlooking the lake on which we live. I live on this island, with the bats, the mink, the otter, the moose and the eagles. I have scattered my parents’ ashes there. It is where I feel at home.

And yet, I don’t come from there. On my mother’s side, I come from a small village, Velke Kapusany, in what was once Hungary and is now Slovakia. In March, I was the first person in my generation to return to the village. My maternal grandfather was one of 14 children. He, one brother and one sister came to the United States in the early 1900s. Nine surviving siblings lived in Velke Kapusany and all of them, their spouses, their children, and their grandchildren were rounded up by Hungarian and German soldiers in 1944 and shipped to the extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Only five people from my family, my mother’s first cousins, all teenage boys, survived the war. From separate Displaced Persons Camps each walked back to Velke Kapusany on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for Jews, which happened to be today, September 18, in 1945. They rightly surmised that if any relative survived he or she would try to get to the village on that holiest of days.

Visiting Velke Kapusany was an extraordinary experience. Seeing the graves of my ancestors—all that is left of Jewish life is Jewish death—was very emotional. It was the first time in my life I had stepped on earth that I had come from, where my people had lived and worked, played and prayed. I saw the graves of my great grandparents, who had died before the war and so, as it turned out, had the good fortune

to be buried. I may feel at home in Greenville, but I know I don't come from there.

What does this have to do with hope in a time of global despair, you may be wondering at this point? About two months after we returned from Velke Kapusany, my husband and I were having dinner with friends who had spent two years in Budapest. I had known that the husband, Charles, had family in Hungary. As we got to talking about our mutual experiences, it became clear that his family too was from Velke Kapusany. In fact, his family's compound was about 1 km from my relatives' graves. Friends for 30 years, we had not known this about each other. And then, just as dramatically, we realised that his family had undoubtedly participated in the round-up of my family to the camps.

Charles is a veteran who has a medical disability as a result of the PTSD he developed serving as a medic during the Vietnam War. He is an anti-war and peace activist who edits a literary and arts magazine devoted to understanding how war affects us at every level of society. His mission is to challenge assumptions. Charles and I were both born in 1947, two years after the end of the Second World War, and we have taken different paths to a remarkably similar place, I being active in the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War in which he loyally served. We both oppose violence and violation of all kinds. In one generation, we have turned the dynamics of perpetrator/victim into those of compassionate witnessing. To me, this is a manifestation of hope in a time of global despair.

These are serious times. The global picture is dire. We do need hope. But not just any kind of hope. I think of hope as something we do. Of course, hope may be a feeling, but I am concerned mainly with the practice of hope. In any case, I believe that feeling follows action. The practice of hope connects one to the webs of meaning and relationship that make life purposeful and meaningful. It gives one something to do.

But what one does is inextricably related to how one understands hope. Hope that is best expressed in Hallmark Card sentiments, or in images of rainbows and butterflies, will direct us to activities that may not touch the suffering that we and others experience.

For this reason, I have developed a new concept that I call reasonable hope. Unlike hope, which often sets up unrealistic expectations, reasonable hope, consistent with the meaning of the modifier, suggests something both sensible and moderate, directing our attention to what is within reach rather than what may be desired but unattainable. Many people, considering their experience in relation to "hope," are daunted by its accumulated lofty meanings in current cultural discourse and (wrongly) classify themselves as hopeless. Reasonable hope softens the polarity between hope and despair,

hope and hopelessness (Flaskas, 2007) and allows (more) people to place themselves in the category of the hopeful.

How we think about hope has all to do with whether we can co-create helpfulness with our clients and whether we can maintain our own. While counsellors work to restore hope in individuals, couples and families who have lost hope, their ideas about hope may make it harder not easier to do so. Reasonable hope makes it easier to be hopeful oneself and to co-create hope with others. There are five characteristics of reasonable hope, which, taken singly or together, illustrate the construct. These characteristics are drawn from a number of domains, including philosophical and theological writing on hope.

Characteristics of reasonable hope

1. Reasonable hope is relational

Hope is considered an attribute of an individual. In the last 35 years, there have been over 14 scales developed to measure hope in individuals (Elliott & Olver, 2002). Reasonable hope, on the other hand, flourishes in relationship. I hope because we can do hope. Gabriel Marcel (1951/1962) also writes about hope as relational. He calls it “choral” and he likens it to Buber’s I–Thou relationship. Yet, one cannot romanticise relationships; not all relationships will give rise to or support reasonable hope.

