

## CHAPTER 1



# Finding Our Way in the Dark

Hope is being able to see that there is light  
despite all of the darkness.

—DESMOND TUTU

Those who do not hope for the unexpected  
will not find it.

—HERACLITUS

Of all the unique wedding gifts that the couple had received, it was certainly the strangest: a large clay jar with a sealed lid, accompanied by a stern warning never to open it. Of course, curiosity prevailed. As soon as the jar was opened, out flew a swarm of plagues. They clapped the cap back onto the jar, but it was too late; the afflictions had been loosed on the world.

In conveying this ancient story from mythology, a translator in 1508 mistakenly rendered the Greek work for a jar—*pithos*—as “box,” and five centuries later it continues to be known as Pandora’s box. A New Mexico governor once garbled it further by exclaiming, “Well, that opens up a whole box of Pandoras!” Perhaps he thought they were cigars. An important detail that is often omitted in telling this classic story is the single thing that remained in the jar after all the grim afflictions had escaped. It was hope.

Hope is always about the unknown, particularly the future. We might *wish* for a different past, but would not *hope* for it. We also don't hope for that which seems certain to occur or has already happened. Actually there is an exception here, because we can be hopeful about the past until we learn what actually transpired. "I hope you slept well." "I hope our team won yesterday." Marooned on a desert island, we might wistfully imagine what is happening in the world during our absence. Even here, though, hope pertains to what we will learn in the future about what has already occurred. In an era of near-instantaneous information and communication, the period of hoping prior to knowing has been greatly diminished.

Hope is anticipated possibility, something that we do when confronting uncertainty. In saying "do," I mean not merely overt actions. Although hope can take the form of observable behavior, what we do when faced with uncertainty also includes aspects of the inner world such as choosing, attending, thinking, feeling, and remembering, all of which can be done hopefully. Hope is all about anticipation of what is not yet. It is a liminal space, a threshold to what may yet be. Indeed, hope can critique and transform the present.<sup>1</sup>

There seems to be an inherent human desire to hope, especially during dark times.<sup>2</sup> Like night vision, hope is a way of seeing

With what is happening in your life now and in the world around you, what are your three fondest hopes?

in the dark, although it may take a while for your vision to adjust. Through many threats and dangers, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. held on to

his dream for the future: "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." It is the stuff of visions that sustain us and of songs proclaiming that we *shall* overcome.

The essence of hope is envisioned betterment, and it serves us well. It comes hardwired in human nature to dream a better future,

helping us to carry on and survive. Hope “springs eternal in the human breast,”<sup>3</sup> especially in times like the present plagued by war, a pandemic, global warming, social polarization, and crushing economic disparity.<sup>4</sup> It arises in the midst of obstacles and uncertainty, when the present is troubled and the future is unclear. It is a universal human experience that lives in the realm of not-yet, searching beyond how things *are* to envision what *could* be. Animals respond to the present and remember the past, but so far as we know, contemplating possible distant futures is a uniquely human experience. People and many mammals grieve after losing a companion, but *anticipatory* grief about a coming loss requires an imagined future. We can envision what *might* be, and that is where hope lives.

## Varieties of Hope

Hope is an experience that everyone knows, yet exactly what *is* it? Although it's familiar, hope can also be fleeting, like the tiger swallowtail and the hummingbird that are winging outside my window as I write this. It has an elusive, intangible quality that can be difficult to pin down in a definition. As we shall see, this is in part because, like butterflies and birds, hope comes in varied forms. As I read background research for this book, it quickly became clear to me that hope is not just one single thing. It is complex, with many faces, forms, and foundations that are complementary aspects of the same experience.<sup>5</sup> Hope can be a feeling, thought, action, vision, a life force, and a way of seeing or being. It stands amid the abiding spiritual triad of faith, hope, and love.<sup>6</sup> Two definitions dating from the 11th century portrayed hope as a stepping-stone up to a higher level and as an oasis in the midst of a wasteland.<sup>7</sup> It is all of

these things, no one of which captures its full essence. A diamond therefore seems an apt metaphor for hope. It has many facets, great beauty, and is among the hardest and most precious of gems. A diamond may be given as a sign of hope and commitment.

