



Hope, a Call to Community

MARTHA E. STORTZ

Pandemic marks the last two years. A fast-mutating virus stymies epidemiologists, treatments, and vaccines. Cries for racial justice erupt in the aftermath of the murders of Black men and women. Political polarization signals a dangerous erosion of public trust. All of this plays out against the slow burn of global warming.

Hope, that “thing with feathers,” as Emily Dickinson described it, seems to have permanently taken flight.¹ Yet, hope abounds, calling solitary individuals into community. In this essay, I place hope not in the air but on the ground, with gritty fingernails and muddy boots.

To keep the discussion concrete, I argue narratively, drawing on the insights of two scholars who’ve written with great insight on hope: Jesuit philosopher William F. Lynch, and Jewish physician Jerome Groopman.² Finally, I weigh counsel

¹ Emily Dickinson, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>.

² William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), and Jerome Groopman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* (New York: Random House, 2005). Both men wrote intentionally for broad audiences, Lynch for *America* magazine and Fordham’s quarterly journal, *Thought*, which he edited for decades, and Groopman for *The New Yorker*.

In the midst of personal upheaval and challenge, the author finds the roots of a continuing hope in community and relationship. Hope is a thing for which we depend on together, persons joining to gain the courage to continue and grow in life. In this sense, hope is a plural thing.

from Scripture, particularly the psalms, words from the apostle Paul, and the book of Job. Along the way, I offer several related distinctions:

- the difference between hoping *for* and hoping *in* something or someone
- the distinction between *false hope* and *true hope*
- the distinction between *having hope* and the sense that somehow *hope has you*
- hope, not as an *individual* effort but a *joint* effort, a relationship

The whole of these distinctions is greater than the sum of its parts: hope is a “we.”

OUR STORY

I can't tell this story alone. It's *our* story—my late husband Bill's and mine.³ To tell it I summon emails we sent to people who were on the journey with us, because it's their story too. Quotes in this section come from those messages, resurrecting Bill's voice, his disarming sense of humor, and his deep Jesuit spirituality. When the story begins, Bill was chair of the Bannon Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit and Catholic school in Santa Clara, California.⁴

During Holy Week of 2004 Bill was in Indianapolis consulting, when seizures scrambled his speech and landed him in the hospital. I flew out immediately to hear him describe what had been like a verbal traffic jam in his head: “I know what it's like to speak without thinking, but it was weird to think without speaking.” An MRI had shown the faintest shadow in his left temporal parietal lobe, the “eloquent brain.” We flew back to California and began scheduling doctors' appointments.

We kept two schedules during the next eight weeks. One marked the forward march of calendar time, tracking the various tests, scans, and treatments that crowded our days. The other kept liturgical time, tracing the cycle through Good Friday and Easter, Pentecost and Ordinary Time, Advent and Christmas, Lent and Holy Week all over again. Living in liturgical time may have been my own form of “magical thinking.”⁵ I hoped for a particular outcome: return to that time before seizures. That proved to be a false hope. Instead, we found ourselves spiraling deeper and deeper into a mystery that held us. When an MRI eight weeks later revealed that the shadow had grown into a mass, Bill was, within a week in and out of surgery, officially diagnosed with the “T. rex” of brain cancers, *glioblastoma multiforme*.

³ I've told this story before, but no one ever tells a story the same way twice. When I first told it, I had very little understanding of what hope was. Today, I know more. Cf., Martha E. Stortz, “The School of Hope,” *Santa Clara Magazine*, December 13, 2006, <https://magazine.scu.edu/magazines/winter-2006/the-school-of-hope/>.

⁴ Bill is the late William C. Spohn (1944–2005). He had been a Jesuit for thirty years before he left the order and married.

⁵ The phrase is Joan Didion's, from a memoir chronicling the year after her husband John Gregory Dunn's sudden death. See *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

Medically, we entered a treatment regime of radiation, chemotherapy, and potentially more surgery. Spiritually, we stepped into established circles of prayer. Bill's Jesuit brothers brought us the sacraments and remembered him at community mass. My mother mobilized Methodist "prayer warriors" in Lower Delaware. There were prayers from San Quentin, Carmelite nuns at Dachau, a Jesuit seminary in East Africa. Friends and strangers, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian, routinely interceded for us. We felt those prayers like so many hands on our bodies. We laid hands on others, for from around the world came requests for our prayers in return: a child battling leukemia, a death row inmate, a family displaced. These prayers were the respiration that kept us alive. We took them in like air; we breathed them out in blessing.

