Cultivating Hope in the Christian University Classroom

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Abstract:

Today's post-secondary students struggle with increasing depression and anxiety, in part influenced by the troubling state of the world. Our students desperately need hope; yet too often, their university classes diminish rather than increase hope. A key role of the Christian educator is to teach students to live in biblical hope, rooted in the transformational work of God in human history. Drawing on the work of diverse scholars and educators, this paper lays out a theological framework for hope and uses it to outline orientations and practices for the classroom that equip students to live faithfully into that hope.

Introduction

Today's post-secondary students are struggling with increasing rates of depression and anxiety. The National College Health Assessment reported in 2018 that 41.4% of students reported feeling "so depressed that it was difficult to function" in the past 12 months (up from 30.6% in 2008); 53.1% of students "felt things were hopeless" (up from 47.0%); 62.3% of students "felt overwhelming anxiety" (up from 49.1%); and 11.3% had "seriously considered suicide" (up from 6.4%) (American College Health Association, 2009, 2018).

While multiple factors contribute to this mental health crisis, the current state of the world is undoubtedly playing a key role:

> From news reports and life around us, we are bombarded with signals of distress – of job layoffs and homeless families, of nearby toxic wastes and distant famines, of more devastating hurricanes, floods and droughts, of ever-widening military offensives. These events stir fear, sorrow and anger within us….To be conscious in our world today is to be aware of vast suffering and unprecedented peril. (Macy and Brown, 2014: 20)

Today's students have experienced assaults against hope throughout their lives. Growing up in a post-9/11 world of perpetual war, they are accustomed to lock-down drills and school shootings. Unlike previous generations, they have no expectation that they will be more economically secure than their parents, instead believing that their economic future will be worse (Stokes, 2018). They are acutely aware of the looming ecological crisis, and yet feel powerless to address it. In an age of social media, they watch each new crisis unfold in real time. In an increasingly polarized, post-truth era, they cannot imagine their nation coming together for a common cause. They desperately want the world to be a better place, but they have no idea how to make it happen.

Today's university students need hope. But too often, their classes have the effect of diminishing, rather than increasing, hope. As students learn about the scope, complexity, and intractability of the world's problems, about the challenges and failures of outwardly promising technological or economic solutions, and about the lack of political will to implement even essential changes, they grow increasingly despairing about the prospect of real progress. To despair is to experience the void of hope.

Hope in Latin is *espere*; hence despair, from *de-espere*, means literally the negation of hope. This describes well the sense of futility many students feel.

Yet Christians are people of hope, and one of our primary roles as Christian educators is to teach our students to live in biblical hope. This is not a hope born of wishful thinking or blind optimism, a refusal to take seriously the problems of the world, or trust in human power and ingenuity. Instead, it is a hope rooted in the transformational work of God, who has been active throughout human history and is – already! – making all things new. Drawing on the work of diverse scholars and educators, this paper aims to describe a biblical vision of hope and link it to classroom practices and orientations that can cultivate hope among our students, enabling them to live faithfully into this vision.

A Christian vision of hope

To cultivate hope in our students, educators must first cultivate hope in ourselves. Hope cannot be artificially generated, and we are unlikely to convince our students to share a hope we ourselves do not hold. Hope may be found in many places, such as the resilience of nature, the strength of community, and the inspiration of the human spirit. As Christian educators, an important source of our hope is theological, and this is the one we will focus on in this paper.

Bauckham and Hart (1999) define hope as "the capacity to imagine otherwise, to transcend the boundaries of the present in the quest for something more, something better than the present affords" (1999: 72). Hope is the human condition of open-ness to the future, living with a sense of possibility and anticipation. Hope is related to both yearning and desire; it is a disposition of leaning forward into the future, full of expectation that "what is" is not equal to "what is yet to come."

