



Faith-Ann McGarrell

Anchored in

Hope

There are times in our personal and professional lives—individually and collectively—when fear seizes our hearts. We fear losing that which is of great value to us; we may feel as though we’ve lost all hope; or we may have a glimmer of optimism, but the storms threatening to surround us strip us of courage—leaving us disheartened, paralyzed with fear, and caught in a cycle of inertia. How can we continue to be hopeful during these difficult times?

Hope is intangible—an indescribable spark of optimism anchored deep within us. American poet Emily Dickinson, who lived her life as a recluse, is well known for her cryptic descriptions of hope. She wrote: “Hope is a strange invention—A patent of the heart—In unremitting action/Yet never wearing out—.”¹ In another poem, she penned: “Hope is the thing with feathers—That perches in the soul—And sings the tunes without the words—And never stops—at all.”² Even in her retreat from society, hope flickered in her thoughts. Most of us do not have the luxury of withdrawing from the world, away from trouble. We have to face the ups and downs of life with the belief that we will come out of the experience with our hope intact.

Researchers and scientists believe we are created and wired, as human beings, to have hope. Some call it “optimism bias,”³ others call it the “placebo effect.”⁴ What is it about hope that stirs the soul? I believe we fully grasp the meaning of the word when we look at what life would be like without it. Proverbs 13:12 says: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.”⁵ Someone without hope is characterized as living in despair. *Webster’s Dictionary* tells us that a hopeless situation is one that has no possibility of changing or improving. Conversely, someone with hope expresses a higher level of certainty and optimism, which inspires preparation and visioning for the future.⁶

In 2014, Cornell University, the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Pennsylvania initiated a four-year, US\$5 million research grant project called *The Hope and Optimism Initiative*. Andrew Chignell and Samuel Newlands, co-primary investigators, led an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the disciplines of philosophy, philosophy of religion, and the social sciences. The

initiative sought to generate conceptual, empirical, and practical understandings of hope and optimism.⁷

Chignell posed the central research question: “Can we be clearer about the different kinds of hope that people have, use, and talk about?” The researchers hypothesized that there would be a spectrum of very different kinds of hope. They found that on one end of the hope spectrum there is *facile hope*—hope that consists of the desire for something to happen and perhaps the belief that it’s possible, but no attempt is made to structure one’s life around the possibility (winning the lottery, for example). On the other end of the spectrum is what Chignell calls *robust hope*, where a person not only believes something to be possible and wants it to occur, but also takes decisive actions because of it.⁸

In fact, the positive physiological effects of robust hope have been well documented, most acutely by the experiences of those living with chronic and terminal illnesses. Physician Jerome Groopman in *The Anatomy of Hope* writes: “Researchers are learning that a change in mind-set has the power to alter neurochemistry.”⁹ He continues: “Belief and expectation—the key elements of hope—can block pain by releasing the brain’s endorphins and enkephalins, mimicking the effects of morphine. In some cases, hope can also have significant effects on fundamental physiological processes such as respiration, circulation, and motor function.”¹⁰ The idea that simply being hopeful can potentially make a difference in brain chemistry or physiological well-being might seem like a stretch, especially when considering the abstract nature of the concept. Yet, Groopman is emphatic: “True hope has no room for delusion.”¹¹ We have to face the situation head on, and in the process, find pathways to dealing with crisis.

Shane Lopez, author of the book *Making Hope Happen*, offers another perspective and suggests: “Hopeful people conjure a vision that sustains them, that causes them to show up for the hard work and accept setbacks. They make an investment in the future that pays off in the present: in the way they eat, exercise, conserve energy, take care of themselves, stick to their treatment plans [if fighting chronic or terminal illness], or just live their lives with optimism.”¹² Similar to the

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work done by Chignell and Newlands, and Groopman, Lopez suggests that hope in its most robust form incorporates action, preparation, planning, and visioning.

So what do we do with this abstraction? Do we leave it alone as an intangible concept, or can we truly find purpose for hope and optimism in our lives? In Jeremiah 17:7 we are told that the Lord is the hope of those who place their trust in Him, and in 1 Peter 1:3 we are reminded that God has given us a “living hope” through Jesus Christ. We have a living hope!

Several years ago, Duane Bidwell (a theologian) and Donald Batisky (a pediatric nephrologist), came together to research and write articles about children and their families coping with chronic illness. They identified five pathways to hope:

- *Maintain identity.* Keep a regular routine similar to one prior to the event.
- *Build community.* Interact with and seek out others who are experiencing a similar situation, and spend time connecting.
- *Reclaim power.* Take back power from the situation by continuing to make plans and set goals.
- *Attend to God.* Embrace spirituality through religious practices, connecting with God through prayer, meditation, and reflection.
- *Acquire wisdom.* Gather wisdom from the community, medical experts, and through sharing one’s experience with others.¹³

These pathways are active, constructive, and deliberate choices, and could apply in most difficult situations. Hope is a choice—one that needs to be nurtured every day in our homes, churches, and schools. Together, as administrators, teachers, pastors, counselors, and those who serve in schools, we are called to create learning environments that inspire hope in the lives of students, many of whom face pervasive hopelessness and can see no way out of unresolved anger, anxiety, bullying, depression, or extreme poverty. Adventist schools must be enclaves of hope and optimism, places where both are planted, cultivated, and nurtured. We know each one has power to transform individuals and situations, and beyond that, we believe hope in God transforms lives. Maybe this past school year was fraught with personal or professional storms and turbulence—some are more difficult than others; and, in the future, we can certainly expect to experience personal tragedies, or financial, social, or political crises. In fact, despite our best efforts, our situations might not change; in some cases, they might get worse. Yet, we can choose not to fear, for fear is the absence of hope.¹⁴

What do we do in troubled times? We clothe ourselves in the hope and assurance of God’s presence in difficult circumstances—“‘And surely I am with you always’” (Matthew 28:20); remember His working in past experiences—“I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done” (Psalm 143:5); and claim the promises of deliverance for the future—“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (Isaiah 43:2). Hope, anchored in God’s promises, is a bastion against any storm. May this robust hope be ours as we navigate the days ahead, nourishing and nurturing hearts that are hopeful, expectant, and fearless.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. _____, “‘Hope’ Is the Thing With Feathers (254),” 116.
3. Tali Sharot, *The Science of Optimism: Why We’re Hardwired for Hope* (Seattle, Wash.: Amazon Digital Services, LLC, 2012).
4. Jerome Groopman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* (New York: Random House, 2003).
5. Proverbs 13:12. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references in this editorial are quoted from the New International Version (NIV). Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
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12. Amanda Enayati interviews Shane Lopez, author of *Making Hope Happen: Create the Future You Want for Yourself and Others* (New York: Atria Books, 2013) in Amanda Enayati, “How Hope Can Help You Heal” (April 2013): <https://www.cnn.com/2013/04/11/health/hope-healing-enayati/index.html>.
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