



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Is hoping just another name for magical thinking?

Clay Nelson © 19 July 2020

It is difficult to deny that hope is hard to find in 2020 as the increasingly out-of-control pandemic keeps knocking at our door. For nearly all of us, inside or outside our unique bubble, life has become dire or at least more challenging and fearful. But while hope is in short supply, magical thinking seems to be having a banner year. On that basis alone, they are clearly not the same.

The author [Joan Didion wrote a book called *The Year of Magical Thinking*](#) — a memoir about the death of her husband. Two years later, she performed a play by the same name after the death of their only daughter. Didion had been with her husband John for 40 years. Their daughter Quintana was 25. Magical thinking is when you bargain with your god: if we sacrifice a cow, the rain will come. If I hold my breath for a minute, my football team will win. Didion writes, “I stopped at the door to his closet. I could not give away his shoes. I stood there a moment, and then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return. The recognition of this thought by no means eradicated the thought.” If I keep his shoes, he will come back.

In church, we do a kind of magical thinking. One of our hymns begins, “May nothing evil cross this door/And may ill fortune never pry/About its windows, may the roar/And rain go by.” But we know the truth, which is that ill fortune does get in. The roar and rain of the storm do not always pass us by. And we know that singing together won’t keep all the bad news out. But we sing anyway.

Magical thinking during the pandemic includes thoughts like we can open our borders and still keep the virus out. We will have a vaccine any minute now. When this is over we can go back to living the normal lives we had before the pandemic. None of these is plausible. And as an aside, in the case of the last example, it is not necessarily even desirable. While the pandemic is certainly a case of overkill, it has served a similar purpose to rebooting your computer when the operating system is no longer functioning as intended.

To have hope, on the other hand, is to want an outcome that makes your life better in some way. Hope not only can help make a tough present situation more bearable but also can eventually improve our lives because envisioning a better future motivates you to take the steps to make it happen.

Whether we think about it or not, hope is a part of everyone's life. Everyone hopes for something, even pessimists. It's an inherent part of being a human being. Hope helps us define what we want in our futures and is part of the self-narrative about our lives we all have running inside our minds.

Having hope is important to the very act of being a human being. As [Dr Judith Rich writes](#), "Hope is a match in a dark tunnel, a moment of light, just enough to reveal the path ahead and ultimately the way out."

And yet there are times when our lives feel hopeless. Despair and depression reign in our hearts. Getting out of the hole seems beyond our strength and will. At such times we might hope for something magical, like a rose in the wintertime, to restore our humanity. It is often an unlikely surprise.

A surprise like the magical mystery tour a few years back. Yes, I know, it sounds like a Beatle's album but this tour involved only one Beatle, John Lennon, and it was not actually him on tour — as he was now dead — rather it was his piano — more specifically the piano on which he composed his song "Imagine" — spreading peace and love at the sites of tragic events.

The piano toured cities like; Oklahoma City, Waco, New Orleans and Virginia Tech.

Free of any restrictions the piano was there to be touched or played by anyone.

Libra LaGrone, whose home was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, said "It was like sleeping in our grandpa's sweatshirt at night. Familiar, beautiful and personal."

The tour director said, "I never went anywhere saying this was a magic piano and it's going to cure your ills." But she added that consistently there was a warming of even the most sceptical heart. The piano landed in Virginia a mere month after the massacre. "I had no idea," she said, "an inanimate object could give people so much."

It turns out that hope isn't about thinking at all, magical or not. It is about feeling.

[UU minister Victoria Stafford captures this reality in her poem "The Gates of Hope":](#)

*Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope—
Not the prudent gates of Optimism,
Which are somewhat narrower.
Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
Nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,*

*Which creak on shrill and angry hinges
(People cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through)
Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of
"Everything is gonna' be all right."
But a different, sometimes lonely place,
The place of truth-telling,
About your own soul first of all and its condition.
The place of resistance and defiance,
The piece of ground from which you see the world
Both as it is and as it could be
As it will be;
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
But the joy of the struggle.
And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
Telling people what we are seeing
Asking people what they see."*

[Parker J Palmer](#), a Quaker elder, educator, author, activist and founder of the [Center for Courage and Renewal](#) agrees with Stafford:

"[H]ope is the place where joy meets the struggle". He goes on to say, "Of all the virtues, 'hope' is one of the most-needed in our time. When people ask me how I stay hopeful in an era of widespread darkness, I answer simply: 'Hope keeps me alive and creatively engaged with the world.'

"When privileged people like me choose hopelessness over hope, it's not a reflection of the state of the world. It's a reflection of the state of our souls.

"If I were to lose hope and turn to cynicism, what would I do? Sit in a corner, stare at the wall, and suck my thumb? When people like me allow ourselves to become hopeless — while there's so much we can do for those who are truly suffering — we need to remind ourselves that opting out is not a fit way for a grown-up to live."

I take from all this that we who accept the struggle to hope become the hope of the world. It isn't magical thinking, it just is: reality.

Discussion:-

How does our magical thinking deny us becoming the hope of the world?