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These intercessions came at the end of our daily practice of morning prayer, during which "the words of Scripture, especially the psalms, seem less hyperbole and more the unvarnished truth of our condition." Think about the full and free range of emotions the psalms evoke—anger, lament, joy, awe, wonder, abandonment, hope in the midst of suffering—of course the psalms spoke to us.

When radiation left Bill with a bald spot like the continent of Africa on the back of his head, the nieces suggested we razor the rest. We took their advice. He wrote to friends: "Although the result is not exact Vin Diesel with bifocals, it does support a variety of new hats." Then, a serious turn: "I don't believe God sends tumors to anyone, but we have found that on our brief walk through 'the valley of the shadow of death,' God has certainly been with us."

Bill had hoped to be writing, but anti-seizure meds left him stranded "somewhere between a retreat and a fairly major hangover." He lamented the "reptilian" turn his life had taken, but he learned things his vast library could not teach. "The last six months," he wrote, "have been nothing like I feared the encounter with death would be. We are not called to summon up a great act of hope, but rather to turn our attention to the One who is faithful. As a professional student, I guess I imagined that this would be the ultimate final exam—and I'd better get it right. We have found more gift than accomplishment in all of this. If gratitude is the echo of grace, then hope is the echo of God's paying attention to us. Marry the right person. It makes all the difference."

As I read this email, sent out without my eagle editing eye, the typos worried me, the final sentences warmed me; the logic seemed odd. "Marry the right person. It makes all the difference"? Then the insight hit me—how else was God going to pay attention to us, except *through* the love of others? There was another

distinction as well, the difference between hoping *for* something and hoping *in* something—or someone.

We had an MRI scheduled for early January; we suspected it would reveal new growth. When the neurologist confirmed it, we weren't surprised. It was just hard to tell our people: "We're learning much in this school of hope. The grace we need has been there and continues to be there. Thanks for being its allies. No prayers are wasted; it's just that some get channeled into unrequested directions. We know that it is not our hope that will continue to sustain us, but the life in Christ, as evidenced by what the apostle Paul says: 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col 1:27)."

With the consensus of our growing team of doctors, Bill enrolled in a month-long Phase II clinical trial at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) in Parnassus Heights. The treatment was easily integrated into the formidable army of medications he was already taking. He experienced none of the side effects, but the drug didn't work. When Bill complained about students ambushing him on campus, we realized the cancer had eaten away his peripheral vision.

When we met with the trial doctor, he was visibly exhausted and unusually abrupt. He walked us through the new scans, the new numbers, then concluded, "Clearly, you failed the trial drug." I was furious: "No, your drug failed us."

Anger was pointless. We had to move fast. Within forty-eight hours, we secured all of Bill's records and reviewed the latest scan with his first surgeon in the East Bay, Dr. Dickinson—his list name a coincidence that strikes me only now; then, there was no time to think about Miss Emily. As we were leaving, Bill asked, "Who survives this kind of cancer?" We expected a medical answer. Without missing a beat, the surgeon responded, "People who have hope and live life aggressively." Bill had a follow-up question: "What would you do if I were your brother?" Dr. Dickinson had a ready answer: "I'd drop my practice and take you skiing."

Surgery was scheduled during spring break, which coincided with Holy Week that year. Bill had been teaching one graduate course, and there were papers to grade and grades to turn in. As things dropped into place, though, our pace was ahead of our feelings. As we explored all of this with our spiritual director, it became clear that Bill was not sure he deserved surgery: "What's the point?" As we unpacked his reticence, we discovered an underlying fear: "Do you love me?" If he couldn't teach or speak or walk across campus, if he couldn't command the podium or the dinner table, would he still be loved?

Once it surfaced, the question could be addressed. The spiritual director and I found our script in Scripture: "Yes, Bill, you know that we love you!" The affirmations registered. Bill faced surgery knowing he was loved, not for his obvious scholarly and administrative gifts, nor for his stunning written and oral wit, but for himself. We knew something else as well: he was dying. We began to grieve together.

The last illness was less like a leaf falling than dropping off a cliff. There were some terrible moments, some funny moments, some incredibly holy moments. In the end, after consulting with Bill's Jesuit and Spohn families, we opted for palliative care in the hospital. On August 3, 2005, Bill's sister Catherine, her

husband Toby, and I were at the hospital, practicing hymns for Bill's memorial service. We looked up to see Bill, as if awakened from his coma, looking at us. And then he wasn't.

