

Spokane Friends Meeting
April 28, 2024
“Beyond Hope”
Johan Maurer

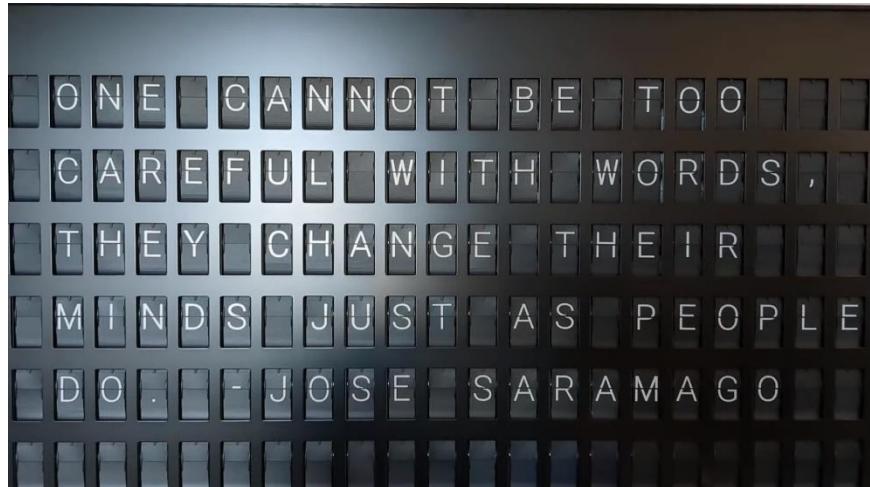
As some of you may know, Judy and I have just returned from London, England, where we spent a little over three weeks with our son Luke. When I spoke with you last month, I had just gotten out of the hospital, and Luke's guest room was a wonderful place to recuperate.

One of the features of Luke's apartment is a Vestaboard, an electromechanical signboard that's a small version of the signboards you used to see in railroad stations and airports, with flaps that flip through the alphabet to create messages. Luke had programmed his signboard to dispense random bits of wisdom and philosophy, changing every hour. You never knew what would come next.

Here, for example, is an example of the deep insights you could gain:



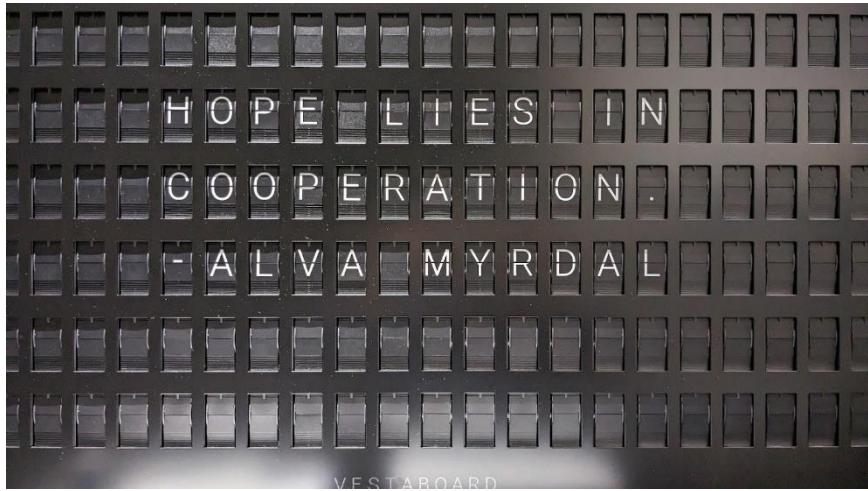
At least equally thoughtful was this message from the Portuguese writer José Saramago:



I was glad to be reminded of this quotation from Elie Wiesel:



And, finally, this message reminded me of the theme I promised you I'd speak on today. It's from Swedish Nobel Peace Prize winner Alva Myrdal:



All my life I've been an incorrigible optimist; hope has been my middle name. (Almost literally! My actual middle name, Fredrik, means "ruler of peace.") But in these difficult times, I find myself very resistant to overselling the theme of hope. So today I'm not going to make outrageous claims on behalf of hope, or at least not many, but rather just some modest observations.

Here's the one outrageous claim I'm going to make on behalf of hope, because it is at the very center of my faith. It's sort of oddly embedded in this passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 15:17-19 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for *this* life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Instead, Jesus told us at the end of his time on earth, as recorded in John 14, that he has gone ahead of us, back to our Creator, to prepare a place for us.

So we do have ultimate hope. But this is no guarantee of individual safety and security in this life. Remember Martin Luther King's last speech, on the evening of August 3, 1968, the night before he was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee. It was as if he foresaw what was about to happen. Echoing the story of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 34, Dr. King said,

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

Yes, you and I may not make it to the end in one piece. Thousands of children in Gaza did not make it to the end in one piece. But I love to imagine God greeting those children at the gates of the Promised Land, giving them the full extent of love that the earth's adults did not figure out how to provide in our stubborn insistence on the ways of violence, despite millennia of evidence that violence doesn't work.

