



Evolving From Hope to Hopelessness, by Margaret Wheatley

[Rudolf Bahro said,] "When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure." Could insecurity, self-doubt, be a good trait? I find it hard to imagine how I can work for the future without feeling grounded in the belief that my actions will make a difference. But Bahro offers a new prospect, that feeling insecure, even groundless, might actually increase my ability to stay in the work. [...]

Vaclav Havel helped me become further attracted to insecurity and not-knowing: "Hope," he states, "is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out."

Havel seems to be describing not hope, but hopelessness. Being liberated from results, giving up outcomes, doing what feels right rather than effective. He helps me recall the Buddhist teaching that hopelessness is not the opposite of hope. Fear is. Hope and fear are inescapable partners. Anytime we hope for a certain outcome, and work hard to make it happen, then we also introduce fear-fear of failing, fear of loss. Hopelessness is free of fear and thus can feel quite liberating. I've listened to others describe this state. Unburdened of strong emotions, they describe the miraculous appearance of clarity and energy.

Thomas Merton, the late Christian mystic, clarified further the journey into hopelessness. In a letter to a friend, he advised: "Do not depend on the hope of results . . . you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. . . . you gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. . . . In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything."

[...]

Thomas Merton was right: We are consoled and strengthened by being hopeless together. We don't need specific outcomes. We need each other. Hopelessness has surprised me with patience. As I abandon the pursuit of effectiveness, and watch my anxiety fade, patience appears.

--Margaret Wheatley