2. Reasonable hope is a practice

Reasonable hope is a practice; it is something we do with others. A practice is a programme of action undertaken, not just or even for pragmatic purposes, but as an expression of who one wants to be and how one wants to act in the world (Griffith & Dsouza, 2010). Reasonable hope as a practice is not about accomplishing a goal but about aiming toward it. It is—to quote the well-worn phrase—the journey not the arrival that matters. This emphasis on process is constitutive of reasonable hope. Thinking of hope as a verb rather than a noun leads to different activities. Reasonable hope as a practice, doing reasonable hope, is oriented to the here and now, towards actions that will bring people together to work towards a preferred future.

3. Reasonable hope maintains that the future is open, uncertain and influenceable

Reasonable hope doesn’t struggle against an uncertain, unknowable future, but rather embraces it as its best bet. In dire circumstances, for example, amidst violence, poverty, or fatal illness, it is precisely because we cannot know what the future may bring that

using reasonable hope, with its limited horizon of expectations, helps us work toward something better than what we are living now. The practice of reasonable hope feels justifiable because the future is not determined but is influenceable.

Marcel (1951/62) describes this “fundamental openness” as an expectant act of the whole person in which “the soul turns toward a light which it does not yet perceive, a light yet to be born” (p. 31). It is because we can join with others, because creative communal synergies can happen, because spontaneous actions do arise from collective commitments, that an open future is full of possibilities. To return to Marcel’s image, it is precisely because the light is “yet to be born” that we can anticipate that we will be the ones who, together, create the light we seek.

4. Reasonable hope seeks goals and pathways to them

We tend to feel hopeful when the goal is clear, the pathway known, and hopeless when the way is blocked, the goal obscure. Hopelessness arises from the conviction that nothing that one wants is within reach, whether love or security or health. As counsellors who subscribe to reasonable hope, we can cultivate a practice of identifying realistic goals and pathways toward them for ourselves and for others.

Clarifying realistic goals and pathways is not necessarily simple, even given the more modest expectations that occur with reasonable hope than with hope in general. First, there is often a lot of trial and error. Goals and pathways to them may have to replace each other at a rate one would never have expected or wanted. Second, life deals us circumstances in which we have to select goals and pathways we never thought we could accept (Weingarten, 2004a, b). Yet, the practice of re-forming goals and cultivating pathways to them stretches us, helping us sustain reasonable hope.

Elizabeth Buckley, LICSW, and her supervisee, Suzanne Hecker, who work in an intensive, home-based therapy programme for multi-stressed families, have been working with this idea about reasonable hope and provide a wonderful example of it. A client of Hecker’s, with whom she had been working for several weeks toward reunification with her children, made an error, was now in jail overnight, and the Department of Social Services, similar to your Child, Youth and Family Service, was working to remove her children permanently. The client had no legal recourse left. Both Buckley and Hecker felt hopeless as the goal they had worked toward evaporated.

Buckley writes:

I asked Suzanne what she was hoping for in this situation. I wrote it down. It was something like: ‘Bail Chloe out of jail, and make sure that the kids are returned to

her? We reflected together that she could work to make this happen, but that it was unlikely. What might her next hope be—just a bit smaller and more attainable than that one?

Suzanne thought that maybe Chloe could get bailed out of jail, and find out where her children had been placed. Again, we wondered together if this might be attainable, specifically since DSS would not grant permission for Suzanne to disclose the location of the children. Still, Suzanne thought—maybe it would be enough for Chloe to know they were safe? She could say that. Okay, I said, but what about the next smallest thing you can hope for? What if Chloe can't get out of jail? Suzanne thought for a moment, and generated the idea that she and her co-counselor could make sure that they called Chloe, and maybe they could go visit her in jail—to let her know that they still cared for her, and believed in her. And what would be the hope smaller than that? That they could write to her, to convey their hope for her in words, to reach out. This was, Suzanne thought, a hope that no one could interfere with. Suzanne began to wonder with me if it might be helpful to ask Chloe the same questions that I had asked her. (Hecker & Buckley, 2007, p. 3)

Reasonable hope is a humble hope. It allows reasonable goals to trump ideal ones. It is satisfied to do less than everything that needs to be done in order to ensure that something be done.