I'll end the story with the prayer that held us. It's the prayer of Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, and it was a powerful part of Bill's formation. It was carved into a side chapel at St. Ignatius Church in San Francisco, the parish Bill had grown up in, which sat across Golden Gate Park from Parnassus Heights and UCSF, where he'd had so much of his treatment. We often arrived at UCSF early, and we'd go and sit in this chapel. Known as the *Suscipe*, the first part of the prayer was a devastatingly accurate description of brain cancer. That terrified us both. But the second part of the prayer offered the consolation we craved:

*Take, Lord, receive
all my liberty,
my memory,
my understanding,
and my entire will,
all that I am and call my own.
You have given it all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours, do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace; that is enough for me.*

We lived inside that prayer. All in all, it was not a bad place to be.

I want to return now to four distinctions that opened this story, drawing on the combined wisdom of William Lynch and of Scripture to unpack them.

A DISTINCTION BETWEEN HOPING FOR AND HOPING IN

Back to Miss Emily. Hope as “the thing with feathers” captures the fragility of hope, particularly that sort of hope that invests in outcomes. We hope *for* all kinds of things, not only things with feathers. Hope predicated on outcomes is kind of like a child's Christmas list, endlessly open to revision. One of my nieces kept resubmitting hers. She wanted shoes, that much was clear, but the style kept changing. For a few weeks it was a pair of Nikes with lights that flashed every time her heel struck the ground. Then a pair of turquoise, kitten-heeled party pumps—with sequins!—topped the list. Her hopes bordered on the fantastic, considering the likelihood that she'd get either one of these types of shoes, but there was that tween-age attraction to glitzy, glittery things. Captive to desire and delusion, fad and fancy, what we hope for often alters all too quickly.

Sometimes, in the darkest moments, we don't know what to hope for at all. When Bill was dying, I said exactly that to a friend. Should I hope for him to beat an infection running feverishly through his body, but continue living in a world without language? Should I hope for death to intervene quickly and mercifully?

Outside of a miracle, I couldn't imagine an outcome that would restore any shred of the old life, the life we thought we'd have together. So was I hopeless?

When every possible outcome seemed obscene or incoherent, I discovered a hope *in* something, something Christians dare to call resurrection. Resurrection is never resuscitation, as Catholic theologian Ronald Rolheiser observes.⁶ My old life was never coming back, however much I hoped for it. Resurrection meant life on new terms entirely. I prayed that I could stand it; I prayed I would recognize it whenever, however, and wherever it appeared. Both edges of that prayer bear examination.

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Resurrection is hard to take, even frightening. Confronted with life on new terms entirely, I understood the terror of the women who ran from an empty tomb in Mark's gospel (16:8).⁷ They wanted the old Jesus back again; they weren't sure they could stand to face a risen Christ. When he did appear, the disciples had a hard time recognizing him. They thought he was a ghost (Luke 24:37), a wandering rabbi (Luke 24:13–35), a bossy bystander who thought he knew more about fishing than they did (John 21:4–6). Maybe the disciples were so busy looking for the old Jesus, they couldn't recognize the risen Christ in their midst.

And resurrection can be difficult to recognize. The disciples come to know the risen Christ in relationship. Along the road to Emmaus, a wandering rabbi teaches them, then breaks bread over a meal. At the Sea of Tiberias, a risen Christ cooks the disciples breakfast, eats with them, talks to them. In a locked room, a risen Christ appears, offering them peace. Hope is always grounded in relationship.

For Christians, Muslims, and Jews this hope *in* something is uniquely a hope *in someone*, whether Christ or Allah or Elohim. We find that hope in spite of ourselves. Most of the time, that hope finds *us*, something the author of "Amazing Grace" put into words. With deep longing and fierce hope, we sing, "I once was lost, but now *am found*." Found, located, placed again on a map. Who would have guessed it? Who would have figured we'd be here?

Hope in someone is powerfully and paradoxically that someone's presence *for* us and *in* us, despite our blindness, our fear, our feelings of unworthiness. Bill and I were "found" in words the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians. As we wrote to our fellow travelers: "We know that it is not our hope that will continue to

⁶ "There are also two kinds of life: There is *resuscitated* life and there is *resurrected* life. Resuscitated life is when one is restored to one's former life and health. . . . Resurrected life is not like this. It is not a restoration of one's old life but the reception of a radically new life." Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 146.

⁷ "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8 NRSV).

sustain us, but the life in Christ, as evidenced by what the apostle Paul says: ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’ (Col 1:27).”