Christian hope is distinctive because it does not look to human power or ingenuity for the source of hope, nor to any other created thing, but to God's transforming and renewing action in the world. Its vision is not derived from human imagination, but from the Biblical story, especially the Kingdom vision taught by Jesus and illustrated in his signs and miracles. Christian hope looks to and strives for a future that only God makes possible and whose certain coming only God can assure. It is based on confidence in the character of God who makes promises, who acts with power, and who is dedicated to the renewal of all things.

According to scripture, God consistently and persistently takes initiative in history to create and preserve a future for the whole of creation. The creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 reveal a God who brings order out of disorder and chaos. God declares creation "very good"; even so, he commissions the human pair to be stewards and agents of development in the Creation, to guide and direct the creation towards the fullness of God's *shalom*.

When human sin brings fear and despair (Gen. 3, 7, 11), God takes initiative to move forward with a people and a promise. God's covenant with Abraham reveals his intentions to bless Abraham's descendants and through them all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12, 15). God's promise is not solicited by a deserving people but is a gracious bestowal on a needy people, originating in the saving intentions

of Yahweh. Stories from Israel's exile – Esther in the court of Ahasuerus, Ezekiel resolutely praying to the "dry bones," and Daniel and his friends remaining steadfast in the furnace – remind us that God's faithfulness persists even when it seems that all is lost (Lowry, 2001). God works for, in and through his people to strengthen, save and restore them.

God continually reminds his people to trust him for what they need. In the liberation from Egypt and the provision of manna in the wilderness, God's story of abundance, which is grounds for hope, transcends the myth of scarcity, which traffics in the language of deficit (Brueggemann, 1999). The Sabbath and Jubilee laws – where the land, animals and people find rest, debts are forgiven, slaves are released and land is restored – invite Israel to embrace God's providential care. The feeding of the five thousand in John 6 builds on this motif, with Jesus now being the one who brings abundance to the wilderness. Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, *is* in fact the abundance which is central to Christian hope. In Jesus, God redeems the fallen Creation from sin and all that brings despair. This redemption comes not from human ingenuity, power, community, or anything in creation, but is the gracious gift of God. The resurrection is

> not to be accounted for in purely human or historical terms. It arises out of the intervention of God in the midst of the here and now…. 'See,' says God in his final speech in the Bible, 'I am making all things new.' All things will not *become* new through some natural process or human program of works, but must be *made* new. (Bauckham and Hart, 1999: 69)

The God who made the whole creation can also redeem and make it new.

While the ultimate fulfilment of this hope – unimaginable in our current frame of reference – lies in the future, God is already active, as he has been throughout the whole of human history, to bring about his promised redemption. Thus, Bauckham and Hart call on Christians to "identify scattered acts of recreative anticipation of God's promised future, as the same Spirit who raised Jesus from death calls into being life, health, faith and hope where there is otherwise no capacity for these and no accounting for them" (1999: 70). Acting in hope, Christians engage here and now "in a struggle with the principalities and powers of the world, a struggle in which ironically we are liberated from fear and guilt by the knowledge that in and of ourselves we cannot win" (1999: 71).

Botman (2001) argues even more strongly that hope must be acted upon in the present. The mission of Jesus was not to secure an otherworldly future that is discontinuous with the creation that God loves, upholds and redeems, but to make manifest in the present age the coming of the Kingdom of God – the reign of God in the midst of human history. Thus,

> we are not merely called to act in anticipatory hope. Our mission in the twenty-first century is to confess *hope in action* following God's actions in our times. We take our point of departure in the notion that God is acting in history, at this time, in this place, in this country, and in this world. Our mission is to confess this hope. (Botman, 2001: 80)

Our understanding of hope is enriched by noticing its relationship to other, closely connected theological concepts, especially grace and faith. Consider this, for example: *grace* is not only forgiveness for sins, but the gift of a new possible future, one that is not just desired but guaranteed by the

faithfulness of Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead. *Hope*, then, is the God-given, Holy Spirit-filled imaginative capacity to see this new thing that God is doing, beyond the appearances of the world we inhabit: to see the reconciliation that God has wrought and to be ambassadors of that reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5). *Faith* is the courage to live today as if God's future was a present reality, to allow every thought, action and decision to be shaped not by the "realities" but by the possibilities. Hope begins in agitation and yearns for what it knows can yet be. In this way, God's future pulls us forward. Biblical hope is thus grounded in promise, shaped by vision, and experienced as summons.

