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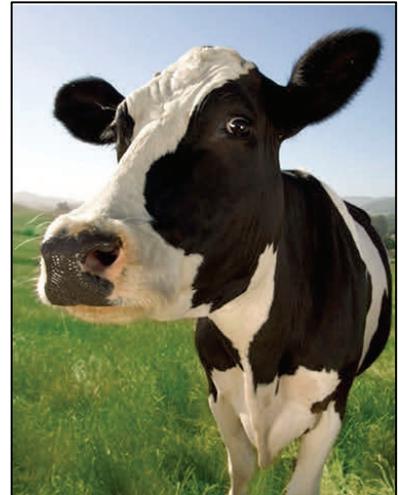
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Got Hope? Adventures in Holy Imagination

by Christine Betz Hall

“Got milk?” the billboards proclaimed. The ads promised smiling faces, healthy teeth and bones, and even happy cows. What if *hope* were so easily guzzled as a glass of milk? Hope is supposed to be good for you. Hope makes you strong and joyful, even if cows’ milk curdles your guts. I’ve been puzzled. Why can’t we simply “get hope?” Why do so many struggle with fear, discouragement and despair? Some of my sensibilities about *hope* are changing.

I’m not satisfied with cheap optimism or bury-my-head-in-the-sand denial. The world is in turmoil. Natural disasters, epidemics, and endemic violence invite us to stand with those who suffer. How do I stand with *hope* after I send my donation to the Red Cross? That requires a pretty sturdy type of *hope*. People I know are in crisis, confronting death, loss, and major life disappointments. Some of them are thrashing in the turmoil, and others are buoyant with *hope* through it all. Their *hope* is resilient and tenacious. Or how do I face the darkness in my own soul with courage and yes, *hope*? A gentler and more patient face of *hope* shines on those flaws and failings. All these *hopes* point to a spiritual orientation beyond cheery denial or airy bliss.



I used to think it was a character flaw that I saw the glass (of milk?) half empty. Perhaps if I was more optimistic, if I believed or thought in more positive ways, I’d be more hopeful. Psychological shifts were helpful, but didn’t generate lasting *hope*. I used to imagine if I trusted more in God, I wouldn’t worry so much. That feels closer to True, but fears and anxiety continue as my trust grows. I’m thirsty for a *hope* that sees and lives out of a different reality altogether. It get glimpses these days . . . the kind of *hope* that animated Nelson

Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day or Julian of Norwich, who knew in her bones that “all shall be well.” Where does that radical spiritual *hope* come from, since I can’t drink it out of a glass?

The *hope* I’ve found is a way of seeing. My own eyesight is more limited than I realized, both physically and spiritually. I’ve missed the many seeds of Grace thrown extravagantly by a Wacky Sower into the nooks and crannies of my days, saying “*Look! Notice that one blessing popping up through the mess? Pay attention there!*” (Mark 4) My spiritual eyes have been opened many times to the More of what a generous God might see. The biggest eye-opener happened after learning I couldn’t get pregnant. I was tangled in shame and doubt when a cousin dragged me to an adoption agency. Jim and I brought our son home nine months later. I notice lesser Graces daily—the beauty of the mountains, the listening

ear of a friend, the hug of that same son. Attention sparks gratitude. Gratitude encourages more awareness, and grows hopeful anticipation of that which I couldn't possibly imagine. It's "too good to be true."

Often I've needed other people to see *hope* for me. In 2010, I nearly gave up on starting the *Way of the Spirit* program. Feeling very discouraged and full of complaints, I attended a conference where an acquaintance offered to convene a support committee for me through her Quaker meeting. Another person jumped at the chance to join the effort. The next year, I became a Good News Associate, gaining a wider circle to nurture and help launch the program that's four years strong now. Or turning the tables, once I helped carry *hope* for a friend who couldn't fathom it. She was pregnant and very sick well into the seventh month. In her misery, she wept and a circle of friends blessed and carried hope for her and that precious babe. He's sixteen now, active in his faith community, and writing letters to the editor about climate change. Who could imagine that but God?

I've learned that *Hope* isn't something I can manufacture in myself or "get" directly. Instead of grabbing at *hope*, like reaching for a desert mirage, I'm asked to wait to receive it like a gift that bubbles from an Inner Spring. I tend to that hidden Source with spiritual awareness. I prepare to receive *hope* by letting go of my expectations, my fears, my way . . . I welcome the Holy into the mess I see or feel. I practice, practice, and practice some more at releasing my limited vision. I ask, "Where are you in this, God?" In Spanish, *hope* is the same word as "wait"—esperar. I wait for true *hope* around that Inner Upwelling, because my heart is filled, sated, and nurtured to Life in that *hope*.

Do you see that a key to *hope* for me is recognizing how Divine thoughts are not my thoughts (Isaiah 5:8)? I trust my own imagination less than I used to. I wait to join God's imagination, despite what seems "real" to me (or terrifying or hopeless) in the here and now. Walter Breuggeman, writing of the Hebrew prophets, calls their *hope* the result of "obedient" or surrendered imagination. That's how Isaiah could promise a peaceable kingdom where "the lion lies down with the lamb" (Isaiah 11). Or how Isaiah, Micah and Joel could wax poetic over beating "swords into plowshares" in the midst of war and oppression (Micah 4). Outrageous *hope*!

On retreat with the *Way of the Spirit* program, we take up experiments in surrendered imagination. Creative reflections help broaden participants' spiritual vision. We try collage, prayer doodles, praying with images and moving our bodies; we write some poetry. Insights come, newness tumbles and dances in our hearts. *Hope* rises. People are changed. We can't predict "results," but the adventure is entirely worthwhile.

What would you do with unfettered *hope*? It is free and available to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear. It's cheaper than milk too.



Creative prayer on retreat with *Way of the Spirit*.
Photo courtesy of Chris Hall.

The *Way of the Spirit* program fosters *hope* through retreats and study in the wisdom of the Quaker tradition of Spirit-led service. Apply this summer for 2016 program cycle beginning February 12-15, 2016 in Mt. Angel, OR. Imagine the possibilities: <http://goodnewsassoc.org/spirit/>.



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