5. Reasonable hope accommodates doubt, contradictions and despair

Hope is a black and white category; it admits no doubt, no contradictions, no despair. Reasonable hope functions in a grey zone, where doubt, contradictions and despair quite definitely co-exist. Doubt and despair are not antithetical to reasonable hope but rather can run parallel (Perlesz, 1999) or be in dialectic relation to it (Byrne & McCarthy, 2007). One can feel despair and reasonable hope simultaneously, an experience that many people have. However, those who do have this experience often assume it means that their hope is insufficient to keep despair at bay.

Clinical applications

The construct of reasonable hope can be integrated into any model of therapy since it infuses an attitude, informs a stance, and opens areas of inquiry that might otherwise not be undertaken. It does not specify or require any particular type of clinical work.

The five characteristics of reasonable hope make it a more robust concept than hope in general. Because our expectations of it are more realistic, we are less often

disappointed by reasonable hope than by hope. At the same time, our pursuit of reasonable hope is no less emphatic and enthusiastic than our pursuit of hope. However, counsellors cannot be effective with clients if their ways of thinking about hope make them vulnerable to feeling hopeless themselves.

One of the major tasks counsellors have is to accompany their clients through their suffering and hopelessness (Weingarten, 2004c). We can develop apathy as a numbing strategy when confronted with the hopelessness of our clients and the seemingly impossible task of instilling hope in them. By subscribing to reasonable hope, we enhance our ability to offer accompaniment and to bear witness (Felman & Laub, 1992; Weingarten, 2003). The metaphor of accompaniment and the language of co-creation (Weingarten, 1991, 1992) rest on a different set of premises from the language of instilling or inspiring hope, which is the dominant language in hope studies. When the task is to instil hope, the therapist must provide the grounds for hope or hopeful thinking.

The language of co-creation of hope and of hope as something we do together derives from a different way of thinking. That is, no one gives or provides hope to another, but rather one creates the conversational space for hope to arise from the forms of conversation one shares. The counsellor's responsibility is to create the conversational spaces in which reasonable hope rather than hopelessness is more likely to arise (Anderson, 1997; Larsen, Edey, & Lemay, 2007). When the task is to co-create reasonable hope rather than instil hope, the bar changes from the unattainable to the attainable.

In another article I give multiple examples of clinical applications of the ideas of reasonable hope (Weingarten, 2010).

Supports for doing reasonable hope

Thinking about reasonable hope makes doing hope more feasible. As counsellors, as citizens, I think it is far more useful to focus on the practice of doing hope than it is to try to stimulate the feeling of hope.

That said, doing hope, alone or together, is not easy. We are called to do hope in circumstances that often deplete us. I passionately believe that doing hope is best done with others and this is the primary support that any of us can have as we do hope. The following are a few others. For more, please see Weingarten (2010).

1. Believe that the small is not trivial

In April, I lost an earring that I had bought in 1993. It wasn't expensive, but it was versatile and I wore it all the time. I went back to the store where I had bought it, but

they had nothing comparable. I went next door and there was the very woman, a Tibetan, who had sold me the earring I sought to replace. Delighted, I showed her the remaining earring, told her I was looking for another black earring, but that it didn't have to be all-black, since I had taken to heart what she had told me at the time: "Plain black looks better set off by something contrasting."

The woman looked at me with wide, dark eyes as she knelt to take a pair of earrings from a low shelf.

"Thank you for telling me that."

"Well, it's true," I continued. "Actually, I remember everything you have said to me over the years." And I had. She had sold me two other pieces of jewellery at the other store.

She got up from where she was bending and faced me. "I was trafficked here."

"Excuse me?"

"I know this is very hard to hear. But I was trafficked here."

I thanked her for telling me and told her a little bit about myself. She too shared more over the next few minutes. She then told me that she gave 20% of the profits from her store to a shelter for battered women. She showed me a pair of earrings and I said, "Whatever you give me, I accept. I'll remember this conversation for the rest of my life" (Weingarten & Worthen, 2009).

What I did was small. I told her that I had remembered what she had said to me and yet, obviously, to her it meant that I had seen her as a person of value and that her opinions had mattered to me. She then confided in me a profoundly significant part of her life's journey while, as a visitor to her store, I was surrounded by evidence of a very different part of that journey. The exchange was a vivid example that small actions need not be trivial.