There can be a downside to hope. One of the most famous gemstones is the large blue Hope Diamond, so named for one of its many owners, some of whom, ironically, met with misfortune and tragedy, giving rise to the stone's alleged curse.<sup>8</sup> The Greek myth of Pandora could suggest that the hope left behind in the jar was merely another curse.<sup>9</sup> Hope has many different aspects. When speaking about hope, people may be describing just one narrow part of it. For example, hope might be equated with an unwarranted optimism that, while comforting, could undermine the perceived urgency of action. Living in a dreamworld of hope, one may miss the joy of the present.

Yet the usual results of hope are overwhelmingly positive, as we see in the chapters ahead that consider many aspects of hope, turning the diamond to explore its facets in how we may respond when faced with uncertainty. There is more than one way of hoping. Before the final chapter we will have considered eight different facets of hope, varied ways of seeing beyond the present to the not-yet.

## Hope and Fear

Besides hope, there is another universal human experience that also dwells in the land of not-yet, imagining what might be. It is fear. In the human mind, both hope and fear project images of what could come to pass, and both can be powerfully motivating. They

are alternative lenses through which to view an uncertain future, and to some extent they counteract each other, although they can also coexist.<sup>10</sup> I am hopeful for the next generations, including my own children's and grandchildren's futures, and I also fret for what life may bring them. Hope and fear have a contentious relationship, and we each choose how to make peace with them. Hope tends to expand our horizons, while fear contracts them.

No matter the year, the world affords ample evidence to justify despair, and we are understandably wired by our evolutionary history to pay special attention to any negative information.<sup>11</sup> Fear is our built-in smoke alarm for survival. If something is even remotely a potential threat, we want to know about it. Obliging, there are news media and websites offering a constant diet of danger and darkness. When there is insufficient local calamity for today's news, there are always distressing tragedies to report from elsewhere. As when passing a traffic accident, a part of us just feels compelled to look: poverty, violence, disease and death, natural disasters, global warming, and human inhumanity.

Yet fear is not the only voice we can hear, and it does not deserve the last word. In the midst of travail, hope remains as an antidote to fear. Whenever biblical

What are your significant fears now, and do you have related hopes?

angels speak, their first words are usually a comforting message of hope: "Fear not." Hope and fear suppress each other. As a very old hardwired survival response, fear is quick and often is the first experience. What happens next, however, is a matter of choice. Fear can predominate, leading to fight, flight, or just shutting down. Hope opens up different paths. Amid the Great Depression in 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt famously declared that "we have nothing to fear but fear itself."<sup>12</sup> Fear can

shut down the creative capacity to find better ways and even the will to find them. Hope is about finding both the will and a way forward.<sup>13</sup>

It is quite possible, as mentioned, to experience both hope and fear together. They may urge us in opposite directions, but we still get to choose which path to follow. The dread of dark potential can fuel an urgent quest for a brighter future. Courage is not the absence of fear, but moving ahead with hope in spite of it. Exploring the varieties of hope is an alternative to sinking into the immobilizing mire of hopelessness and fear. It can also be useful to walk with others who have walked the same path through darkness and emerged on the other side.

## Hopelessness

In Dante Alighieri's 14th-century *Divine Comedy* an inscription stands above the gates to hell: *Abandon all hope, you who enter here*. Despair, the total loss of hope, can be hellish indeed. Hopelessness can follow from persistent adversity, significant losses, or trauma. It is a classic component of clinical depression and contributes to risk for suicide.<sup>14</sup> In the course of life I have experienced periods of significant depression myself, and a striking aspect of it for me was the vanishing of my characteristic optimism. It was one of the earliest changes that I noticed before I realized what was happening. I had written about major depression and had treated people who were suffering with it but had never experienced it firsthand. Happily, depression is normally quite treatable, and over a period of months my positive outlook on life returned.

It is normal to grant yourself the benefit of the doubt, viewing yourself more generously than others might. It is a common human

tendency to take credit for what goes well and to attribute negative outcomes to bad luck, adverse circumstances, or other people. By contrast, depressed people do just the opposite. They often blame themselves for all kinds of adversity while being dismissive about taking credit for what is good. Their views of their own abilities and the controllability of life tend to be dimmer, though sometimes more accurate than the norm—a phenomenon known as *depressive realism*.<sup>15</sup> Isn't that depressing?

