

February 18, 2024-ABQ

Thriving Together The Rev. Christine Robinson

Introduction

Well, I hope we got those puppets on their way to thriving again. It was hard to see them so down, wasn't it? And they did so well through the pandemic! Maybe like some of us. It's hard to feel good with all the problems and worries we have right now, but we need to work on it; it's an important part of our lives. We sing a hymn sometimes, called, "For all that is our life," which posits as the basis of a human life, "to build a common good and make our own days glad." Those are not two distinct things: we're not as glad as we might be without a common good, and building the common good is one of the things that makes us glad...that helps us thrive.

The media teaches us that Thriving means being young and healthy and fit and beautiful and accomplished, financially secure and smiling with straight, white teeth. We are bombarded with images and stories about this kind of thriving, and it is sometimes hard to have any other picture in our minds about thriving. But those pictures are misleading and incomplete. Thriving is a big umbrella. Some poor people thrive, and plenty of rich people don't. Some kids with adverse childhood experiences thrive anyway. It is possible to thrive without a college education. It is possible to thrive while incarcerated, though we make it a lot harder than it should be. It is possible to thrive with poor health, major disabilities, or while terminally ill. I learned about the big umbrella of thriving from my friend Peg.

Peg and I shared a music stand for four years as oboe majors at the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory of Music...the last stand, as we were the lowest performing oboists in the program. We became friends, and stayed friends through the many phases of our lives, until her death three years ago.

My low-performing in my college years had to do with insufficient musical talent. Hers had to do with major physical disabilities, disabilities which became progressively more challenging over the years. When she graduated from college she graduated to an electric wheelchair. When she left her parent's home for a graduate program, she hired her first full-time caregiver. At 40 she became dependent on a ventilator. None-the less, she absolutely thrived. In 2005, during a time of great public interest in issues of 'artificial life support' and pulling the plug, and after reading one too many letters to the editor about what makes life worth living, Peg wrote an op ed piece for the Houston Chronicle. Here's part of it:

Reader: As I type these words, a ventilator gently pushes air into my lungs, I sit comfortably in my motorized wheelchair while a removable sling suspends my arm over the keyboard, and a woman I hired sits in another room of my house ironing and ready to respond should I call for assistance. I am taking a break from the articles I am writing on the results of my research, all while in blissful appreciation of the house I have remodeled to meet all of my accessibility and aesthetic needs, the computer that opens my doorway to the universe, the people who do for me what my own body cannot, and the children and loved ones who fill my life with energy direct from God. I simply cannot imagine how anyone could label this lifestyle as not worth living.

Let us agree, once and for all, that life is not defined by physical functioning. Money is the real artificial life support; if you have it, you can have access to medical science and the personal assistance you need to compensate for any physical impairment. It is our mental functioning that enables us to accommodate

the ever-changing physical and social context in which we live. It is our minds that enable us to receive and give love and joy, but even with extensive impairments of mental functioning, love and joy can still be experienced. It is when all ability to love and relate to others is gone that the value of living comes into question.

In my own advance directive, I have specified that I want all possible interventions that would sustain my physical existence, and when I no longer have the capacity to communicate by any means or respond in any way to those around me, then and only then do I want the artificial life support that has sustained me for the past 15 years to be turned off. To all those into whose hands my life may someday fall, know this: I WANT TO LIVE.

The subscript of this op-ed piece reads:

Dr. Margaret A. Nosek is Executive Director of the Center for Research on Women with Disabilities and Professor in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine. Her physical limitations are the result of congenital spinal muscular atrophy.

Hope

You can google “how to thrive” and get a thousand links to articles and blogs and youtubes that will tell you to eat well, sleep enough, get your exercise, cultivate relationships, nurture your self esteem, keep good boundaries. Even go to church, which many studies show has a considerable statistical correlation to thriving, apparently because of the combined advantages of the focus of religious communities on hope and meaning, and on the way they gather and nurture community..and build a common good. And it is all pretty good advice, especially the “go to church” part(!)

But, it is all pretty focused on that image of the individual thriver, the beautiful, competent, healthy, successful person who mostly did it all by themselves. It’s a myth...none of us did it all by ourselves. And, it needs to be said that the greatest deterrents to more people thriving are social in nature, and by no means evenly distributed across the population.

- grinding poverty and war and street drugs and the lack of enough affordable housing.
- Racism and sexism and other kinds of prejudice contribute to lack of thriving and are extra burdens on those who are struggling.
- Childhood abuse and trauma which leave scars so deep they affect our very genes.
- Not to mention sheer bad luck and living in troubled times.

