

Week 40: How Hopelessness Can Become Our Best Hope

Several springs ago, as the long, bitter Chicago winter persisted well into March, my wife and I started hoping for something different. We began searching for houses in Nashville. Every morning, we'd check our weather app for the temperature in Nashville, and every night we'd scan our email for new home listings. By the time we fell asleep, we'd be dreaming of an acre of wooded land in the temperate winters and rolling hills of Tennessee. It gave us hope.

Eventually, though, summer arrived, and we stopped looking at Nashville listings.

Hope is a wonderful thing when it feels like the wind at our backs, carrying us toward the good things we desire. But, if we're honest with ourselves, sometimes—maybe even most of the time—we hope so we don't have to change anything at all. Kids, for instance, sit in school and daydream about summertime so they can endure the monotony of the classroom. And sometimes we all live our lives like dazed schoolchildren: we dream of future possibilities in order to endure present realities. We imagine something beautiful so we can accept something that isn't. We use our hopes to inoculate ourselves against our lives, instead of allowing our lives to propel us into the things for which we hope.

Hope can be a beautiful thing, because it gives us direction and imbues our lives with a sense of purpose and meaning. But hope can also be the worst of things, because sometimes we settle for *having* a direction, rather than walking *in* that direction. Sometimes, our numbered days are spent hoping and waiting, instead of acting and living.

Sometimes, hope can keep us stagnant.

High school students hope their study habits will improve with a change of scenery in college, but it doesn't happen and they fail out. Young people hope they will feel more secure once they are dating and married, but it doesn't happen and they end up either codependent or divorced. Married people hope their marriage will get better when a kid comes along—and then they hope it will get better when the kids leave home—but it never does and they spend a lifetime waiting for love, instead of learning *how* to love. Employees experience an oppressive job and they imagine returning to school and doing the thing they've always loved to do in the margins of life, but the imagining provides just enough relief to guarantee it will never actually happen.

Several years ago, I attended a continuing education seminar in which therapists learned therapeutic interventions by becoming the clients. At one point, during a lengthy meditation, the instructor had us visualize a filing cabinet. He

instructed us to open a drawer and to see inside the drawer a series of folders—one for each year of our life. We opened the folder corresponding to the current year and envisioned there a scene in which we are with a group of our loved ones, doing the thing we always do to hide and to keep ourselves safe in relationships.

The visualization made me sad.

Next, we put that folder away and pulled out the folder five years down the road. This time, I expected to envision a new, hopeful scenario. But instead, he gave us the *exact same* instructions: imagine doing what you always do. This time, the visualization made me uncomfortable. The exercise continued with the folders corresponding to ten, fifteen, and twenty years in the future. Each time, he gave the same instructions.

By the end of the exercise, I was *angry*.

And so was everyone else in the room. People were demanding to know why, in a therapeutic exercise, he wouldn't help us to envision *change*. And he explained: "By envisioning change, you would have been robbed of the experience of *not* changing. You need to suffer the reality of not changing and, by suffering it, you may actually be motivated to change it. Otherwise, you will just *plan* on changing it."

He called it creative hopelessness.

Hope is a beautiful thing. But hopelessness is a beautiful thing, too, when it gets us agitated enough to say, "No more. Enough. I have one chance at this life and I won't spend one more day doing the same old thing."

I once heard an interview with a Jewish rabbi. He said we all waste our lives trying to avoid suffering. Instead, he, said, we should wrestle with our suffering and refuse to let it go *until we have received a blessing from it*. What if the crises we experience, the oppression we live through, the restless feeling in our hearts, and the itching in our brains to do something different are the things we shouldn't release until we have received a blessing from them? And what if the blessing is a hope *lived*, instead of just a hope *hoped*? Is it possible the thing we want to do in the midst of our troubles is the thing we were made to do *every day*?

Life isn't about hoping; it's about making our hopes a reality. We are spending our lives hoping to live, but maybe we should spend them living our hopes.