Possessed by hope

by Martin E. Marty in the October 18, 2000 issue

The Fabric of Hope: An Essay, by Glenn Tinder
The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope, by Andrew Delbanco

Ever Since Pandora opened her box, hope has come in a dizzying variety of packages. Viktor Frankl found it to be the last expression of freedom in the World War II death camps. Emily Dickinson called it "the thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul." Abraham Cowley spoke of it as "the most hopeless thing of all."

In Glenn Tinder and Andrew Delbanco's books, hope also arrives in contrasting packages. Tinder's book makes its way quietly into the world via Scholars Press, not a mass-market publisher. I've been carrying it on travels for half a year but have seen no reviews of it. Delbanco's book, in contrast, has been called to our attention through reviews in national and international publications. It's possible to read Delbanco in a couple of hours and remember it. But I need to mull over Tinder's work--and I find that he has worked his way into my consciousness and memory and has changed my outlook.

Since I hope to convert readers to Tinder, or at least to reckoning with him, let me spend a paragraph on his genre, approach and achievement. He is best known for a modest, enduring work, *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, which frustrated the left and the right alike, even though it was not a book of the center. The *Atlantic Monthly* featured this quiet scholar on a cover some years ago, bannering his question, "Can We Be Good Without God?" That issue became a newsstand best seller. Through this and other books Tinder has helped a smallish band of steady readers reshape their thought.

The most peculiar feature of Tinder's work is that though he writes for the general public, he does so from a Christian standpoint. His books pose a naïve and startling question: If it is legitimate and respectable to write philosophy, history and social analysis for literate and academic readers, why is it considered outre, corrupting and violative to write, however modestly and fair-mindedly, out of a version of the outlook professed by four-fifths of the American population, one-third of the world's?

That stitching of faith into thinking about politics, community, fate and, here, "the fabric of hope" has inspired profound thought and should not be shunned without a hearing. Let me hasten to add that Tinder never whines or whinnies. He just asks for a hearing and gives readers, nonbelievers and believers alike, good reason for reading.

Like most historians, I look for footnotes, but find one only every 20 pages or so in Tinder's book. It also contains few of the capital letters and proper nouns we cherish. Tinder's indexes are brief and full of abstractions and concepts like "community," "destiny" and "obedience." Yes, you also will find the biggies there: in the "A's" there are, of course, Aquinas and Aristotle and Augustine, with only Ansel Adams and Hannah Arendt to remind us that this book was written at the end of the 20th century. Not that Tinder has not done his research. He simply--or, rather, complicatedly--has read and inwardly digested the works of authors who matter. He shows us the strong sinews and muscles that reflecting on them develops.

Tinder is packaged to look like a downer but points up. Delbanco's book arrives glamorously, teasing readers with a bright Peter Blume painting on the cover and with talk about the American dream, but it is a downer. It takes off from the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville and discovers melancholy under the fading of the dreams of citizens. Just as Western philosophy, according to Alfred North Whitehead, is a series of footnotes to Plato, so most sensible and provocative writing about American democracy and religion is a set of elaborations on Tocqueville.

For Columbia University's Delbanco, the fundamental question for Americans "has always been how to find release from [the] feeling of living without propulsion and without aim." I might want to argue with him on that, having just been privileged to advise dissertation-writer James Block through a master work--watch for it as a book--on how the people who came to America fought less for "freedom" than for "agency." But Delbanco is sufficiently on target to make those who dream and hope wince to find Americans characterized thus.

Like most good sermons--and this one is a jeremiad--the book comes in three parts. Early America's propulsion came from devotion to God. God is still around, and Delbanco is respectful. But God faded as the propelling center for the American dream. So nation followed. That worked in post-Puritan America and led to the doctrine of manifest destiny and some positive missions. Delbanco probes and prods but is not picky, and lets American dreams be dreams, not always nightmares; he

writes of dreams that inspire achievement. But in the past half century the nation became too ambiguous and, yes, too often corrupt or the focus of idolatry to serve as our propelling vision.

