

Hope and Delusion: critical storytelling for difficult times

1. Greetings and acknowledgements

- Welcome and thank you to participants and to Pari for its commitment to bringing people together in this manner and supporting their local community
- Acknowledging the fact of being here:
 - The element of **choice**
 - Making a **wise use** of our resources
 - In **Buddhism**, the first step towards a reassessment of our **relationship with suffering**
 - In **Western philosophy**, recasting the old **freedom vs determination** argument as a question about being **victims or agents**

Word association game

What comes up for you when you hear the word 'hope'?

- **Why we are here:** *we are beset with alternatives, and we want to find a way through (the Trickster play)*

2. The optics of choice

- So much hinges not on whether we have a choice, but **whether we think we have a choice**

Do you think you have the power of choice, and if not, at what point in your experience do you think you lose that power?

- Obvious fact that extreme situations raise serious **questions about the power of choice** (victims of abuse, refugees)
- The courage to face alternatives: a question of compassion, not judgment, because no one can prepare us for our own lives — **we are all amateurs, and alone with our experience**
- *The narrative of aloneness is not the whole story:* beyond **dualistic thinking** (this is my story and this is all it is given to me to know) there is the possibility of **integrative thinking** (there is another side to my story, i.e. there is always help to be found)
- If help is what we need, our task is first to understand that that is the case, and then to figure out how to ask for it
- **The power of asking for help** is more than simply finding solutions to problems: it shows that we have the courage to enter into dialogue with our own mystery
- Gabriel Marcel, **problem vs mystery:** life is a series of problems but mystery is the amniotic fluid that protects and nourishes us

3. More dualities

- *Free will vs determinism*: entry-level philosophy that reinforces the perception that life is one long series of irresolvable problems; in fact it is a false problem because both are both true and false
- *Muscular vs soft*, attributed to Aristotle and Plato (empirical vs ideal); *decent vs indecent*, used to describe a fundamental responses of people experiencing extreme levels of debasement
- *Useful vs unuseful* applied to hope and whether it genuinely helps us in our struggles
- My position with Frankl: **hope is key**, it is a flame we have to keep lit through **right action and conduct**

We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us
— Frankl, 85

- There is **no meaning** to be sought in life that is not related to our own **specific struggle** to come to terms with life
- Frankl quotes Dostoevsky's single greatest dread (75): to not be worthy of his sufferings

4. Camus' happy human

- Camus, the human condition and the **philosophy of the absurd**: the deep human need to find meaning and the unreasonable silence of the universe
- Camus' idea of a happy human was **Sisyphus**, the King of Ephyra (Corinth) who cheated death twice and was punished with the fated boulder
- Frankl: *the prisoners had a whole lot of **suffering to get through**, and the survivors were generally those who got on with it*
- Camus' rejection of religious and political, or utopian hope (dictatorial), especially the religious insistence on after-life and salvation narratives
- The unexpected twist in Camus' story: the impossibility of living without hope
- Camus, and Gabriel Marcel's "strange hope": no anticipation for a specific event (the problematic "I hope that...") but rather a strange sense that *everything is not necessarily lost* (the absolute, or mysteric "I hope.")
- Even Camus came to an impasse in his thinking about hope (letter to a friend), a split between a philosophical stance and raw experience

5. The thing with feathers

- The strangeness in the experience: redeeming Emily Dickinson's poem from its role as ornament to more important messages
- Dickinson was a woman, daughter to a prominent, if not wealthy family of Puritan descent in Amherst, Massachusetts

- She was famously reclusive, considered eccentric, and did not publish the bulk of her work in her lifetime

I am small, like the wren, and my hair is bold, like the chestnut bur, and my eyes like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves.