2. Seek inspiration in the arts

Clay Ward is an artist affiliated with MIT in Cambridge. In March 2007, learning that a homeless man had been set alight while sleeping in a park, he and a group of artist colleagues staged an art installation on the very spot where the man was assaulted. Believing that all homeless people are entitled to permanent housing, that no homeless person should ever be assaulted, the group scaled their goal to one they could fight for now and developed two pathways toward reaching it. Their poster, a succinct educational tool, stating that a "Safe Bed Is A Human Right" has been disseminated in many parts of the world and their art installation jump-started a community response to issues of protection and shelter for the homeless.

3. Investigate the taken-for-granted

Hopelessness, I have found, often takes hold when we mindlessly accept the apparent “facts on the ground” as immutable givens. Nothing cheers me up more than digging up something that re-contextualises a taken-for-granted reality. For me, that activity is both doing hope and supports my hope.

Recently, I did some digging about the word Caucasian. I found an essay by historian Nell Irvin Painter, given as a lecture at Yale University in 2003, that lifted my spirits. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach is generally credited with first using the term Caucasian in 1795, to refer to people designated white, in the third edition of his volume *On the Natural Variety of Man*. In this book Blumenbach offers a taxonomy of five races, one of which is Caucasian.

Blumenbach’s classification was based on two factors: skin tone and skull measurement. He was clear that climate and individual difference played a role in skin colour and he did not equate beauty with ability or intellect. However, he clearly favoured the aesthetics of those with white skin and pink cheeks and the bone structure of those he came to designate Caucasian. His favourite skull, provided to him by a colleague in 1793, belonged to a young woman from Georgia, from the Caucasus region, hence the term Caucasian. Apparently, this young Georgian woman had been taken as a captive to Moscow by Russian soldiers, where she died suddenly of venereal disease. That is, she was a slave.

So, white people at the supposed apex of the racial pyramid are called Caucasian to honour the beauty of a skull belonging to a Georgian woman taken into slavery by Russian men. We all know about the Atlantic slave trade, the Western slave trade. But there was and there is an Eastern one, and it lies behind the history of white people designated as Caucasians.

I think it is particularly apt to comment on the history of the word Caucasian because I have the honour to be addressing you as a Fulbright Specialist Scholar, a programme developed by Senator J. William Fulbright, from Arkansas. Fulbright was an extraordinary man. He was the only senator to oppose Senator Joseph McCarthy, who created havoc in the US for years with his red scare tactics. He was one of two senators who voted against the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which led to a dramatic escalation in the conduct of the Vietnam War. However, in 1954, the same year that he opposed Joseph McCarthy, earning that senator’s lasting animosity and the insulting nickname Senator Halfbright, he also signed the Southern Manifesto, a document opposing the Supreme Court’s *Brown vs Board of Education* decision, the decision which effectively ended the rationale for segregation in the US.

Research now shows that it is not just the self-esteem of targeted minorities that is deflated by bias, negative stereotypes, marginalisation and exclusion, but the self-esteem of dominant groups is falsely elevated by perceiving these same acts of discrimination and derogation. The effects of segregation, then and today, have consequences for everyone (Fryberg, 2004).

The Fulbright Program website excludes this part of Senator Fulbright's life, for they obviously deem it, as I am sure he would today as well, a problematic and undesirable part of his career. However, in my view, this dishonours his career, renders him less complex than he and his times were, and deprives people of the work of integrating what we admire and what we deplore. This limited vision, I believe, is a cousin of rainbow hope. Reasonable hope knows it must deal with contradictions. Part of dealing with contradictions is having the curiosity to look below the surface and being prepared to turn up evidence that things are seldom how they seem. Where that is so, there is space to wedge open constraining assumptions in favour of more promising paths. That is where reasonable hope treads.

4. Look for courage

Students often ask me what they should be looking for when they sit with families. Early in my career, I answered, "Look for moments of strong feeling." Then, a few years later, I replied, "Look for patterns." Then, for even more years, I answered, "Look for gaps in the stories people tell." Now, I answer in all of these ways, plus I suggest that people look for courage.

For many years, I have been trying to do research on male rape in war. It has been a fruitless endeavour. If it occurs, and I believe it does with frequency, the taboo against talking about it is great. In August 2006 I was driving in my car and listening to a talk show on public radio. The theme was prisoners of war, and the three men who were interviewed had been POWs during the Second World War. One man, in his eighties, lived in a small city about ten minutes from where I was then driving. The city, known for its Italian and Portuguese immigrants, was as conservative as any in my state. Yet, he was telling a story about having been sodomised.