There is good reason, however, to think positively about yourself and others because, as discussed in later chapters, that which you expect is more likely to come true. When you start to fear something, you begin looking for it and then you start finding it. Hopelessness fosters helplessness—to give up rather than “to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them.”<sup>16</sup> Fear combined with low hope encourages passivity and avoidance rather than active coping, which in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Your level of hope, whether high or low, is thus mirrored in what you do and becomes a way of life.

## The Science of Hope

How much do we know about hope? I was fascinated to find out. In 1959, the eminent psychiatrist Karl Menninger accurately bemoaned the scarcity of research on this “basic but elusive ingredient” in healing: “When it comes to hope, our shelves are bare. The journals are silent.”<sup>17</sup> He was right, but it's no longer true. Just half a century later in Menninger's own discipline alone there were 49 definitions and 32 measurement instruments for hope.<sup>18</sup> With the burgeoning of behavioral science over the same period, research and scholarship on hope are now abundant in ecology,<sup>19</sup> economics,<sup>20</sup>

medicine,<sup>21</sup> nursing,<sup>22</sup> philosophy,<sup>23</sup> political science,<sup>24</sup> psychology,<sup>25</sup> sociology,<sup>26</sup> and theology.<sup>27</sup> Clearly there is broad interest in understanding this universal human experience. Part of what this book offers is a distillation of hundreds of articles and books published over the decades since Menninger lamented their absence. For readers interested in the details of particular ideas or findings, documentation is provided in endnotes to each chapter. If what engages you is the overall story, just read on.

## People Who Hope

Hope can be measured; in fact, many instruments are available. This makes it possible to learn how hope is related to other aspects of health and personality. People who hope stand out from others in a wide variety of ways. Within a large volume of research on the subject, those who are high in hope have been found to also:

- Be better at solving problems<sup>28</sup>
- Experience a higher quality of life even in the face of adversity<sup>29</sup>
- Be more resilient and persistent<sup>30</sup>
- Transcend the difficult present, finding greater meaning and purpose in life<sup>31</sup>
- Be more engaged and satisfied with their work, and be better at it<sup>32</sup>
- Have higher creativity, adaptivity, and academic achievement<sup>33</sup>
- Recover more readily after a disabling injury<sup>34</sup>
- Experience better outcomes in counseling and psychotherapy<sup>35</sup>



Hope can be quite specific. You might hope *for* something in particular to happen. Research shows that *self-efficacy*—the belief in your ability to accomplish a specific task—predicts success in actually doing it.<sup>36</sup> Yet hope is so much larger than wishing for specific things. It can also be a far broader perspective, a positive orientation toward and investment in the future.<sup>37</sup> For example, with a lifetime of observation and reflection, the French scientist–philosopher and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin concluded that history and humankind are systematically evolving toward a profoundly positive “omega point.”<sup>38</sup> There are setbacks and switchbacks along the way, but ultimately there is a progressive maturation. Shortly before his death, Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed a similarly hopeful message that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”<sup>39</sup> Such big-picture perspectives of a bright far horizon help people transcend and endure dark times, like the light at the far end of a long tunnel. Hope is a vital component of what is known as our *psychological capital*—the development of perseverance and adaptiveness to succeed at challenging tasks.<sup>40</sup> It is vital when coping with serious and prolonged stress.<sup>41</sup>

Not just a characteristic of individuals, hope is communicable to and sharable with others. It can become a *collective* orientation within families and groups, and even as part of a society’s common vision of the future.<sup>42</sup> Both hope and fear are choral and contagious and thereby are motivational themes found in political discourse that can sway decision making. Like common colds, we give them to each other.

Given the plethora of positive characteristics with which it is associated, hope might be considered a master virtue. It is a positive orientation of mind and heart toward your own future or that of the world at large. Hope is a chosen perspective, an alternative to

fear and despair. We're not required to hope, but if we decide to do so there are at least eight ways from which to choose. Let's begin.

### TAKING IT PERSONALLY: HOPE

- Have you ever gone through a time when hope felt particularly important to you? Are you struggling with a personal experience or global event now where hope might help you in the same way?
- On a scale of 1–10, how hopeful are you compared to other people?
- Looking to the future, what are two or three things you really hope for?