We could go on and on, but you know all this. Some people have a much easier route to thriving than others, and that’s not fair. If you feel you are thriving, congratulations and....you have a lot to be grateful for. If you are not, don’t add self-blame to your burdens. Just do what you need to do, one step at a time. And if you think you might have tipped over into depression, please, reach out for help.

One of the things that we need to thrive is a little too woo-woo for Google, and that is that we need to nurture our hope. Without hope, we have to choose between despair and a sort of fake thriving best characterized as “eat, drink and be merry in cheerful oblivion to the problems of the world”. And that might be cheery, but it’s not thriving, because it is not faithful to our values. Since nothing we do can solve the world’s problems, or even seem to everyone like the right way to start solving the world’s problems, we do what we can and live by hope.

We sometimes think that hope is a gift of temperament..a careless belief that everything will work out over time. But hope is more complicated than that. Hope is not that “things will work out.”..that is, by themselves without intervention. Imagining that this global warming thing is just some sort of a coincidental blip of nature that will soon go back to normal is not hope, it is cockeyed optimism, which is a form of denial. But hope is something else. Hope is that things can CHANGE. Change if we change. Change when our institutions change. Change if we pay for it, learn about it, focus on it, if we work for it.

Hope about climate change, say, is hope that some combination of

- human ingenuity,
- nations and institutions deciding to be a part of the solution rather than part of the problem
- individuals buckling down to live satisfying lives in a new way,
- and a whole bunch of things that we don't yet know, good and bad,

Will bring us to a new place in which human thriving is possible...maybe very different from now. Maybe better than now. Maybe not...but humans are actually pretty good at thriving...done so for thousands of years of change that has not always been for the better. We humans thrive in so many situations that it seems that we are built to thrive.

The choir is going to sing us a song about hope, the virtue, and some of the mental disciplines it takes keep hope lingering in our lives, no matter what...

“Hope Lingers On.”

Keeping that kind of hope about the troubles of the world...that's work. It's a virtue, actually, in the thinking of many faiths...in Christianity, for instance, it is paired with Faith and Love as things we should all be working to embody in our lives. And...you don't just hope to live a virtuous life, do you? You work at it... discipline yourself to obey the laws, be kind to those around you, to share. Being good is easier for some than others but almost everybody works at it. Hope is the same way. Some people find it easier than others, but we all need to find it. You challenge your cynicism, you get going with the things that need to be done. You remember that you don't know everything...hope....you really don't! you hone your skills of living lightly, of not scapegoating others, mastering your fear, keeping an open place in your heart for the good outcome. That's a life of hope.

We live through uncertain times and negative trends with hope, and because we hope, we do our bit to help and to live in to the world we hope for. This is not denial. We're not blocking out or denying our fears. Those are versions of living a lie, and that's at best, fake thriving. Whatever thriving we do has to be right along side of the troubles of the world, with clear-eyed understanding we have problems, that we contribute to some of them whether we want to or not, just by living in this society, that there is nothing we can do by ourselves or even with our friends to solve these problems, and that the things we do to help are drops in the bucket or mostly symbolic in their effect. OK. Bring on the drops. Wave the symbols. Use your resources to live into the new world. I'm experimenting with shampoo bars this week. Works pretty well. One less plastic bottle, toting mostly water around the planet. A small victory.

A drop in the bucket...that gives me hope, perhaps, eventually the bucket will tip into the dawning new world.

It often has. People can bring about astounding change...

- The end of slavery, a particularly evil economic system, and we know how incredibly tenacious economic systems are.
- How women have moved closer, almost everywhere, to enjoying the freedoms men take for granted after thousands of years of oppression.
- In our time, how the Gay rights movement came out of the AIDS crisis.

There are plenty of reasons to hope that as a species, we will continue to thrive. The fact that we don't know how is just a problem we need to solve.

To be hopeless is to lose sight of the power of goodness and the impulse to survive and grow which is a part of every cell in our bodies. It is to hang on to the conceit that we know everything. It is also to have a small definition of the word, "thrive." To have hope is to have the emotional discipline to keep a place in our heart for the seemingly impossible good outcome and for the ways that human beings make good and worthy lives out of little beyond enough to eat and each other.

If you want to thrive in this troubled world with a clear-eyed understanding of all of it, you need hope. If you want to thrive in this world in which we are all connected, with integrity, you are also doing what you can to help.

I'm sure you already do. You do good work, volunteer your time, look after your family and friends and neighbors, support good causes. You vote...I know your passions! You recycle your paper, smile at grocery checkers and waitstaff

You do your part. Maybe you could do more? Since doing your part, being a part of the solution feeds your hope, maybe doing more would not only bring more goodness into the world but make your life better. Or...maybe not. Only you know.

So. Eat your vegetables, Tend your people. Come to church. Do your bit. We live in troubled times? We ALWAYS live in troubled times... We thrive, anyway.