Courage like Frank Molinari's is rare. It permits others to come forward. It participates in the creation of a climate where journalists ask and eventually men tell. Recently, journalists covering jailed protesters in Iran, told that they were being raped, asked a follow-up question: men as well as women? They were told yes, men and women. One of the defeated candidates in the election has made repeated statements about the

torture and rape of former protesters jailed in Tehran. He continues to make these claims despite clerics calling for his prosecution.

5. *Embrace resistance*

Reasonable hope thrives on resistance. But not a reflexive refusal to accept what is at hand, or on offer. It is not a stiffening against but a launching toward those paths that orient us toward something that is conceivable, doable and just.

Roger Gottlieb (2003), who has written about the spirituality of resistance, has this to say:

We can open our hearts to full acceptance of the world, but not by telling others or ourselves that there is some cosmic meaning for all of this pain. Instead, we find that the only way to fully take in what surrounds us, to be fully at peace, is to resist.
(p. 159)

A just society often requires resistance. The Bosnian women who testified about the systematic use of rape at the Foca and Omarska concentration camps gave the testimony that allowed the International Criminal Court, for the first time, in 1998, to adjudicate that rape was a war crime and could constitute genocide. These few women testified despite the fact that the commander of the Omarska Camp, Zeljko Mejakic, indicted by the Tribunal in the Hague, remains at large and is the deputy police chief of Prijedor, the town where some of the women still reside.

Nusreta Sivac, a Muslim judge who in 1992, at age 40, was taken to Omarska and systematically beaten and raped, was one of the women who testified. Once liberated it took years before she was able to move back to her home in Prijedor, and even after her testimony at the ICC, and the international attention she received, she had to buy back her apartment and her possessions, even her grandmother's china tea set, from the Serbs who were living there.

She spoke out, she said, because, "We should never close our eyes to what happened. We should condemn it and never allow it to happen again."

Hers is not a story with the arc of a progressive narrative. She didn't: get raped, leave the camp, return to her job and life, testify to international acclaim and feel all better. The arc of her story is similar to other reasonable hope stories. Messy. She and one of her close friends from childhood, Jadranka Cigelj, also a lawyer who was at Omarska, decided to support each other to testify, which they did. They are proud of the contributions they made and angered by the many levels of systemic failure they and other survivors of rape face, all over the world.

Resisting what is not just and pursuing what is just, activates and participates in a sense of reasonable hope. Grounded in principles, anchored in commitments, this form of resistance is not about rejection but about connection. It seeks what people deserve, namely a just society.

Conclusion

When we practise reasonable hope with our clients, we become part of the process by which possible futures emerge. In this way, doing reasonable hope together becomes a profoundly creative process, requiring radical listening (Weingarten, 1995) and a radically open heart.

I started my talk by telling you I would answer the question, “Where do I come from.” I said I finally had stood on the ground of the place I come from, Velke Kapusany.

But that is not the whole story for me. Researching the stories I have told, witnessing the lives of so many people from so many parts of the world, I have another answer also. We live in an era in which the profundity of the planet’s problems deprive them of a certain reality, a palpable face. The numbers who die in wars, accidents, bombings, floods, tsunamis—ten here, 500 there, 10,000, a million over there—paradoxically reduce not heighten their tragic impact.

None of us would be in this room, however, unless we had made a commitment to paying attention to the people who make up these unencompassable numbers. In Camus’ *The Plague*, Rambert, a visiting journalist, at first tries to leave the town where there has been an outbreak of a deadly disease. He says, “I’m not from here.” But he chooses to become a witness to the plague and in so doing he crosses a border, he shifts his sense of belonging, until he is able to say, “Now that I have seen what I have seen, I know that I am from here.”

Rambert is in an on-going conversation with the narrator of the story, a doctor, and at one point he accuses the doctor of living in a world of abstractions, like those large numbers I mentioned. The doctor contemplates whether or not this is so and admits that an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, is a part of his experience. “Still,” he observes, “when abstraction sets to killing you, you get busy with it.”

Such is our time and such is our challenge. Either we are or we are not “from here.” Either we will or we will not do reasonable hope together. And, yes, there are no end of abstractions. We just must, for the sake of us all, get busy with them.

Notes

- 1 This paper is drawn from one published in *Family Process*, March, 2010, Volume 49(1), pp. 5–25 and a keynote address delivered to the New Zealand Association of Counsellors, September 18, 2009 in Hamilton, New Zealand as part of the “Doing Hope Together” Conference.

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