How can we share this vision of hope with our students in ways that enable them not just to know it with their heads, but to believe it in their hearts and live it out in their lives? In the following sections, we propose some practices and attitudes that can help to cultivate Christian hope amongst our students. We illustrate these practices with examples from our own economics and environmental studies courses, subjects that deal with some of the most pressing problems that our society faces and – as our students tell us – have great potential to induce despair.

Rooted in gratitude and trust

Educating for hope must begin with, and be rooted in, a recognition of why we care. As described above, for us, as Christians, this motivation is derived from our faith in God's vision of a reconciled world. Macy and Brown (2014), in their "Work that Reconnects" practices, suggest beginning the work of healing with a focus on gratitude. They suggest that "in times of turmoil and danger, gratitude helps to steady and ground us. It brings us into presence, and our full presence is perhaps the best offering we can make to our world" (2014: 92). Psychological studies affirm the connection between gratitude and hope (Witvliet et al., 2019). Though Christian hope looks ahead to God's renewal of creation, it is rooted in God's faithfulness in the past. Remembering God's abundant generosity in creation and steadfast care for his people throughout history gives us the confidence that God will continue to care for us, and provides the strength to act in hope.

We can cultivate gratitude and trust in our students through the ways we frame our subject matter. One approach, on the assumption that our role is to wake students out of their complacency or apathy and inspire them to action, is to jump right into studying societal and environmental problems. But many of our students are already well informed and concerned about the world's challenges; for example, the vast majority of younger adults already see climate change as a serious threat to society (Angus Reid Institute, 2018; Ballew et al., 2019; Reinhart, 2018). What looks like complacency or apathy may actually be masking fear or a sense of powerlessness. Grounding our discussions of these problems within the larger context of God's providence and abiding care for the world can help prevent these problems from looming so large that they threaten to overwhelm our students.

In our introductory economics courses, for example, we begin the semester by exploring the place of economic life within the structure of God's good creation, and by reading one of the articles referenced above, Brueggemann's (1999) "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity." Only after this foundation is established do we go on to learn about the economic challenges facing our world. Our

environmental studies program grounds practices of gratitude in experiential learning. While we study creation in the creation, we model embracing the beauty and joy that creation provides. For example, we climb to the edge of the Columbia Icefield in the Rocky Mountains to study glacier formations, but then also pause to recite together the words Psalm 148, expressing our gratitude through praise.

Sharing in the pain of the world

Expressing gratitude and trust does not, however, mean denying or glossing over the devastating and deeply rooted challenges that our world faces today. Christian hope does not pretend that the world is not facing many crises or that our problems are easy to solve. Instead, it grapples honestly with the pain and brokenness of the world, the very reasons why God has promised to make all things new.

In *Dare We Speak of Hope?*, Boesak (2014) answers the title's question with the response: "only if we speak of woundedness." He suggests, following Paul in Romans 5:1-5, that hope always begins with suffering, because "suffering always comes with any struggle for the things that matter" (2014: 29). It is in the courage to stand up and resist the evil of the world, and to endure the suffering that comes along with such actions, that hope is found. Knowing that the way things are is not the way they should be, Christian hope, rooted in the certainty of God's redeeming work in creation, "reveals the violence and injustices at work in the systems of our world and calls for our solidarity with those robbed of hope by the brutal powers of the world" (2014: 41).

