

The Thing With Feathers

“In this life,” the Apostle Paul says at the end of that immortal 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians, “there are three things that last forever: faith, hope, and love....” I have been thinking a great deal lately about the middle word in that trinity and the place hope has in human life. It certainly isn’t too much, I think, to call it essential to existence, the silken thread running through every day to bind us to the next and make us eager to open our eyes again each morning. We need it when we are well, we need it even more when we are sick. In my profession I have had occasion to think of hope many times as the liferaft we cling to with such desperation when the doctor says our illness is incurable.

As some of you know, I have made two or three trips to Dallas in recent months to comfort my closest friend in college, the Texas author A. C. Greene who has an untreatable facial nerve cancer which is moving inexorably into the brain. It is a rare form of cancer which undoubtedly struck him because he had a heart transplant five years ago and the anti-rejection medicine he has to take has all but destroyed his immune system. A. C. has changed greatly in the years I’ve known him. He had a reputation as a cynical and hardbitten newspaper reporter, then as an editor, and finally as the author of some 15 books, but after his wife died and after the transplant he began to mellow. Now, in desperate need of hope and comforted by those who love him, he reminds me at the end of each telephone talk that “there are no friends like old friends,” and then he says something so utterly uncharacteristic of him that I stay choked up for a while: “You know I love you.” He treasures each word of hope I held out during our visits: how superbly trained his team of doctors are, and how eager they are to minister to a man they know to be a Texas institution; the chance of a medical breakthrough; even the occasional inexplicable remission. He drinks hope like a man dying of thirst.

I can hardly count anymore the times I have ministered in one way or another to the terminally ill, but it never gets any easier. Truly open and honest communication is often difficult because most of us simply do not wish to talk about the possibility of our own death. We may know in theory that we are terminal from the moment of birth, but we push that knowledge as far back under the rug of consciousness as possible and we almost convince ourselves that what has happened to every life on earth somehow or other isn’t going to happen to us. I have come to feel that this is a mistake, that we should at times confront the prospect of not being here

someday and come to terms with it. Not morbidly, dwelling on it overmuch, but calmly and rationally so that having anticipated it and played it out in mind and heart, we can make a reasonably graceful exit.

My friend and I have reached a point where he wants to talk of meeting this last great challenge of his life in a way that will cap a well-spent life and leave his family and friends with memories of a courageous and dignified departure. His most realistic hope right now is that he will die well. He has read great literature all his life; he wants that line from *Macbeth* to fit his final hours: “Nothing in his life/ Became him like the leaving it....” He enjoyed a poem I found recently and read to him in our last phone talk, a poem with the spirit of surrender which he is beginning to feel, a poem which offers the only hope he really believes in much anymore. A time will come when it will speak to us in the same way, so I shall make it a reminder to you and to myself:

There is nothing new to be written of tears and man’s shuddering breath;

Nothing new to be said of his loving, or sinning, or death;

Nothing new to be thought of his loneliness under the sky —

But something is new in the knowledge that soon it will have to be I

Who will give over weeping and breathing, relinquish my love and my load,

And lie in the dark and the quiet that waits at the end of the road.

There is nothing new to be whispered of blossoms breaking the sod,

But something is new in my asking — “Take care of me, God!”

That is the final hope, but think how all our days are brightened by hope long before we reach the end of them. Ministers may have more than the usual chance to know this, so it comes as no surprise to me that they have said some of the best things about hope. Fred Buechner, for example: “A child on Christmas Eve or on the day before his birthday lives for the presents that he will open the next day, and in this sense we all live like children. There are so many presents still to be opened — tomorrow, next month, next year — and in a way it is our looking forward to the presents that keeps us going. The unexpected friendship, the new job, seeing our names in the paper, falling in love, the birth of a child — all of these are presents that life gives if we want them badly enough and if we are lucky enough, and in a way every new day is a present to be oipened just as today

was and tomorrow will be. The old saying is that where there is life, there is hope, and I think that the hope that there is, is the hope that if not tomorrow or the next day, then some fine day, somehow, life will finally give us the present which when we open it, will turn out to be the one that we have waited for so long, which is the one that will fill the empty place, which is the peace that passeth all understanding, which is the truth, salvation, whatever we want to call it.”

