

In the Midst of Winter, Hope Springs Eternal

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What is hope? At first, I think of “hope” as the political campaign buzzword of President Obama, the second letter of the word replaced with his characteristic “o” logo, eliciting either reassurance from his fans or resentment of a perceived show of arrogance from his detractors.

I should be able to tell you great things about hope. For a college senior ready to pack up the books and move to the next level, surrounded by accomplished peers whose résumés speak of upcoming jobs at Fortune 500 companies, as teachers, as medical students, as journalists—this is a time of great opportunity and anticipation, something which all graduation speakers are required to mention. And, if you’re applying to a job, or graduate or professional program, the default answer to kind queries of friends and relatives is, “I hope to hear back soon,” as to whether you were hired or admitted.

Yes, “hope springs eternal,” as someone important once said.² Notably, that someone is none other than the renowned poet Alexander Pope, whose life and works I hope to study in my career as a scholar of eighteenth-century British literature. For me, literature is a source of hope. Particularly when I feel that my beliefs are out of favor in the current environment, I can always find recourse in contemplating the trenchant satire of Pope as he struggled to unleash his righteous indignation upon the world, encapsulated in charming heroic couplets. Occasionally, I wonder whether the engineer runs to the lever or fulcrum for comfort, or the chemist to his favorite element on the periodic table. . . it seems only fair.

One of my friends, Brett N., stole my literature-induced thunder when he said that he turned to history for encouragement. He declared, “Although humans have lived a turbulent existence, and there’s a lot to be ashamed of, it’s inspiring to see how people have fought against the status quo and strived to obtain a more meaningful future.” This, he suggested, convinced him that his own success in life is imminent, having seen so many excellent examples in his history textbooks, although, he added, “I think the U.S. public would be good to focus less on famous individuals and more on themselves and society as a whole when recognizing the benefits of hope.” Then, seamlessly segueing from far-reaching optimist of the ages to light-hearted college student, he said, “I guess that the first step toward achieving my deepest personal ambitions would be identifying what they are.”

Those comments represent a pretty accurate slice of life on a college campus. Particularly conscious of the efficacy of Obama’s campaign for “hope,” which seemed at times to be synonymous with “change,” I have begun to ask my peers what their goals are, and whether those goals can and will be reasonably met in the coming years. Interestingly, and reassuringly to the

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² One half of an excellent heroic couplet in *Essay on Man*, Epistle I, lines 95-96. “Hope springs eternal in the human breast/ Man never is, but always to be blessed.”

health of the nation, or at least the college students closest to me, while students struggle to answer the first part of the question—what are your goals?—they almost unanimously expressed an unwavering conviction that yes, they could and would achieve their goals, as if the prospect of failure had never really occurred to them. Is this presumptuous, just assuming success? Ultimately, no, because a number of those who responded positively about their future expressed an interest in working as hard as it takes to gain what they desire. While success is assumed, it is assumed as a result of hard work, and that assumption is an important part of the relationship between here and success.

The most prominent success story in the past months has been President Obama's election. Jenny L., an Obama supporter, declared that the "regime change" was a source of hope for the country, citing Obama's positive image and uplifting promises. However, she qualified her statement, supporting what I have perceived as the reassuring consciousness of the hard work which accompanies success: "He's [Obama's] not going to make my *personal* goals happen, but he is a general symbol of hope for the nation." Interestingly, much of the "hope" on my college campuses seems to derive almost as much from the jokes and verbal abuse against the immediate past President, and not so much about President Obama as a leader. In this way, perhaps it is more appropriate to say that the sense of a "regime change," as Jenny called it, is a great source of hope for college students and numerous faculty members. Still, a certain segment of the student population doesn't seem to get the hype: referring to an article "2008 Was A Year of Bailouts, 2009 Is a Year of Hope," one commented, "So many in the media have deemed this "the year of hope," which kind of puzzles me, but whatever."

Few people in their early twenties or late teens would call themselves successful because they have been taught to look ahead, scanning the horizon for opportunities beyond the here-and-now of college. Hope should be directed toward change, and the enemy of change is status quo. We're always looking for a change, the next step, for which it is, ostensibly, our duty to hope. But may I suggest something which might seem a bit brazen? Many college students are on the right track already, and don't need to associate "change" with "hope" at this point. Merely being in college seems to correspond with a higher degree of hope about the future. It makes sense given the status that society attaches to education, and the correlation between education and desirable jobs. Michael W., a peer of mine who has dropped out of school, was the only person asked who responded that he had neither hopes nor ambitions. When I asked about his next step in life, he responded,

What next step? I work at a grocery store. I just hope I do not get fired. I know and admit I need to get back in college but I just do not see it in my life anytime soon.