- Her poetry is a deeply charged chiaroscuro — sharp light and deep darkneses
- Three quatrains, hymnal meter, iambic rhythm suggestive of song that never ceases

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers —
That perches in the soul —
And sings the tune without the words —
And never stops — at all —*

*And sweetest — in the Gale — is heard —
And sore must be the storm —
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm —*

*I’ve heard it in the chillest land —
And on the strangest Sea —
Yet — never — in Extremity,
It asked a crumb — of me.*

- Elsewhere, Emily Dickinson has said of hope that it is “a strange invention” about which nothing is known apart from its “unique momentum” that embellishes all we own
- Hope is powerful, wild and airborne; impervious to the elements, it brings us **warmth in dark** times, as Viktor Frankl himself so frequently pointed out
- Gift-giver, the Pandora of pre-Hellenic times
- The Galadriel in the human heart, demanding high standards but passionately protecting her own
- Hope will not stop singing: **it is a call, not an excuse**
- The celestial beauty of the Christian idea and the problem it conceals
 - My own trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau and the concreteness of Frankl’s message: *there is no abstract meaning to be found in life or after-life, rather there is the reality that lies before us*
 - We look into the challenges we face to discover the **nature of our task**, not as something grandiose and meta-existential, but as something that guides us from day to day, tapping our resources at each and every moment and encouraging us to look and see what we have to give
 - Frankl’s memory of a foreman giving him a piece of bread: not just the **gift** that brought the tears, but also the **word** and **look** that accompanied them (p.95)

6. The Buddhist perspective

- In many Buddhist circles, hope features in a kind of unholy alliance with fear
- Thanissaro Bikkhu, 'All About Change':

How can we find genuine hope in the prospect of positive change if we can't fully rest in the results when they arrive?

- Pema Chödrön, 'Hopelessness and Fear', *When Things Fall Apart* (ch.7)
 - To give up hope that the pain and insecurity can be exterminated is to give up the quest for meaning
 - Viktor Frankl, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel — in fact anyone who has looked into these matters can agree that meaning is not a quest in itself, but something we may discover when we learn to turn to the task in hand
 - In Frankl's observation, the only way out was through, not away from, and a clear acceptance of the fact that the 'out' is by no means guaranteed; in fact that the 'out' was not even necessarily the objective: he talks a lot about the loss or retention of our dignity
- In the monastery the monks renounced alcohol and sex not because they were bad in themselves, but because they are babysitters that save us from dealing with our personal issues; likewise, hope is an addiction to the idea that we can be saved from ourselves

When we talk about hopelessness and death, we're talking about facing the facts. No escapism. We may still have addictions of all kinds, but we cease to believe in them as a gateway to happiness

- Chödrön is compelling, and reading her I feel that old call of something familiar that was of great comfort to me in my own difficult times, that sense of calling, even, *but I can't get beyond her use of this word 'hopelessness'*
- What I think about when I think of hopelessness: Frankl's description of the prisoner who has given up; Dante's treatment of hope in the *Inferno*

What do we say to people in these circumstances?

MAYBE THAT PRISONER HAD SIMPLY COME TO THE END OF HIS CALLING; MAYBE HIS DEATH, DESPITE THE HORROR OF APPEARANCES, WAS NOT A DEFEAT AT ALL, BUT A FINAL ACT OF ACCEPTANCE. WE WHO STAND WITNESS TO HIS DEATH AND ARE CALLED TO LIVE ON STILL HAVE MANY OPEN QUESTIONS TO COPE WITH. IF I AM ALIVE NOW, WHAT DOES MY LIFE EXPECT OF ME?

7. Summing up

- Viktor Frankl, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, like Pema Chödrön, all understand the importance of **lived experience** as our surest compass in navigating life's often choppy waters
- It is important for us sometimes to stop and reflect on what it is that our experience is asking of us; or if our experience is already long, what it is about our experience that we can offer to

others as a form of **critical storytelling** in which we help others gain some perspective on their own experiences

CRITICAL QUESTION BREAKOUT

Pairs, 8 minutes speaking and listening, 2 minutes conversation

I am alive, so what is it that life expects of me?

Focus on **personal experience** rather than what you have read or otherwise learned

As a listener, focus on what moves you, not what you agree or disagree with. Stay with the body experience rather than the mind's opinions.

