

The Practice of Hope in the Here and Now

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Abstract

In these dark times, we're often challenged to sustain a sense of hopefulness. I see this especially in younger scholars, with whom I sometimes collaborate, and who despair of ever seeing a more just world. In conversation with them I find myself advocating for a balance between our commitments to big-picture changes and participation in smaller, local projects. These latter can provide immediate, sustaining satisfactions. Without abandoning our more ambitious dreams, defined, proximate goals allow us space to experience a modulated or educated hope that works in the present to move us forward to a better future.

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At 79, I've arrived at middle-old age: the stage of life after we make our peace with becoming old, no longer weighed down with the personal and professional responsibilities of middle age, but before we endure the frailties of the oldest-old that turn some aside from active engagement with the world. A time too when many of my former Early Childhood colleagues have retired from the field and taken up residence in enviable places with family and good books to accompany them in the penultimate period of life.ⁱⁱ

Questioning how, if at all, to find a way forward in a career of writing and educational research, I have begun collaborating with younger scholars. To be sure, in the past I've considered collaboration a much over rated practice, one that resulted in increased work and patience for complicated social connectivities that it required. But no longer keeping up with the latest theoretical fashions and program descriptions, I wondered what if anything I had to contribute or might learn that would hold my attention and speak to the moment.

From the outset, our conversations have proven lively, drawing me away from the dangers of solipsism and into new points of view. I'm brought up short, however, by the despair of the next generation of scholars over escalating social injustice around the world and the impermeability of U.S. educational systems to change.

I, too, experienced dark times during my younger years, my memories vivid with newsreels decrying the threats posed by the cold war in the 1950s, watching the Army-McCarthy Hearings on our tiny Admiral TV screen, and practicing for air raids that sent us scurrying from our fourth-floor classroom into the sub-basement of the aging building that housed my elementary school. A decade later, as a young gay man, I knew the violence of police raids on the bars that I frequented on the far West Side of Manhattan, and in the 1980s and '90s, I lived and worked through the worst of the AIDS epidemic that decimated my social world.

Yet today, I have become the hopeful one, the one who turns attention to even the smallest programs that hold the promise of a better future. I find myself the voice of hopefulness amid a chorus of discouragement, turning on its head the stereotype of optimistic, forward-looking younger people and cynical, disappointed older folks. I don't know when and how I found my voice for a canny, educated hope that heralds the

smallest glimmers of light in an otherwise bleak social landscape. Where does hope come from on the cusp of the ninth decade?

Hope is always a slippery if necessary state of mind. For me, it has arrived late in life, as I was detaching from the ambitions of midlife and re-attaching to a sense of Jewish belongingness—not because it promised immortality, as some religions do, but because it was a path to a richer, more mindful present. A welcome surprise in the wake of our worried world, this new practice of hope links me to people and ideas from other times and places.

My curiosity about social identities began as a Harvard undergraduate when I had the good fortune to study with Erik Erikson, grandfather of contemporary theories of psychosocial development. In 1961, the gray-haired, tweed-jacketed, and German-accented Erikson presided over an experimental freshman seminar series, surrounded by admiring graduate students. Erikson is best known for having posited eight tasks to be addressed at key points across the life span, beginning with Trust vs. Mistrust and ending with Ego Integrity vs. Despair. Although he understood these tasks to be universal, his thinking was capacious in its recognition of cultural differences and of the unique ways that individuals meet these developmental challenges.

At 17, identity seemed to me a personal matter of emergence from the constraints of childhood and family and into adult life. I could not have imagined that a decade later I would have shed my high-school identity as a homosexual in hiding and emerged with an uncompromising sense of myself as a gay man and an active participant in proto-clone culture. As feminists were teaching and lived experience was confirming, the personal had become political, private angst transformed into socio-political struggle. In retrospect, I see this shift as a first indication that hope might be found as much in the battle as the outcome, the connection with others it fostered as much as in individual achievement.

More recently I have experienced for myself, and seen in others, hopefulness emerge from several collaborative writing projects that were proceeding by deep, layered conversations that moved fluidly among immediate political concerns, focused professional questions, and personal stories reflecting our daily lives. In the process we were all changed, energized and recommitted to the work of social reconstruction. I learned that collaboration might be more about our moment to moment existential realities than about the production of a finished product, more about how we prompt, push and provoke each other into generous and expansive understandings of human experience rather than affirmations of long held points of view.

I identify the recent shift within me as a move toward hope, the kind specifically that comes from “feeling historical,” a phrase that I first encountered in Christopher Nealon’s (2001) description of the struggle of gay people in the 20th century to establish meaningful identities. Then, leaving behind a sense of isolation and pathology, gay people began to recognize connection and community with others like themselves on the margins. Today, when I step back and place my personal story in the context of broader social narratives, I know I am becoming historical.

In feeling historical, I reject the Scylla of defensiveness when we wield history as rationale or excuses for what we did or didn’t do, and the Charybdis of nostalgia when we look through rose-tinted glasses. Feeling historical, I try to navigate a more even-keeled trip through the past that docks at what Eric Erickson termed ego integrity.

Erikson (1982, p. 65) describes the final life challenge as “finding a sense of ego integrity rather than succumbing to despair”. Erikson (1950, p. 268) writes that ego integrity is “the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be.” It allows

us to recognize that we have had a life well-lived and to jettison regrets and self-recriminations.

Feeling historical brings a heightened attention to the larger currents of human events that frame our lives and complements Erikson's psychosocial perspective. Looking back, I see that I was not as in control as my younger self imagined, nor as special as my middle-class privilege often led me to believe. Not in control, not special, and yet hopeful when I see the opportunities open to young queer people that I could not even have imagined in my 20s, 30s, and 40s. Hopeful, too, because when I married David, my second life-partner, and had to put down roots in a new city, I was able to find a thriving LGBTQ+ welcoming synagogue that left spiritual questions up to its individual members (Silin, 2016).

In recent conversations with my younger colleagues, I have come to see that while despair is most commonly linked to paralysis and withdrawal from the world, it can also be a prompt to action and engagement. This has led me to be more explicit in pointing out that we have survived dark times before and that there is comfort in the long view, with allowing ourselves to feel historical. This isn't to eschew looking at devastating inequities in the present, but it is to temper more ambitious ideas about the future and to insist on a balance between our commitments to big picture changes with participation in smaller, local projects that provide immediate, sustaining satisfactions that are essential to moving forward.

In the Jewish tradition repair of the world, *tikun olam*, is understood to be inextricably linked to *tikun atzmi*, or repair of the self. This understanding should be self-evident to all early childhood educators who know that in order to be successful caregivers of others we must also take care of ourselves. I am arguing that a critical part of the care of self may be sustaining work in the here and now that brings us a sense of personal satisfaction and success. *Tikun olam* and *tikun atzmi* are not linear processes but rather held in tension, the one contained within the other.

I am only too aware that many are far from hopeful in middle-old age, undone by social injustices or marked by personal tragedy. In particular, my African-American and transgender colleagues have good reason to mistrust the contemporary world. They risk potential violence in their daily lives that I do not. At that same time, I hope that my younger colleagues can realize that a sense of wholeness, of ego integrity, is buttressed when we modulate our personal ambitions working for a better world with feeling historical in the face of the ineluctable challenges of a society run amok. I hope too that I can convey the value of allowing an educated hope to be our guide in moving toward the future.

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