While I am certain that this attitude is not the mindset of *most* young adults not attending college, it is safe to say that education does represent a valuable source of hope for those enrolled, and a perceived advantage in our society among those who are not. College administrators in particular should recognize the benefits that students receive from attending college, including increased self-esteem and a heightened perception of potential for success.

Whether this optimism continues after graduation, however, is complicated by the obvious economic difficulties the country is facing. Catapulted from the comfort of not necessarily having to have a job beyond attending school, one recent graduate explains that while the economic downturn enabled her to achieve her deepest ambition—owning a horse—she has no job to support it, so the victory is bittersweet at best. "I wonder why I bothered to take on extra training when I can't even support myself," Elizabeth W. said of her bachelor's degree. With such examples in the Class of 2008, the Class of 2009 is poised on the edge of a severe economic depression, and at a time traditionally spent wondering what excitement lay beyond the hallowed

halls of a soon-to-be alma mater, many are contemplating the exact percentage chances of finding employment. Another recent graduate, Andy P., explained in a characteristically chipper tone that he wouldn't have his current job, teaching English in Korea, if it were not for the economy here and his inability to find a job after graduation. "In fact," he confides, "as tactless as it may be of me to mention it, the economical downswing in the United States has almost given me extra impetus toward my goals of being a writer and world-traveler." Some students do see the potential to benefit in the upheaval, but the majority of students are either unconcerned or anxious, primarily anxious.

To cope with the anxiety, students have discovered numerous sources of inspiration: others are bolstered by a sustaining faith which is present throughout good and bad times. A Christian who believes that religion is a way of life and not an "analgesic," Michael T. responded,

To be very real with you, my source of hope comes from Jesus Christ, and the fact that He died to reconcile me (and everyone else who accepts him) to right relationship with Himself. The economy and today's condition are not permanent. By trusting in the Lord, and acknowledging what He wants for me and where He is leading me, the next steps in my life are nothing to be concerned about. The times ahead may be/look a little rocky ahead with the recession and all, but "God works all things for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Next to family, friends, and perhaps a system of belief, it seems that hope emanates from a balance between a memory well-stocked with moments of happiness from the past and an imagination strong enough to picture the happiness held in the future. One of my friends most blessed with these faculties explained,

The hope that comes from simple things is what sustains me on a daily basis. In my opinion, it's the little promises life makes you which are the key to a happy existence: a dinner party, game night, a new book, a three-day weekend, an exploration of a new part of town, a walk in the sunset, shooting some hoops, a package in the mail, a freshly-cut apple, a cool breeze to the face. . . .

He continued to list those things which made him happy and hopeful, and even simply hearing this recitation made me instantly feel happier and more optimistic about the future too. There may not be the type of job I've always dreamed of, but there will always be freshly cut apples, fluffy comforters (and I invite you to insert a few of your own favorite things, a la *The Sound of Music*) and that is reassuring.

Judging from the number of funny responses and witty comments I received in the course of my investigation, I am firmly convinced that a major index of hopefulness is an upbeat sense of humor. Quipped one interviewee about the perils of the economy and the prospect of not achieving his dreams:

I find it difficult to be concerned about anything when I have no clue what it might be. That means, if this was a horror movie, I'd be the second one jumped and eaten by the monster, directly after scoffing that the others were making a silly fuss about nothing and poor Harold's grisly death was just a freakish mishap.

The results of my survey are hardly groundbreaking: students have numerous sources of hope, and are overwhelmingly positive with their assessment of their own chances of success,

even as they describe an awareness that the country holistically is in a downturn or depression. The individual human spirit prances on even under the most adverse circumstances, and it is the millions of single Americans so optimistic in their abilities who will (perhaps unwittingly) collectively amass the power to persevere and accomplish great things.

Those of you who were born prior to the '80s may find comfort in knowing that today's youth still turns to long-established sources of hope. And despite the reputation the current generation has for their quest for success, the goals that they hold dearest to their hearts do not seem to have deviated much from the preceding generations' ambitions. The best example of the continuity between generations (whether overtly acknowledged in previous surveys or not) was delivered with an embarrassed laugh:

I don't seriously believe that I'll ever achieve what I'm probably most hopeful for: to meet, woo and marry a woman who (a) is well-read, intelligent, witty and charming, yet still lacking certain superfluous social graces and retraining some crucial vices; (b) wouldn't mind gallivanting all over the world without knowing where the two of us will be in a year's time; and (c) would actually want to sleep with me. But I can dream, can't I?

References

- Pope, A. (2006). *Essay on man*. In P. Rogers (Ed.), *Alexander Pope: The major works* (p. 274). New York: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1733)
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