This call to solidarity means we need to help our students genuinely identify with those who bear the burdens of our world's brokenness – to "see the world and its systems of domination, oppression, and exploitation through the eyes of those who suffer" (Boesak, 2014: 65). Stories, art, images, and experiential learning – rather than dry facts or statistics – are often powerful ways to help students see and feel the suffering of others. For example, we ask students to participate in a two hour Social Justice Walk, offered by a local inner city agency, which opens their eyes to poverty and structural injustices within their own city. Having students complete an Ecological Footprint calculator brings home the immense overconsumption of our societies and the students' contributions to it.

Some of our students may come from situations where they have not previously been forced to confront the suffering of the world or to stand in solidarity with the oppressed. Other students may already carry pain from their own difficult situations. For both groups of students, genuine exposure to the suffering of others has the potential to break their hearts, but not necessarily in a bad way. Parker Palmer (2011) speaks of two kinds of heartbreak: hearts that break apart and hearts that break open. Faced with pain, hearts are more likely to break open, rather than flying apart in frustration and rage, if they have been "consistently exercised through conscious engagement with suffering….Such a heart has learned how to flex to hold tension in a way that expands its capacity for both suffering and joy" (2011: 60). Hearts that break open gain compassion and the ability to love themselves and others more deeply. In the classroom, as we lovingly guide students to engage with the suffering of the world, we can remind them that their disappointment and frustration is in solidarity with God himself, who identifies with the

wounded. It is for this pain that God promises healing, restoration and renewal. Thus, this kind of heartbreak can lead to hope.

Getting to the roots

We do not, of course, leave our students drowning in the pain of the world, but help them to move forward in hopeful ways. But we must not be too hasty to leave pain behind. As Gabriel Marcel has said, "the truth is that there can be strictly speaking no hope except when the temptation to despair exists. Hope is the act by which this temptation is actively and victoriously overcome" (1951: 36). Our temptation may be to ease students' heartbreak by immediately moving towards solutions. But there is value in taking time for a deep analysis of the underlying roots of painful situations. This does two things: it helps prevent false hope based on surface-level solutions, and it opens up new and more genuinely hopeful ways to move forward.

Humans are very good at using our power and ingenuity to develop "technical" solutions to the problems we face. God does indeed work in and through human beings to bring about his purposes, and a sense of human agency is crucial to developing hope (Jacobs, 2005). However, an exclusive focus on human ability can easily become idolatrous. In many ways, our society's focus on achieving "progress" through economic growth, technology, and military force has actually contributed to economic and social insecurity, environmental degradation, and international conflict (Goudzwaard et al., 2007). These "solution paradoxes" happen when placing full trust in the means used to accomplish a goal allows them to take on a life of their own, exacerbating the very problems they were intended to solve, or creating new problems. One example is the global arms race that has left us vulnerable to worldwide nuclear destruction on a scale never seen before; another is the push for economic growth that is unravelling the fabric of the natural world on which the economy depends. Hope cannot come through trust in idols, for idols will inevitably betray their followers.

Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen, and Van Heemst (2007) encourage us to broaden and deepen our vision beyond the narrow view of reality that comes from dependence on technical solutions. Looking beyond economic growth, for example, exposes poverty as a problem of not only material insufficiency but also of unjust and broken relationships between nations, communities and individuals. Underlying the security threat of conflict and terrorism in the Middle East is a history of injury, humiliation, and injustice that cannot be solved simply through an increase in military power. They also note that problems often exacerbate each other, such as when ecological degradation caused by the quest for economic growth pushes people into forced migration, contributing to global and social conflict.

Analyzing the deeply-rooted and intertwined sources of current problems exposes the shortcomings of many proposed solutions and the false hope offered by quick fixes. But it also opens up new ways forward. When false hopes are finally revealed to be false, then we are properly *disillusioned* – we lose our illusions and are then open to discovering the true hope that false hopes concealed. Invincible hope arises only "from the ruins of all human and limited hopes" (Marcel, 1951: 47).

