

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In the face of potential despair, interfaith leaders see hope

Douglas Kindschi

Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute



If we look around the world there seems to be plenty of reasons for despair. Whether it is the unending war in Syria, increased belligerence from North Korea, evidence of Russia trying to undermine our democracy, continuing conflict in Africa, or mounting division in America, the picture is not good.

While in our own country the campaign and election season is over, the polarization and distrust have not only continued, but seems to have increased. Is 2017 just more of the same with no hope in sight?

A recent article by Martin Marty, author and church historian, brings to our attention Jewish, Christian and Muslim writers who have focused on hope.

Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, cites human freedom as a major reason for maintaining hope. Many in the ancient world, as well as some people today, believe that all is blind fate and that freedom is an illusion. Sacks, however, counters this belief:

"This view is challenged in the opening chapters of the Bible. For the first time, God

is seen as beyond nature, creating nature by a free, uncoerced act of will. By creating human beings in His image, He bestowed something of that freedom on us. Human beings are the only life form capable of using the future tense. Only beings who can imagine the world other than it is, are capable of freedom. And if we are free, the future is open, dependent on us."

In a similar manner, Muslim author Noor Mohammad Osmani explores how hope moves to action:

"Hope is a positive spiritual attitude in life that leads a person towards activism, dynamism and constant striving towards excellence. Hope is a belief in a positive outcome related to events and circumstances in one's life. Hope implies a certain amount of patience and perseverance even though a person is facing contrary situations. It is closely tied with faith and belief of a person. ... Hope leads one to dynamism in spirit and physical strength. It transforms the lazy into active, and the active to perform even better in order to obtain excellence."

Tanim Laila, director of a Muslim institute dedicated to social justice and interfaith understanding, sees hope as fundamental to Islam:

"The religion of Islam takes a system-

atic and comprehensive approach towards the nurturing of hope. Islam looks at the root causes of hopelessness and comprehensively addresses these issues. It engenders and encourages values that kindle the torch of hope and keeps it ablaze. Accountability, Forgiveness, Compassion, Moderation in words and practices are embedded in the fundamental teachings of Islam."

Vaclav Havel, poet and playwright, was a dissident in former Communist Czechoslovakia whose protests put him in prison numerous times, including a four-year period prior to their revolution. He knew suffering as well as patience, but eventually served as president of the independent Czechoslovakia and the president of the Czech Republic following the split with Slovenia. He makes the critical distinction between hope and optimism with these words:

"Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. ... Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. It is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. ... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it tran-

scends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons."

Hebrew and Christian scriptures speak often of hope, with over 200 references. It is a common theme in the Psalms and a frequent reference in the New Testament Epistles.

In the letter to the Romans, it is the result of a process beginning with suffering which produces endurance, then character, and character produces hope. (Romans 5:3-4) Later in the same letter the Apostle Paul realizes that hope is not based on what is seen: "For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." (Romans 8: 24-25) In the famous "love chapter" of I Corinthians 13, hope makes the top three along with faith and love.

Perhaps the best contemporary statement on hope comes from the evangelical writer and activist Jim Wallis: "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change."

In our world where despair is threatening we need to take heart in these themes from our various faith traditions, which remind us of our freedom to act as well as the need for patience combined with the action. We maintain hope, "in spite of the evidence."