So what is left? What helps people counter that pervasive melancholy that we paper over with sitcom watching, compulsive shopping, frantic competitiveness, materialism and the market? Delbanco calls his third chapter "The Self," and argues that while Americans may have been ambiguous about God and nation, they are left in protean confusion and walk meandering paths within the labyrinth of the self.

Like most three-part sermons, Delbanco's division is a bit too neat. His three categories actually blend and fuse and blur, and together provide the raw material for dreaming about tomorrow. He does not dream the new American dream, but he gives us reasons not to be content with the current muddle--which I'd call our "malaise," but you know where that term got Jimmy Carter and other truthtellers.

Left feeling down by Delbanco's dreamless dream, his Tocquevillean discernment of melancholy, I turn to Tinder's meditation on hope. I am happy to note that it is not about illusion, about the possibility of possibility thinking or about being positive about positive thinking. The only kind of hope worth pondering is grounded in realism about the human condition and situation, and Tinder is nothing if not a realist. Like Delbanco, but pointing also beyond the American dream, Tinder muses about "The Failure of Modern Hope," and pairs "modern despondency" with Delbanco's "melancholy." "Hope is as necessary to life as light and air," Tinder says. But we live not only with positive general principles but with what Tocqueville (him again!) discerned as contradicting actualities.

These, then, are the weaknesses of modern hope: obliviousness to the insecurities and tragedies inherent in history; neglect of the finitude and moral imperfection affecting all human understanding and action; failure to realize that people, although finite, have an imagination without determinate limits and therefore cannot rejoice in ephemeral satisfactions; and finally, implicit in modernity's denial of eternity, an incapacity for according unqualified respect for every person.

Next comes "The Nature of Hope," wherein Tinder takes up "Hope and God," community and self, followed by "Sin, Suffering, and Forgiveness." He treats hope as having a "universe" and remaining a "mystery." He will disappoint those who want a free ride into that universe and an easy penetration of the mystery by concluding

this section with "Hope as Obedience." Obedience is costly but rewarding. More explicitly than Delbanco, Tinder sees the co-incidence of thought about God, nation [which he calls "community"] and self. "The search for community is also a search for self"; this arises "from the fact that apart from community selfhood is impossible." Tell that, sell that, to the pathetically lonely and even desperate seekers after a community-less "spirituality."

Which brings up, third, "The Spirituality of Hope." Prayer, thought, meditation, solitude and remembrance all receive due attention, along with church. The church so often "fails so conspicuously to be what it ought to be that the image brought to many minds when they hear the word may be rather inglorious. Hence we should note that 'Church,' for Christians, is a way of saying 'humankind'--in all of its global scope and divine depths."

Finally, there is "The Politics of Hope," concluding with a philosophical political-science chapter on "The Prophetic Stance," which Tinder has related to community and church in earlier books and capsules for a climax here. There is also an epilogue on barbarism and the future of civilization. Tinder quotes Psalm 104:15, praising actualities such as "food and drink in moderation," when "food is seen as bread given by God and drink as wine intended by God, in the psalmist's words, 'to gladden the heart of man.'" I told you he wasn't a grump.

So he celebrates "the dignity of the individual; the value of truth . . .; and, finally, the value of community, symbolized in Christian discourse as the kingdom of heaven." Tinder may not have lured agnostic readers into entertaining theism or Christian faith as a component in civilization, but he has at least shown them what it looks like or could look like. "Since hope is for and in God, being possessed by hope leads naturally to the belief that values are disclosures of the eternal foundations of life and govern the unfoldment of life. Values are seen as sources of destiny. Their role in forming conduct is thus greatly enhanced by hope."

And hope is greatly enhanced by a book like this, a book which I hope people will track down. It is a book worth reading slowly and pondering, a book that, while never difficult, is always thoughtful and demanding, a book that takes a lifetime to live into and up to.