

The thing with feathers

1 Peter says we should always be ready to give a reason for hope. Always?

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1 Peter 3:15 says that we should always be ready to give a reason for the hope that lies within. Always ready? Always a reason? It's a tall order. Recently I had a chance to make the attempt, as part of a panel on the theme of hope.

I started off with an innocent assumption: that hope is by definition the antithesis of despair (which comes from the Old French *despoir*, meaning entire want of hope). This gave my thinking a dramatic cast: I thought of the divine power that rushes in when all seems lost, that rescues the psalmist from the pit of Sheol, the drunkard from the gutter, and the suicidal person from the precipice. I identified Christian hope with the Magnificat of Mary and Hannah, and with Abraham's hope against hope (Rom. 4:18). I looked for hope in the "eucatastrophe"—J. R. R. Tolkien's term—a sudden turn of events that bursts the bonds of enslavement and summons tears of joy. I saw the reason for hope, and hope's paradigm, in the death and resurrection of Christ, the prince of life. All this led me to the idea that there's no room for natural optimism or stoic self-reliance in a Christian understanding of hope.

But that's where I went wrong. In making a sharp distinction between natural optimism and supernatural hope, I had forgotten the scholastic adage that "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it." I had forgotten that when Emily Dickinson calls hope "the thing with feathers," she means to link the Holy Spirit to the common sparrow. Back home, however, a series of distressing, if not catastrophic, events forced me to think again. An elderly family member with Alzheimer's was incapacitated after a fall in her apartment, and we became responsible for her care. Unfinished work mounted up, we had taxes to do, and we felt all the swarming nibbling host of worries that fray the nerves without sinking the soul. I would be an ungrateful sod if I thought such trials anything exceptional.

Yet Christian hope pertains to the lesser as well as the greater trials of our life. The short petition that follows the Lord's Prayer in the Roman eucharistic rite expresses the idea beautifully: "In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." Christ entered and exited the world under the same banner: "Fear not" (Luke 1 and 2) and "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). With the surpassing gift of salvation comes an offer of protection from anxiety, provided we are open to it.

The question is, how to be open to it? Philosophers distinguish two kinds of hope: intentional (hoping for a certain outcome) and dispositional (a hopeful outlook). Dispositional hope, like other habits of the heart, may be inborn in some lucky souls, but it is also a trait that can be nurtured and trained. Prayer, suffering, loving service, remembrance of the dead—all these are schools for the practice of hope, according to Pope Benedict's recent encyclical *Spe salvi*. And there may be other preliminary schoolroom exercises as well.

So, being school-minded, I took up my notebook with the resolve of strengthening my hopeful disposition by recording, each night, one good thing that happened during the day. A rather lame positive-thinking regimen, I must admit; but I've come to think that little tricks of this sort can be part of a Christian schooling in hope. Of course, hope has its deeper foundation in the cross and the empty tomb, the promised Comforter and the coming kingdom, but a proper preparation for this astonishing gift is to train the heart, as the wise virgins do, in joyful response.

I've seen the effects of such lifelong training in the face of our family member who suffers from Alzheimer's. As she daily loses ground her soul appears, almost visibly, like a thing with feathers half-perched on her frail, diminutive body. "It will be a wedding," she said, when we told her she would soon be coming to live near us. Smiling knowingly at our 12-year-old, she told him why he could expect to turn 13 at the end of May: "It's only because people *like* you. That's why good things like this happen." Odd as these statements are, I've never heard a more convincing reason for the hope that lies within: the reason for hope is love. Habitual exercise of a loving disposition has left her with one clear thought to express, and that thought is love.

A wise nun recently told me of a prioress who urged her novices to start practicing in their 20s to be nice old ladies. It's the only way to be sure of being a nice old lady when the time comes.

Pace Tolkien, Christian hope is not always eucatastrophic. A milder, more quotidian kind of hopefulness is schooled by every small chance we take to find in others and be for others an "other Christ."