I believe in that ultimate promise, but I don't believe in using it to make up for the ways we seem to get in the way of hopeful outcomes here on earth. Martin Luther King said that we as a people will get to the promised land, but earlier in that same speech in Memphis, he said,

It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

During our time with Luke in London, we made a side trip to Coventry, where we saw the Coventry Cathedral. For those of you who know your 20th century history, the name of the city of Coventry will be familiar. On the night of November 14 to 15, 1940, during the so-called Coventry Blitz, the *Luftwaffe* bombed that cathedral into ruins.



Winston Churchill (center) visits the cathedral's ruins with Richard Howard (left).

But even in the high emotions of total war, neither the *Luftwaffe* nor the spirit of revenge had the last word. The very day after the Coventry Cathedral lay in ruins, its chief priest, Provost Richard Howard, made a commitment to reconciliation. As a first step, he decided to have the words “Father forgive” engraved on the wall behind the altar.



“Father Forgive.”

It was decided to preserve the ruins as a memorial to the destruction of war, and build a new cathedral right next to the ruins.



But even earlier, years before the new cathedral was built, in fact in less than three years after the end of the war, the city of Coventry and the city of Kiel, Germany, reached out to each other in recognition of their common wartime experiences, because Kiel’s cathedral had also been bombed into ruins. It is as if both communities had a chance to see the Promised Land. Thousands of their fellow citizens had not made it in one piece, but their

communities knew that reconciliation and new life were possible. These developments were a direct and shared result of the wartime hope and vision of Coventry Cathedral's provost, that something different was possible, and who literally took concrete steps toward that resurrection hope. Because, as Alva Myrdal said, "Hope lies in cooperation."

I tell the story of our visit to Coventry in last Thursday's post on my blog, "blog.canyoubelieve.me." I went on to talk about our visit to Stourbridge, England, where we spent the night with our friends Diana and John Lampen. Now in their 80's, the Lampens have been lifelong workers in the fields of peace education and conflict resolution in such places as Northern Ireland, Ukraine, Uganda, and *apartheid*-era South Africa. Interestingly, the name of the organization they set up for their work is called the "Hope Project."

This link between hope and cooperation is at the heart of my interpretation of our second Scripture:

Ephesians 1:17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know God better. **18** I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which God has called you, the riches of God's glorious inheritance in God's holy people, **19** and God's incomparably great power for us who believe....

This is my prayer and invitation for you. Not just the hope of "long white robes over yonder" and "the streets flowing with milk and honey," but a way forward in the concrete dilemmas and agonies of our world today, and in our own lives today to one extent or another. Not just the awareness that God can help us become aware of the way forward, and that God can give us the power to see that direction and move forward in it, but also, and crucially, the riches we have in each other.

Because we never need to take those steps alone. Some Friends are far better discerners than I am, for example; I need their prophetic help in seeing the possibilities, as Coventry provost Richard Howard knew how to do. Some are better administrators than I am, knowing how to organize the resources that will be needed. Some are more faithful and persistent in prayer. My own gift might be my optimism, my resistance to cynicism, which also has a role to play in the glorious inheritance we have in each other.

Maybe I shouldn't dare to take Israel and Gaza as a case study, but maybe some of *you* can envision the possibilities. My mother, as you may remember, was a member of the Hitler Youth in Japan, and in my childhood was still a vocal antisemitic. As a gut reaction, I'm absolutely allergic to antisemitism and grieve for that cosmic wound left by the Nazis, and reopened for many by the events of last October 7 across the Israel/Gaza border.

After years of involvement in Palestinian education and human rights, I am also horrified beyond words by the new depths of violence to which the Gaza Strip has sunk. When I think of the ways some university students in this country and elsewhere have responded with an almost elemental passion on Palestinians' behalf, I'm grateful that we're not all stunned into silence, even as I remember the mixed record of the demonstrations I participated in, in decades past.

One in particular I remember, on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, when we were demonstrating on behalf of a caravan of Canadian Natives who had arrived in Ottawa. As we stood facing the Parliament building and shouting slogans for the Prime Minister to come out and talk to us, there was a group of militant supporters of the Chinese Communist Party right behind us demonstrators, trying to push us forward into the line of Royal Canadian Mounted Police guarding Parliament, and generally trying to turn our peaceful demonstration into a riot.

So I can totally believe that there are antisemitic activists trying to exploit the demand for a ceasefire in the Holy Land. But utter passivity in the face of slaughter would be a tragedy all its own. In this situation, and in the war in Ukraine, and in Haiti and Sudan, as well as the housing crisis on our own streets, I ask what the first step might be to allow hope to get a word in edgewise, on this side of the Promised Land.

Here are some queries to take with you into the open worship. Use them if they are helpful, but of course otherwise ignore them. The Holy Spirit may well have something else for you.

- 1. Can you think of a dilemma in your own life, or known to you, where there doesn't seem to be any evidence of hope? Can you pray for God to open the eyes of your heart to see a first step toward hope? Who among your friends here might talk or pray with you about that first step?**

2. Take this same dilemma and look a decade or two into the future. Is it possible to envision or imagine new life, new possibilities springing up that are not at all visible now? As you imagine yourself in that vision of the future, who is walking beside you?
3. Are you being led to give someone a word of encouragement?

“Hope lies in cooperation.” Thank you.