A DISTINCTION BETWEEN FALSE HOPE AND TRUE HOPE

False hope denies reality; true hope embraces it. At the beginning of our medical odyssey, I was full of false hope. I figured if we could just find the right doctors, the right therapies, the right clinical trial, we could beat this. Trying to circle back to that time before seizures, I spent hours doing online research—again, my “magical thinking.” This “counterfeit” of real hope despairs of coping with the facts on the ground. It conjures the impossible, setting everyone and everything up for failure. It refuses what is real.⁸

Maybe my frantic pursuit of false hope was necessary, because it bought time until I could set my face toward the facts on the ground. Eventually, our radiologist refused to indulge me: “Look, we’ll handle the business of treatment. Your job is to be about the business of living well.” With that, he gave us work that was uniquely ours, along with a challenge to do it well. After all, if we lived from scan to scan, treatment to treatment, therapy to therapy, the disease would win. We had to live the life that had been given to us, as richly and fully as we could.

True hope dared us to live well. Every day I planned a new adventure, a walk we’d never done, a restaurant we’d never tried, a recipe we’d never cooked before. As the disease progressed, our circle of adventure got more and more constricted, but finding responsible adventures connected me with what was real. Jerome Groopman notes that true hope adds an element of “fear into the process of rational deliberation and tempers it so we can think and choose without panic.” One who has true hope, not its counterfeit, “takes into account the real threats that exist and seeks to navigate the best path through them.”⁹

Gradually, instead of indulging fantasy and dreams of medical miracles, we reached back to what was real. And what was real? The progression of the cancer was real, along with its unpredictability and the limits of treatment. But what I remember vividly was the love of family and friends, the daily graces that swarmed us, and the work that went into living life boldly. Reality grounded true hope.

A DISTINCTION BETWEEN HAVING HOPE AND HOPE HAVING YOU

We discovered that we didn’t so much have this hope, as a product of fierce focus or even deep faith, as this hope had us. All we had to do was to fall into it, like a trapeze artist falls into a net. She’s missed the catch, but she dared everything because she knew the net was there.

⁸ “This fantasy life, these omnipotent dreams, are attempts to cope with life. Superficially, they resemble the nature and the processes of hope. In fact, they are a brilliant and exuberant counterfeit of hope.” Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 200.

⁹ Groopman, *Anatomy of Hope*, 198–99.

In the last months, as we reached the end of our treatment options, we felt a strange freedom. For the first time since our medical odyssey began, I felt like I was on solid ground. I stopped taking notes at consultations. I didn't need them anymore. I knew where we were. We'd had great care. We'd had terrific doctors. But if we were looking for them to play God, that position had already been taken. We had no maps for the country of medicine, but we did have a compass for that "valley of the shadow of death."

Psalm 23 proved to be that compass. What could be more consoling than its opening? There are green pastures and cool waters, and God appears as a gentle guide, addressed in third-person singular as "my shepherd." But when the path leads into that forbidding "valley," the tone becomes intimate and urgent; the psalmist shifts to direct address. No longer "shepherd" or "he," God is addressed as "thou" or "you." Groopman finds the shift in tone deliberate. It indicates that "God has moved near to us, has become a close companion, allaying our fear, supporting us with rod and staff, nourishing us in the presence of our enemies."¹⁰

HOPE IS A "WE," MEDIATED AND UNMEDIATED

God's companionship manifests in various ways, sometimes mediated through other people, sometimes itself in direct address. We surely felt God's companionship through others. How else was God going to pay attention to us, except *through* other people? In loving ways and even in more abrasive ways, at every point in the journey, other people kept us grounded in true hope. We were surrounded by the love of family and friends. We were connected to circles of prayer around the world, and we felt those prayers like hands laid on us in blessing. In turn, we prayed for others, laying hands on them. One powerful way the body of Christ lives in the world is through intercessory prayer, and we participated in that great exchange.

But notice how even less loving, more abrasive exchanges grounded us in true hope. Our radiologist broke through the "autism" of my fantasies.¹¹ Gently but firmly, he invited me out of the medical deliberations, which I couldn't second-guess or control and which were, particularly against this cancer, standard, limited, and finally, powerless. At the same time, he showed us our rightful work: living boldly and well.

False hope thrives on isolation; it lives in a bubble. Sometimes someone else must puncture that bubble.

In similar fashion, the trial doctor who told Bill he'd "failed" the trial drug gave us another hard and possibly necessary infusion of reality. At the time, I was angry. Now, I feel gratitude for his candor, along with remorse for not recognizing

¹⁰ Groopman, *Anatomy of Hope*, 79.

¹¹ Speaking of psychiatrists dealing with mental illness, Lynch writes, "To the extent that we can satisfy any of their real needs, or hopes, or tastes, we remove the source of these intensely autistic drives." *Images of Hope*, 200.

that he probably wanted success as much as we did. Truthful relationships with both a radiologist and a research doctor did not give us the news we wanted but brought us truth, which in turn, nurtured true hope.