Hope is fulfilled often enough to make us believe, and when it doesn't come we feel some comfort in knowing that just hoping made life better than it could have been otherwise. Because, of course, every hope is not fulfilled. Some boys in my hometown wrapped an empty box with a ribbon at Christmas and delivered it to a retarded boy they knew, thinking it would be quite a joke. They made the mistake of staying around to watch him open it, and what they saw in his face when they first held out the box, and what they saw in his face when he found nothing, sent them home sick at heart and more deeply ashamed than they had ever been in their lives. Somehow they knew, even then, that life would treat them the same way at times, and that hope is a shining promise not to be betrayed by one of us to another. Life will do that often enough without our connivance.

You may have read or seen Christopher Fry's play, *The Lady's Not For Burning*, in which Margaret says, “Have any of you seen that poor child Alizon? I think she must be lost.” And Nicholas answers: “Who isn't? The best thing we can do is to make wherever we're lost in look as much like home as we can. Now don't be worried. She can't be more lost than she was with us.” It's an interesting comment: “The best thing we can do is to make wherever we're lost in look as much like home as we can.” We do that. It's part of human courage. I'm convinced that the most confident seeming people in the world at times, in lonely hours, in the middle of the night, feel alienated. *Do I really count for anything? Would anyone befriend me if I had nothing to give? Does life itself make any sense?* Surely I am not the only one in this room who has awakened at 2 and wondered about those things and listened in the darkness of my own mind for the faint sound of hope whispering *Yes* to those questions. We hear the whisper, usually, because “Hope springs eternal in the human breast” — almost as necessary as a heartbeat — and we fall asleep again, and at our next waking, when the birds start to sing and the fresh cool breeze ruffles the curtains, we feel better. We decide we can cope after all — maybe because we have to cope, we have to get through the obstacle course, we have to impose a little order on the chaos of our days. And we do that because a residue of hope convinces us that we can....and that maybe before the day is over, there will be a surprise package with a ribbon around it and something actually inside when we open it. No wonder Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great old 18th century dictionary-maker defined our

word this way: “Hope is itself a species of happiness, and perhaps the chief happiness which this world affords.”

I see hope governing life all the time. The last time I went to vote, a handsome little black boy was the one who had been assigned to usher voters to the right place in his school. I don’t know whether he was just glad to be out of class, or because he had a job and it seemed important, but he had a million-dollar grin and was so articulate and courteous that I found myself thinking, *This bright kid probably hopes to be a writer someday, or a judge, or president.* So I asked his name, and thanked him for being so courteous and helpful, and I said, “What do you hope to do with your life, Tommy?” You can probably guess the extent of his hope? — “I’m gonna be a basketball player.” Probably not very realistic, I thought, but at the moment that hope was the gas in his tank, and I wasn’t about to wish him anything but good luck.

And who knows? One of the fascinating things about hope is that life really does hold surprises. The cynical line in Ecclesiastes about how there is nothing new under the sun is not the absolute truth. How hard it must have been through two generations for Germans to hang on to a forlorn hope that one day the infamous Berlin wall would be flattened, but to the shocked surprise of the world it was. And that scene the other day of Russians and Americans in space together — how reasonable would that hope have seemed ten years ago? We cling to hope, no matter how unlikely, because in spite of disappointments we are sometimes surprised.

The Bible celebrates stubborn hope in that charming story about Abraham, 99 years old with a wife past the child-bearing age even if *in vitro* had been around. He’s relaxing one day beneath the oaks of Mamre, maybe a little bored, and down the road come three strangers. Like some lonely shopkeeper eager to talk to anybody who will stroll in, Abraham invites the men to stop and share a meal. Midway through a bite of leg of lamb one of them says, “Where is your wife?” It isn’t hard to imagine Abraham saying, “What kind of place do you think this is? She’s in the back — in the kitchen.” And the man says, “Well, she’s going to become pregnant.” And back in the kitchen, Sarah — who may have her ear pressed to the tent wall — doubles over with laughter. Later, when the visitors have left, in that primitive mode of narration we have in these early chapters of the Bible God is represented as asking Abraham, “Why did she laugh? Is there anything too hard for me?” Which is another way of saying, “Don’t lose hope!” And by and by, along comes Isaac — child of promise, whose name in Hebrew means, “Laughter.”

