

In Defense of Hope

A public bathroom was not the best place to engage one of my writing heroes in meaningful conversation.

Of course, it was not a completely random meeting—I had purchased a ticket to hear him speak at the event. And, to be fair, I recognized him in the bathroom but waited outside to say hi and express my appreciation of his work, even as someone from a different culture and the other side of the world.

I first read the writing of Ta-Nehisi Coates when *Between the World and Me* was winning all its awards and critical acclaim, then went back to “The Case for Reparations”—his landmark 2014 essay in *The Atlantic*—as required reading for a graduate class in justice studies. Others of his books have since made their way onto my reading list—and now I had the brief opportunity to say thank you.

But what I really wanted to ask him about was his dismissal of hope, his prioritization of struggle and his assertion that “resistance must be its own reward, since resistance, at least within the life span of the resisters, almost always fails,” as recorded in his critically acclaimed book *We Were Eight Years in Power*. Of course, historically, it is hard to argue against his sentiment. In concluding his *How To Be Antiracist*, it seems Ibram Kendi would agree: “There is nothing I see in our world today, in our history, giving me hope that one day antiracists will win the fight.”

Hope is Hard

It is difficult to grow and sustain hope. More simply, it is hard to hope. Each headline, each murder, each injustice, each outrage, each tweet, each slight or shrug adds to a growing sense of futility and the temptation to despair. Too often, reality contradicts the possibility of hope.

And, too often, hope has been used as an excuse. Rather than addressing and working to overcome the injustice and racism in the world around us—so the argument goes—hope promotes passivity and urges its adherents to focus their efforts and attentions on some kind of other realm or possible afterlife. Like any cliché, there is a truth behind it. The hope offered by faith has been used as “the opium of the people”—to borrow Karl Marx’s infamous line—by those who have held power in various cultures and societies.

Hope as an Opiate

But, at times, a milquetoast hope has also been embraced by the oppressed people themselves who have used the consolations offered by religion as a way of shrugging their shoulders and grimly making the best of the status quo. Faced with the inevitabilities of life, death and all the injustices and sorrows in between, hope has been used to normalize tragedy, explain the inexcusable and cultivate complicity with injustice. And if this is all there is to hope, those who choose hope are rightful objects of criticism and even pity.

But using faith and hope in this way is difficult to maintain. The content of this hope undermines its abuse. This is why Cornel West states in his book *Prophesy Deliverance* that often in history the religion of the oppressor has sown the seeds of liberation and renewed the possibilities of hope, even when brandished in the hand of injustice. He writes,

“Christianity also is first and foremost a theodicy, a triumphant account of good over evil. The intellectual life of the African slaves in the United States—like that of all oppressed peoples—consisted primarily of reckoning with the dominant form of evil in their lives. The Christian emphasis on against-the-evidence hope for triumph over evil struck deep among many of them.”

The substance of such hope contradicts unjust reality.

Hope in Revelation

So as we confront a world torn by injustice and racism, with a tragic history and a rising tide of anger and despair, we need to remember the content of that hope and a particular picture offered by the visions of Revelation that offers an alternative perspective. Describing a group of people who have emerged from our troubled world, Revelation 7 details the different people groups who are represented equally and equitably (see verses 5–8), together comprising “a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9, NLT). In a later vision, this crowd of humanity sings together a song of praise and victory, literally creating harmony in their God-created and God-honoring diversity (see Revelation 14:1–3).

We must not allow the poetic nature of this language to dull the revolutionary force of what it describes.

According to the Bible, this is the future of humanity—the pinnacle of our collective human endeavors. And the reality of the human family reconstituted in the presence of God is not merely a future fantasy; it is a beam of light shining into our present darkness. It is a call to live and work today, oriented toward this alternative vision of what it means to be human. It is a hope that can never be a pacifier or an excuse.

Assured by these promises of the future, we must work to resist the temptation to despair, recognizing that our hope is a unique attribute for living as the people of God, confronting injustice and overcoming evil in our world. In the words of Bryan Stevenson in *A Perilous Path: Talking Race, Inequality, and the Law*, “Hopelessness is the enemy of justice. When you are fighting for justice you are fighting against hopelessness. Injustice prevails where hopelessness persists. So you have to see hopelessness as a kind of toxin that will kill your ability to make a difference. And the truth is, you’re either hopeful working toward justice, or you’re the problem. There’s nothing in between. You can’t be neutral.”

How Long?

An overused expression in justice conversations is the call for a leader, commentator or other contributor to ensure they will be counted as “on the right side of history.” It is often a noble but hollow expression. From their perspective of history, writers such as Coates and Kendi are correct: justice is not inevitable, racism is not predestined to fade, oppression will not go out of business. Instead, they urge us to rejoin their struggle—and to that we bring our vision of an alternative future to which we can invite them and many more to stand “on the right side of the future.”