Jerome Groopman writes about a similar encounter with one of his patients, Barbara, who was considerably more gracious than I'd been. Diagnosed at sixty-seven with breast cancer that had spread to her bones, Barbara went through a rigorous round of chemotherapies, each with its own side effects. Each of them worked for a time, before the cancer returned with gathering force. Groopman had reached the end of treatment options, and he met with his patient. "I know of no medicines that I can give you at this point to help you," he said. She refused his admission of failure: "No, Jerry. You do have something to give. You have the medicine of friendship."¹² Barbara found hope in her ongoing relationship with her physician.

Hope happens between people; it's generated by relationship. Writing from his experience in mental health, William Lynch discovers again and again that despair is "the constriction of the private imagination."¹³ Therapy puts two people, a client and a therapist, to work on enlarging the real possibilities of a situation. Like physicians, pastors, and priests, therapists literally hope *with* their clients, helping them find truthful patterns of meaning. Hope emerges from that joint effort of imagination. Hope cannot be achieved alone; it is an act of a community, a people, a nation—and just two souls struggling to produce liberation in each other.¹⁴ Hope is a "we."

Hope emerges from that joint effort of imagination. Hope cannot be achieved alone; it is an act of a community, a people, a nation—and just two souls struggling to produce liberation in each other. Hope is a "we."

Bill and I were fortunate to experience that "we" in the people around us. Similarly, Barbara found it in a rich tapestry of friendships. What happens to hope when mediating relationships with others have vanished? Addressing that question recalls the barren landscapes of suffering in the psalms and the book of Job.

The psalms of lamentation are utterances from someone whom friends and neighbors have deserted (Ps 88:18), whom companions have shunned (88:8). Psalm 22 even begins with an accusation of divine desertion: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Simone Weil identifies the marks of affliction as physical suffering, social alienation, and spiritual abandonment, and they all crowd the psalms of lamentation.¹⁵

¹² Groopman, *Anatomy of Hope*, 135.

¹³ Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 23.

¹⁴ Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 24.

¹⁵ Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in George A. Panichas (ed.), *Simone Weil Reader* (Mt. Kisco NY: Moyer Bell Ltd., 1977), 441.

Yet even here, there is someone to address, someone to call out to, whether in anger, anguish, or supplication. Quite simply, there is someone to shout at, someone to be angry with, someone to absorb lament. Moreover, as Groopman has noted, that person can be addressed directly, as “you,” as “thou.”

The book of Job explores the landscape of isolation, abandonment, and alienation narratively. Job has lost his position of status at the center of the human world. His children have been killed, his wealth taken away; skin disease banishes him to the outskirts of civilization. Job’s friends come to sit with him, and for a time, their silent presence offers him consolation. But then, they open their mouths, and consolation vanishes. They probe what Job might have done to deserve such suffering. Job sends them away.

In the end, there is just God. Job’s plea to the Almighty is simple: Job and God. “Talk to me!” (“Let the Almighty answer me!” Job 31:35). Job begs, not for vindication, exoneration, or even release, but for relationship.¹⁶ And in a voice from a whirlwind, the Almighty answers.

The voice from the whirlwind describes a creation that has nothing to do with the human project and its flimsy metrics of status, usefulness, and righteousness. The Almighty produces an avalanche of examples. The ostrich may not be able to fly, but its flapping unseats a horse and rider (Job 39:18). The Behemoth lives on both sea and land, eats whatever it wants, wherever it finds it—humans beware!—but God finds this creature magnificent. Similarly, the Leviathan, the Behemoth of the ocean, strikes terror among the ships at sea, but “its eyes are like the eyelids of dawn” (Job 41:18). The voice from the whirlwind shows Job a creation of stunning beauty on the margins of human civilization, and it’s a creation in which its creator takes obvious delight. In his social marginalization, Job has simply joined the “Wild Things”! God fiercely loves them all.¹⁷

More than a host of wild and wonderful companions, Job has God’s attention. He has been heard, regarded, beheld by the Almighty. Maybe that was all he needed to sustain his own hope. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). That relationship grounds hope, even on a dung heap.

Now, Bill’s words make a different kind of sense. “If gratitude is the echo of grace, hope is the echo of God’s paying attention to us.” Hope is the “we” that gives life. ☩

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¹⁶ “It is an appeal for recognizing a personal relationship between God and man that is not satisfied by the statements of reason or justice.” Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 111. Lynch’s discussion of Job is worth reading in full.

¹⁷ Martha E. Stortz, “Beauty and the Eye of the Beholder: What Job Sees,” *Word & World* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2019), 32.