

The Wounded Healer & The Prisoner Of Hope

[BY JUSTIN CRAIG](#)

The phrase “*prisoner of hope*” perfectly captures the ambiguity of hope.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once described himself this way, referring to a line attributed to the Hebrew prophet Zachariah: “Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.”

This is a man who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, as that country sought to heal the terrible wounds of apartheid through radical forgiveness. Archbishop Tutu’s conviction sprang from a deep well of living faith as he “witnessed so many incredible people who, despite experiencing atrocity and tragedy, have come to a point in their lives where they are able to forgive.”

There are levels of hope, and I believe Archbishop Tutu refers to a transcendent hope that grapples with the paradox of certain salvation in a fallen world.

By contrast, hope can be experienced as sometimes cruel, because in a dualistic worldview, it is inextricably tied to its polar opposite: disappointment.

The Buddha used the term [nirāsa \(or nirāsā\)](#) to describe one of the qualities of an enlightened person. It can be translated as hopeless, wishless, or without expectation. They are beyond hope fixed to an object, another form of attachment.

Disappointment is its own bitter medicine. Hope can keep us in the game, get us out of bed, but is it enough? I'll state the obvious: it is hard to let go of hope.

Servant leadership

I love the Christ model of servant leadership practiced by Archbishop Tutu. It is leadership through humbling, not by hoping for an outcome or resolution. The servant leader abides in the place of transcendent hope itself – and holds a vision of healing and redemption when another cannot.

“Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of mind?” the late theologian Henri Nouwen wrote in “The Wounded Healer.” “In short: Who can take away suffering without entering it?”

The servant leader willingly enters into the suffering of others. It is not a performance trick by the ego looking for recognition.

Tortured hope puts the self first. Selfless service, by contrast, is liberation. In my experience, few things feel as naturally good, easy, and loving as that respite from the mind's ceaseless demands for proof and form.

Hope beyond hope

Author Gerald May wrote of his experience of “contemplative hope,” “transformed hope,” and “naked hope” as a “bare energy of open expectancy” in his book, “Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth.” This hope was not a hope for something. Describing people he met in Bosnia after they had lost their homes, possessions, families, everything, he sensed in them deep hope:

“Yes, hope,” they smiled.

I asked if it was hope for peace.

"No, things have gone too far for that."

I asked if the United Nations or the United States would intervene in some positive way.

"No, it's too late for that."

I asked them, "Then, what is it you are hoping for?"

They were silent. They could not think of a thing to hope for, yet there it was – undeniable hope shining in them.

I asked one last question. "How can you hope when there is nothing to hope for?"

The answer was, "Bog," the Serbo-Croatian word for God.

Thus I have had some glimpse into the nature of this transformed hope.

The wounded healer

When hope is fixed to the same spectrum occupied by disappointment, healing itself becomes a vicious cycle. There will always be more to heal, clear, cleanse, transmute, purify – you name the verb. As long as I measured my own worthiness by my wounds, I was bound to shame.

Yet shame cannot be healed, because that legitimizes a false sense of self. It requires reorientation. For many people, to transcend implies a movement away from or above the troubles of the world and eliminates or negates the small

self.

Instead, true transcendence leaves nothing behind, not even shame, but sweeps it up in a much larger vision. Shame becomes rich soil for the bloom of compassion.

Who can sit with another's deep shame without recoiling or judgment, except one who has worked that same black seam? Judgment here can refer to trying to bring that person out of their experience prematurely in the name of "healing." It is a subtle and dangerous form of abandonment.

Nouwen wrote that we are all wounded – it's our human inheritance – but when our wounds are no longer a source of shame, we can use them in service of others as wounded healers. Our wounds are made holy, in other words, and become the very portal to commune with the soul of the world. Healing then becomes a byproduct of our new orientation, rather than an end unto itself.

I now better understand my personal confusion around hope. Despite having experienced both hope and transcendent hope, I had put them in the same basket. Let's call it a category error. The first order of hope doesn't deserve condemnation. It kept me alive.

It is in that very spirit of forgiveness, that hope is transformed. The wounded healer returns to the fortress as a prisoner of hope voluntarily, with a bifocal vision of both hope and also the hope beyond hope. Such a person doesn't hold healing as an object or an achievement as much as a cosmic vision of a redeemed world.

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For more self-study, [The Urban Howl](#) recommends [The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom](#) .

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*Find Beauty During A Dark Night Of The Soul
Our Wounding Can Become The Very Portal For
Transformation*

"Grace isn't always a pretty thing. There are times when she arrives cloaked in suffering. Dials up the pain just enough to wake us the fuck up, so we're finally willing to make a change."

SHANNON CROSSMAN

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