While we yet hear only hopeful echoes of those harmonious songs of praise and victory envisioned in Revelation, we join another chorus of psalmists, prophets and the oppressed across the millennia, singing and crying out, “How long?” Injustice and racism will be overthrown. Somehow their evils will be undone and their wounds will be healed. In the victorious resurrection of Jesus, they are already defeated. The question is no longer *if*, but *when*. And when we ask again, “How long?” we testify to the impermanence of injustice, and so sound again the call to listen and to speak, to act and to march, to shout and to vote, to love and to hope.

Of course, I couldn’t share all of that in my brief conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates—but my greater task is to listen and to hear his experiences, insights, anger and struggle, for which I was privileged to have the opportunity to say thank-you.

Social Justice and the Image of God

Often when talking about justice, we start by talking about injustice. After all, it’s often the injustice that catches our attention. Whether a horrific headline, a political outrage, an unfolding disaster, or chronic problems like poverty, inequality, violence, environmental degradation or economic exploitation, these are often the things we use to initiate a call for justice.

But this is not where the Bible’s many calls to justice begin. Instead, the Bible’s story opens with a world that is “good” and human beings who are created in the image of God. While theologians and philosophers have long debated what specifically about human beings reflects the divine image, in most traditions in Christian history, as well as in the world’s other monotheistic religions, “made in the image of God” is a foundational tenet of what it means to be human. But our reflection of God’s image is also the key to our ethical responsibility for how we act toward our fellow human beings.

Empathy and the Image of God

What is appreciated but not often preached is the truth about how socially transformative, economically disruptive and politically challenging this understanding of our human origins and value are. Writing in the *Washington Post* earlier this year, columnist Michael Gerson highlighted the tensions in history between how faith has been used to diminish and to ennoble, to oppress and to liberate, to hurt and to help. He also writes how essential—and politically inconvenient—is this core formulation of human

identity. "Christianity inevitably raises [this] question," he reminds us. "What if everyone we favor, and everyone we fear, and everyone we help, and everyone we exploit, and everyone we love, and everyone we hate, were the reflected image of God—unique, valuable and destined for eternity?"

To insist that all people are created in the image of God has dramatic political and practical implications. If we believe this foundational teaching of our faith in any meaningful way, much of what currently passes for political debate is simply unacceptable and unsustainable.

Putting it another way, Belinda Bauman describes this failure of belief as "the most significant barrier to empathy." In fact, she suggests that a belief in each person as the reflected image of God is how we produce true concern for others. It is a lack of faith in this belief, "the idea that *some people matter more than others*," that serves as the foundation for the perpetuation of injustice and inequality in all their forms. The reality is that some people do matter more than others—to us. We have a natural affinity for our family, friends and even community members, as we should. But we must also and always resist the temptation of assuming that others beyond our circles are of lesser value as human beings.

A Value System for Victims

Oftentimes when we are assaulted with and overwhelmed by the cumulative weight of injustice, tragedy and suffering in our world, we start to place value judgments on those who suffer. Some News media outlets operate in this way, employing a pyramid of proximity that assumes that the closer a story is to the viewer the more valuable it is. This causes a single death in our community to somehow become more valuable than hundreds in a country whose people and policies are not like ours. These damaging classifications perpetuate the belief that people who don't look like us don't feel like us, don't hurt like us, don't grieve like us.

Compounding this human tendency are those who would cynically or even hatefully exploit our fears and prejudices for political purposes. As one unfortunate example, in recent years, my home country of Australia has contributed greatly to undermining the international framework for responding to refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced people. Damage that we now see being played out in the rhetoric and harsh practices of many other nations around the world.

Australia and Asylum Seekers

This became such an issue in Australia not because we were being overwhelmed by refugees, but because it was politically expedient. Belying the small number of people who have arrived in Australia on unregulated boats over the past two decades, this issue has been deployed politically to move the public conversation from that of a necessary and compassionate humanitarian response to a dominant and divisive political debate. This political posturing has required the implementation and progressive escalation of a regime of mandatory and indefinite detention of even legitimate asylum seekers on remote Pacific islands. This decision brings with it a great cost to Australia and great harm to many people already vulnerable and traumatized after having sought to escape danger and persecution from their countries of origin. And this shift has been observed, applauded and adopted by other

political “leaders” and opportunists around the world.

While many people of faith in Australia have raised their voices in protest, it is also those politicians who have most professed Christianity who have overseen and implemented this inhumane policy. This public debate reached a new low last year when the Australian government’s Minister for Home Affairs urged that “Australians must guard against compassion towards refugees”—a statement that is deeply troubling in every way. A nation warned to “guard against compassion” is being led in profoundly unhealthy and dangerous ways.

Compassion is Our First Response

So it is not hard to see why the Bible’s foundational teaching about what it means to be a human being is so politically confronting and challenging. It means that we cannot use people for political point-scoring or applaud those who do. It must change how we speak, how we vote and how we live. It insists that compassion must always be our first response (compare Matthew 9:36), even when we are tempted to fear. It demands that every person matters. It urges that the surest way to respect our Creator is to care for His creation, perhaps pre-eminently His human creation: “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but helping the poor honors him” (Proverbs 14:31, NLT). It is the foundational way of understanding our world and our highest calling for living in it. It is the recognition that our best reflection of the image of God is living with generosity, creativity, courage and love.