And so it goes in that book. Israel is promised to be a blessing to the world, and then winds up in slavery in Egypt, worked to death, apparently in bondage forever. Until — surprise, surprise~ — a guy named Moses shows up. In one of those seemingly endless wars between the Philistines and the Hebrews, a shepherd boy named David goes out to fight Goliath. His friends think he is crazy, that he hasn't a prayer against the boastful bully, but that at least he ought to be properly outfitted in battle gear. So David tries on the armor of his king, but says it's too heavy and tosses it aside. Armed with a sling, and a hope shared, one guesses, by nobody else, out he goes onto the battlefield, and — surprise, surprise! — the giant falls.

One day a man is born to parents as obscure as any you can imagine, but he turns out to be the most unforgettable character ever to walk the stage of history. He chooses a ragtag bunch to share a dream with him, and somehow they rise up and turn the world upside down. He had hoped they would. The man himself dies on an instrument of shame, and that instrument becomes a cherished symbol of ultimate love. “I, if I be lifted up,” the man said, “I will draw the world to my dream” — and the hyperbole of his hope has almost seemed quite realistic at times.

Who could have guessed that a little wimp of a guy dressed in a loincloth and carrying a bamboo stick would set his country, India, free from foreign control? Or that an exhausted black woman, insisting on a seat in a bus in Alabama, would start a social revolution? If such things can happen, why should we not hope even in the face of the most improbable odds? Every Sunday we pray together the words, “Thy kingdom come.” I don't know how much we mean it, or how strong our hope is. Fearful of shootings and muggings, upset by kids killing kids, shocked by drug addiction and carjackings and child abuse, do we really hope for that kingdom or are we just going through the motions?

And what do we really mean by it, anyway? Somebody defines the kingdom of God as “the energy of God realizing itself in human life.” Does our weekly prayer mean that we intend to be the life through which that energy comes into the world? Jesus said this kingdom doesn't come with signs to be seen, nor will people say of it, “Hey, here it is!” or “Just over there, look!” What he says is rather quiet: “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” It isn't something captured by a single church, as I thought in my childhood, or by a single party or person or country. It's not “within you” as the old King James Version had it. It's “in the midst of you” — not some emotional spasm in which you fall madly in love with your own goodness, but a way of reacting in the routine matters of ordinary life: with courtesy, with kindness, with a moment of generosity,

with the balm of forgiveness, with the will to understand another heart. Ernie Campbell, for some ten years minister at the famed Riverside Church in Manhattan, liked to warn his people that it was a state of affairs, not a state of mind. Ernie was a remarkably blunt man. He said once, “A lot of this Holy Spirit business is nothing but glands” — and blasphemous as the words may sound to some at first hearing, he has a point. Jesus never asked people to let the kingdom into their hearts; he called them to enter it. It’s in the midst of you, he said. Enter it! I think he meant that if we open our eyes, we see it in some of the most unexpected places, and we are then forever being surprised by it. The kingdom of God — what the London preacher Leslie Weatherhead taught me long ago to call the kingdom of right relationships — is full of surprises.

Before this day ends, or this week, you may get knocked off your feet by one of those surprises: in something you read or hear, in some new person entering your life, in some failure or success, in some prayer spoken in a weary moment when you hope against hope. Faith says you may think you are finished with yourself, but God isn’t, and hope builds a house on that promise. My friend in Texas, summoning up the words of favorite poets to feed his hope, signed off last week with the first two lines of a poem by Emily Dickinson, expecting me to finish the stanza the way we used to do when we were in school together:

“Hope’ is the thing with feathers —

That perches in the soul —

He waited for me, and grateful for enough memory not to disappoint him, I said his own words again and added the other two:

“Hope’ is the thing with feathers —

That perches in the soul —

And sings the tune without the words —

And never stops — at all —”

The Scripture speaks once of hope as an anchor to hold us steady in the storm, but Emily Dickinson’s image is inspiring, too: Hope as a singing bird, feathered to fly when the moment comes for flight. And the melody never stops— that’s what my old friend wanted to hear, what all of us want to hear in some dark night

of the soul: the poet's way of saying what we heard in our Scripture reading before the sermon began: Three great and enduring qualities make human life possible — faith on one end, love on the other, and in the middle.....hope.

Grant us, Eternal God, the grace of expectancy — the hope of
good things yet to be by the love of Him who called us into
this place. Amen.