If you prefer not to speak, please feel free to offer yourself as a listener in a breakout group, or to sit out this session

8. Critical Storytelling

- the meaning of **crisis**, and how this relates to **agency**
 - **Hippocrates**: Gk. κρίσις, *crisis*, the point in the progression of a disease at which the final prognosis is indeterminate, when, as we say, the disease (or fate) 'hangs in the balance.'
 - **Indo-European**, *skar- (cf. Skr. *apaskaras*, 'excrement, waste', among other things), 'crisis' is related to an idea of **di-scer-nment**, that is sorting good from bad, right from wrong, and we find it in the cognates 'critical', 'criticise', 'critic', and, not coincidentally, in the title of T.S. Eliot's poetry review, *The Criterion* (1922-1939)
- T.S. Eliot and *The Criterion*; lines from *The Waste Land*, 'What the Thunder Said', 411-14

Dayadhvam: *I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison*

9. The body of hope

- Why 'hope' is contentious, paradoxical, misunderstood and ultimately quite mysterious — unless we actively reposition ourselves in an expressly non-mechanistic view of what it means to be in life...
- ...unless we learn to relate to our inner experience through **direct observation of our bodies**: this is one possible first step towards a more direct relationship with things
- Hope is a body-experience before it is a mind experience, which is to say it is a total experience, because in fact there is no real justifiable separation between the mind and the body

- Hope is not related to fear or delusion, except insofar as all three are human experiences: they are acquaintances with a common friend in the body of you and me
- From embodiment studies we know that **70% of the information we have about ourselves comes from our bodies**, and yet most of what we see around us, including the problems we are currently facing, are the result of our monomaniacal focus on *information* rather than *understanding*
- Lessons from *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.: **awareness through interoception** is essential to our self-knowledge
- through self-knowledge we can slowly begin to rebuild our **agency, defined as**

THE FEELING OF BEING IN CHARGE OF OUR LIFE, KNOWING WHERE WE STAND, HAVING A SAY IN WHAT HAPPENS TO US, AND KNOWING THAT WE HAVE SOME ABILITY TO SHAPE OUR CIRCUMSTANCES

HOPE IS POTENTIAL ENERGY THAT MAKES ACTION POSSIBLE

Bibliography

The sources listed here have all played a significant role in the shaping of this talk. Not all of them have been used directly in the talk, but I thought it might be useful anyway to give interested parties the references.

Books

- Braine, D., *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit* (Duckworth: London, 1993)
- Camus, A., *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Penguin: London, 2015)
- Camus, A., *The Rebel* (Penguin: London, 2000)
- Chödrön, P., *When Things Fall Apart* (HarperCollins: London, 2009)
- Dickinson, E., *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (Canterbury: San Diego, 2015)
- Eliot, T.S., *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (Faber: London, 1990)
- Frankl, V., *Man's Search for Meaning* (Rider: London, 2008)
- Jung, C.G., *Alchemical Studies* (Bollingen: New York, 1983)
- Jung, C.G., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Fontana: London, 1995)
- Jung, C.G., *The Undiscovered Self* (Signet: New York, 2006)
- Marcel, G., *Homo Viator: an Introduction to the Metaphysics of Hope* (St. Augustine's Press: Indiana, 2010)
- Milton, J., *The Complete Poems* (Dent & Sons: London, 1980)
- Nietzsche, F., *The Genealogy of Morals* (Dover: New York, 2003)
- Solnit, R., *Hope in the Dark* (Canons: London, 2016)
- Spretnak, C., *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* (Beacon: Toronto, 1984)
- Titmuss, C., *Light on Enlightenment* (Rider: London, 1998)
- Van der Kolk, B., *The Body Keeps the Score* (Penguin: New York, 2014)

Podcasts, films, interviews and other web-links

- Blanchard, J., *Westminster Insider*, Politico podcast (launched January 2021)
- Curtis, A., *Can't Get You Out Of My Head*, 6-part BBC documentary series (released February 2021)
- Illich, I., 'Rinascita dell'Uomo Epimeteico', altraofficina.it
- LBC Radio, Iain Dale interview with Kate Garraway, 27 April 2021
- Solnit, R., 'The Impossible has already happened': what coronavirus can teach us about hope', *The Guardian*, 07 April 2020
- Runciman, D., *Talking Politics*, London Review of Books podcast (launched March 2016)
- Runciman, D., *Talking Politics: The History of Ideas*, London Review of Books podcast (launched 2020)
- Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu>
- Wallace, D.F., 'Good People', *The New Yorker*, 28 Jan 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/02/05/good-people>
- Wilks, A., *Eric Hobsbawm: The Consolations of History*, London Review of Books documentary (released April 2021)