

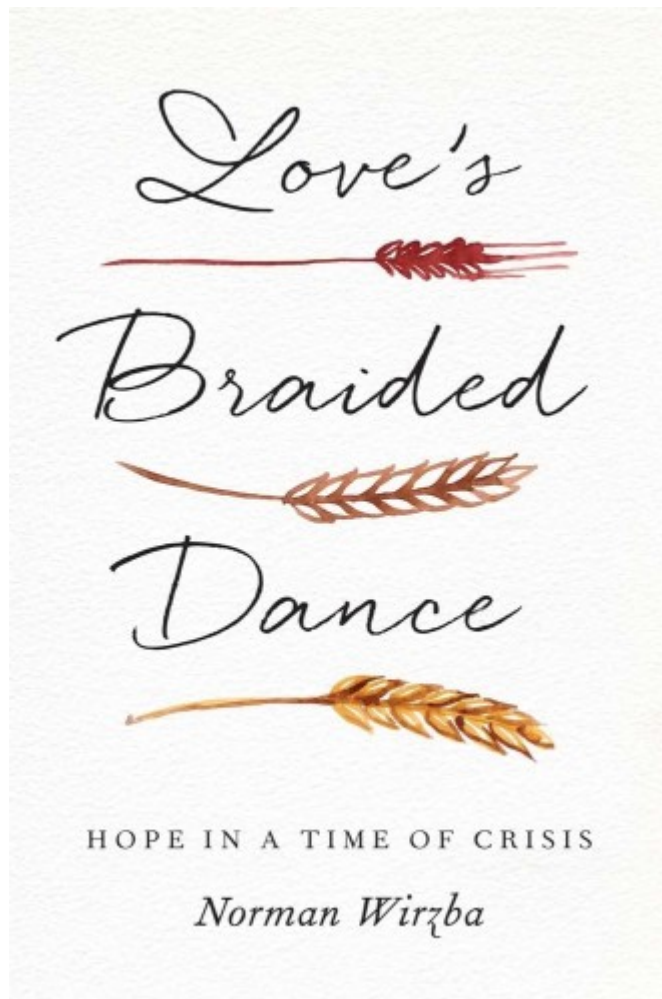
Hope as an act of love

Theologian Norman Wirzba's account of hope is compelling precisely because it is so grounded in harsh reality.

by [Lilia Ellis](#) in the [February 2025](#) issue

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## In Review



### Love's Braided Dance

Love's Braided Dance

By Norman Wirzba

Yale University Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In recent decades, apathy and despair have come to permeate the global mood. From climate change to the rise of anti-democratic movements, it is tempting to tell the same story: things are getting worse with each passing day. Hope—traditionally a Christian virtue—appears to be on shaky ground. But maybe hope is not as distant as it seems. Maybe if we better understand hope, we can work toward growing it together. This is the argument Norman Wirzba makes in his reflective new book, *Love's Braided Dance*.

Wirzba, a theologian at Duke Divinity School who works on ecological and agrarian issues, sketches a bold vision of hope not as a naive belief that things will get better, but as a shared act of love. Drawing from a series of real and hard-hitting stories across the globe—the global refugee crisis, apartheid South Africa, and the sexual violence following World War II, to name a few—Wirzba's book is less a systematic account and more a kaleidoscope that reveals “the experiences and journeys” of hope for different people and places. By that measure, *Love's Braided Dance* is a clear success, proving the possibility of hope and charting a way forward for our seemingly desperate times.

Although Wirzba's topic is hope, he is no starry-eyed optimist. While most people tend to think of optimism and hope as synonyms, *Love's Braided Dance* aims to shatter this notion. Optimism, Wirzba says, “often works against hope” as it downplays injustice and assumes the horrors of the world will go away on their own. Hope, on the other hand, is “a way of being in which people commit themselves to the healing of our wounded world and, in so doing, communicate a future that is worth striving for.” True to this distinction, Wirzba confronts story after story of injustice and grief. He treats each story with great care, handling trauma with respect for the people involved and an insistence that we must work together to build a better world. Heavy as these stories may be, a life-affirming vision of hope emerges from them, proclaiming the goodness of creation in the face of horror. Wirzba's account of hope is compelling precisely because it is so grounded in harsh reality. Readers who have grief and trauma of their own can take comfort in Wirzba's vision, which stands as a powerful antidote to the easy greeting-card hope that papers over pain.

*Love's Braided Dance* pays particular attention to the earth's role in sustaining hope. Ecological devastation is among the most despair-inducing crises of our time, and Wirzba's account makes a broad case for the connection between hope and land. The "remedy for a broken, lonely, and commodified world," Wirzba says, is to "nurture the places and creatures that nurture us." That's a task easier said than done, he admits, but it's one brimming with life. For Wirzba, the earth is a living being. It nurtures, it is wounded, it forgives, and it takes care of us—so long as we take care of it. Wirzba's passion for ecology is palpable, and the love he encourages for the earth is moving. His ecological insights are a true strength of the book, offering a perspective beyond the policy and lifestyle changes we typically turn to as solutions for the environmental crisis.

Central to hope, Wirzba maintains, is a communal way of life. *Love's Braided Dance* is in part a paean for our common existence. Wirzba rails against the individualism that has come to define American culture: while our economy and society lift up the self-made person, he says, "everything about people suggests that they are created for resonant relationships." He imagines "a hopeful economy" which "respects the life-giving relationships that join people to each other." His treatment of community is by no means groundbreaking, but it is powerful nonetheless. Locating hope in the collective takes away the burden on individuals to muster hope alone. And the stories Wirzba has selected—from a terminally ill man finding support in his church to farmers seeking reconciliation with Indigenous peoples—offer vivid examples of what it means for us to develop hope together.

While Wirzba's perspectives are timely and engaging, readers might wish for more explicit God-talk in the book. *Love's Braided Dance* draws more from literature, sociology, and philosophy than from scripture or theology. Hope and love abound, and yet faith is largely absent. In sticking to a somewhat secular account of hope, Wirzba can offer wisdom for Christians and non-Christians alike; yet wisdom grounded in particular traditions also has its place in speaking to times of crisis. Wirzba's passing mentions of scripture and theology offer a tantalizing glimpse of what that might look like.

*Love's Braided Dance* offers hope for hard times. It is, in places, a difficult book to read, grappling seriously with the real trauma and violence of life. Yet it is strikingly honest, and in its honesty it can speak to readers who fear for the future amid our fraught present landscape. In a culture all too familiar with cheap, saccharine hope, Wirzba offers a refreshing reminder of the future we can build together.