

# Hope in an Age of Hysteria

*'Hope' is the thing with feathers –*

*That perches in the soul –*

*And sings the tune without the words –*

*And never stops – at all –*

*~Emily Dickinson*

I was reading a book on the front porch of my daughter's house when a car pulled into the driveway. Two women got out, waved, and walked toward me.

They were evangelists – I never asked their denomination, though Jehovah's Witnesses might be a safe guess – and they asked if I would go through some Scripture with them. Politely, I declined.

Just before they turned to go, one of the women looked at me and said, "Sir do you have hope for the future?"

"It's a requirement, ma'am," I told her. "I have grandchildren."

If you're a parent or a grandparent, surely you've heard someone give a shake of the head and say, "The future looks pretty bleak. I'd hate to be raising children right now."

Given our current political divisions and shrill rhetoric, it's understandable that some might think we live in the bleakest and most desperate of times. But is being alive in 2020 worse than living through the Black Plague, which took out some 25 million people in Europe and between 75 and 200 million people worldwide? Worse than living as an ordinary American in 1800, when death from sickness and childbirth were rampant? Worse than World War I, which killed millions and was

followed by a disastrous influenza pandemic?

In this miasma of gloom-and-doom, wonderful changes are occurring. Despite a planet teeming with a record number of human beings, we have reduced poverty and hunger to the lowest level in human history. We've cured many diseases, we'll cure more, and life expectancy worldwide is higher than ever before. Crime and murder rates in the United States have plummeted in the 21st century, and in general the average American possesses more material advantages than any king who has ever lived.

Unfortunately, rather than lifting a glass to this rising tide that raises all boats, far too many of our young people, particularly here in the West, view the future as dismal at best, catastrophic at worst, a time of starvation, rising temperatures, and endless wars. Climate change activist Greta Thunberg is the most emblematic standard-bearer of those who see the future of the human race, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, as "nasty, brutish, and short." Swallowing what they hear in classrooms and from far-Left politicians, and perhaps ignorant of history and of the positive changes around the globe, they see the planet as teetering on the brink of disaster.

This planet does indeed face plenty of troubles, and to raise our kids as cockeyed optimists would be misguided. They need to know that the world is a tough place requiring hard choices both in politics and economics, and in our personal lives.

But to instill in the young a philosophy of angst and despair is equally dangerous. Such instruction breeds cowardice, apathy, and surrender. Without hope of some kind, we have given up the fight before picking up shield and sword. Without hope, the battle is lost before it has begun.

When we indoctrinate our young people with these messages – and it is indoctrination, sometimes intended, more often, I

suspect, simply part of the cultural zeitgeist – we are denying them the tools of adulthood, that sense of balance and realism we so need to survive. We are allowing them to remain adolescents, impotent to meet challenges, or worse, victims who moan and whine about their circumstances rather than trying to change them.

But here's the good news: we can counterbalance this culture of gloom and anticipated misery by teaching our young people to embrace hope.

Hope is one of the three theological virtues – the partner of faith and charity in the New Testament. To practice those three virtues doesn't mean we need to be a believer. We can instill in our children faith in family and country. We can guide them on the path of charity, or love. And we can tell them again and again to live always with hope.

Many prisoners of a gulag or a concentration camp walked away from those barbed wire pits of suffering having learned at least one important lesson: To live without hope makes a wasteland of the soul. To live without hope ends in death, sometimes physical, sometimes spiritual.

Is that what we want for our children? Or do we want the thing with feathers to be singing in their souls?

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