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HOPE IN HOPELESS TIMES

A few days ago I had the honor of being consecrated as an Abbot in the Order. This was a moment of solemn sacredness followed by an explosion of joy. I crossed this open threshold in my seventieth year.

In my first solicitude I want to reflect on hope in our time of existential threats. I was born, in Britain, a few years after the end of World War II, in a family dedicated to the return of life and civilization after the carnage of war and the systemic annihilation of the Holocaust. Yet the shadow of existential threat lived close to the hope of a new European peace.

My first encounters with existential dread came with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviets. These threats were real but the dangers seemed to subside. For me the real bombshell came with the publications of the “Population Time Bomb” by Robert Erlich, the predictions of the Club of Rome, and Rachel Carson’s, “Silent Spring”. These warnings were not going to go away, but continue to get worse. But my career and family took me away from these threats. The dread returned during the Reagan Administration. I was the mother of a young son. This time it was the threat of nuclear annihilation. I was propelled into political activism, and public protest. And then the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War was over and this country foolishly declared victory. Even the doomsday clock was turned back a few notches from midnight.

Each of the crises threw me into rage, despair and a deep cynicism about the human condition. And then the upheaval would subside, so I could simply go back to normal life. Back then I had no spiritual practice at all.

In recent years the existential threats to re-emerged—not that they were ever really gone—with an ever-increasing intensity. First, it was how we were pumping carbon into the atmosphere from the ever-expanding oil economy. Then it was agri-business destroying the very aliveness of soil through chemical pollution. Then the bees, and the massive die off of the insect world, the frogs and toads, on and on. This is the sixth extinction. The first five extinctions were geological upheavals; the sixth is caused by our human activity: over hunting and fishing, habitat destruction, pesticides, herbicides, atmospheric pollution, deforestation, climate disruption, overpopulation, poverty and the list goes on.

The Trump election added gasoline to the fire. Now there really seemed no escape. This time there was no sense of things getting better. Even the idea of geo engineering, climate treaties seemed hopeless in a world riven with competition and a political zeitgeist that favored the oligarchs operating in the background of world affairs.

It was then that I listened to the wisdom of Daniel Schmachtenberger and Charles Eisenstein and I began to feel glimmers of hope and new ways to respond to what seems like a hopeless and catastrophic global situation. There were phrases like “tipping point”, “The Butterfly Effect”, “Inter-being”, “the goo phase of the chrysalis”. I could feel how these words inspired me. These visionaries were seeing a world that could survive but only through a massive change of human consciousness. But deep down my pessimism bubbled away. It was reading the writings of Gem Bendell, founder of Deep Adaptation and a member of Extinction Rebellion, that I found something that kindled my heart and pointed me back to praxis.

Bendell is not an optimistic visionary. He does not believe we will survive and even the biosphere may be set back by millennia if we go nuclear. He pointed to the way deep into our despair and grief. Surprisingly, with time and patience, this way of an unflinching gaze into the ending of life as we know it, opens into an experience filled with excitement and joy, not hope about the future, but about the hope implicit in the NOW. This is not the path of the doomsday survivalist, but rather what Bendell calls deep adaptation—and what I would call a spiritual awakening and arrival in the intersection of the vertical dimension of the divine realms and the time space world we live in, NOW. We know this personally. We just don’t believe this is possible in the midst of cascading existential threats.

People who have received a terminal diagnosis can come to know this. Beyond the roller coaster of hope and fear, is a fecund stillness, which is generative, full of life, even playful, beautiful and creative. Life in the NOW becomes precious beyond measure. We don’t want to die of course, we don’t want to suffer, we don’t want live as we know it to die away. But what we discover is this moment, this moment, this moment, is a freshness we did not know before the crisis ripped us out of our comfort zone.

This means allowing ourselves, to enter the realm of no hope without collapsing. It means allowing ourselves, to be clueless about what to do. It means allowing ourselves, to reach the end of our mind’s capacity to think our way out this mess. It means meeting the fear and not fleeing into denial or dissociation. It means opening our hearts to the unimaginable heartbreak of the destruction we have wrought as a species. It means accepting our personal responsibility of life in the belly of empire and all the comforts of privilege, without collapsing into endless guilt and recrimination. This seems a herculean task and yet the wisdom teachers of our Abrahamic lineage all point the way to standing up in times of existential threat.

What I have discovered is that, this practice of being present, clear-eyed, openhearted and grounded leads to the joy and excitement of being alive NOW. Rather than drowning in the 24hour news cycle, I see and experience bubbling goodness, bubbling creativity and bubbling generosity all around me, emerging under the radar, tucked away from the horrors of social media. This lives in the virtual Sanctuaries that we have come to know during this COVID year. This will live in a new form of Sanctuary— when the virus is tamed—, with the mix of zoom and in-person gatherings which are safe, truthful, vulnerable, alive and growing sacred spaces. We cannot do this journey alone, partly because we are so imbedded in the Matrix and we cannot

see beyond the blinkers of our culture, but also because we need each other as expressions of Inter-being; this new and ancient consciousness is pushing us forward to new ways of living, loving and being in a world filled with intense suffering.

This is not just my experience. I am witnessing this emergence among us all. It comes in fits and starts. It is not a goal, nor is it a permanent state of bliss, nor the end of suffering. It is what Yeshua calls the True Human. Along the way we will be tested, more and more fiercely maybe. We are called to stand up, bearing and witnessing the suffering, but not beaten down by it, not defeated by our fears, but standing up into the divine realms with our feet firmly planted on our beloved earth. She needs us, and we need each other. In our praxis She meets us pouring Herself into our hearts. *This is the hope in hopeless times.*

Let us remember our sister, Julian of Norwich, who stood up wide-eyed and open hearted in her anchor hold, witnessing the horrors of the Black Death. She knew this hope, the eternal hope, the indestructible hope, the hope beyond all hopes.

*All shall be well,
All shall be well.
All manner of things shall be well.*

~~ Abbot Alison Hine