Looking for signposts of hope

How do we then rebuild hope in our students, looking to the true Source of renewal, and situating human agency in its proper place? Christian hope is rooted in the "already but not yet" nature of the kingdom of God. Jesus' death and resurrection have already redeemed the world, but redemption has not yet come in its fullness. God's new creation is not yet here, but the Holy Spirit is already active in the lives of God's people. Cultivating hope calls us to look for signposts of God's coming kingdom in the midst of difficult situations, so that we can grasp the deeper reality that God is already making all things new.

Goudzwaard, Vander Vennen and Van Heemst (2007) offer a powerful vision for hope in the story of Esther, whose name means "morning star" – the star that appears when darkness is deepest, and heralds the morning to come. With her people in danger, Esther approaches the king, even though it places her own life in mortal risk:

> Esther's simple walk to the king, while seemingly small and insignificant, was the turning point in Israel's story of sure destruction…we are called to take first steps, small beginning acts of undistorted justice and unperverted love in the midst of powerful ideologies. Even our smallest acts can sometimes mobilize the forces of God's kingdom in a time of doom, just as Esther's act did centuries ago. Who knows whether the "God who is hidden" is waiting for just that to happen? (Goudzwaard et al., 2007: 177)

Hope does not necessarily require us to seek grand solutions to the problems we face, nor even for proof that the tide is turning. Pursuing hope means taking small steps along God's ways of love, peace, justice and reconciliation (Goudzwaard et al., 2007). We can search for and celebrate seeds of hope, knowing that it is God's Spirit who enables such actions and that the fruit they bear may be beyond our imagining.

In our courses, we intentionally look for these signposts of hope and bring them into the classroom through stories, case studies, films, and speakers. We encourage our students to be inspired by Wangari Maathai, Oscar Romero, Vandana Shiva, Wendell Berry, and many others, while admitting that all human role models have flaws and blind spots. We celebrate how the Millennium Development Goals have helped reduce poverty and how renewable energy technologies can help us work towards sustainability, while acknowledging their limitations. Such initiatives and developments should not be presented as blueprints or silver bullet solutions, but neither should they be dismissed or ignored. They may be imperfect and incomplete, but they are nevertheless seeds of hope and signs of the coming Kingdom (Untener, 1979).

Sharing difficult emotions

Honestly entering into the pain of the world, digging down to its deep and intractable roots, and acknowledging the limitations of all human initiatives can elicit difficult emotions in us and our students. Macy and Brown argue that such pain should not be suppressed:

> Pain is the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world. It is not only natural; it is an absolutely necessary component of our collective healing. As in all organisms, pain has a purpose: it is a warning signal, designed to trigger remedial action. (2014: 21)

Those living in Western culture, they argue, tend to shy away from acknowledging pain because we fear the feelings of despair, guilt, and powerlessness that can come along with it, do not want to be seen as weak, or do not want to distress others. Blocking pain, however, also impedes cognitive functioning, joy and connection, empathy and imagination. Being willing to experience and acknowledge difficult emotions frees us to imagine new realities and to participate in the healing of the world.

Moving through difficult emotions is often best done in community. Even the simplest act of expressing pain to another can bring hope: "Hearing one another name the tragedy unfolding in our world reassures us that we're not alone in noticing" (Macy and Johnstone, 2012: 125). In "The Work that Reconnects," Macy and Brown (2014) offer a series of practices that can help people process difficult emotions in community. Not all of them are appropriate for the university classroom, partly because our students, unlike participants in the Work that Reconnects, may not have the choice of whether or not to be there. The exercises require trust, openness, honesty, mutual respect and empathy – qualities we should be seeking to foster in our classrooms, but which may not be guaranteed for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, some of the exercises offer ways for students to process their emotions and experiences in relatively non-threatening ways. For example, one exercise invites participants, in pairs, to complete sentences such as "What concerns me most about the world today is…" and "When I see what's happening to our society, what breaks my heart is…" The simple act of naming things that cause us pain or fear can open the doors to deeper conversations.

Building community

Community is not only important for processing grief; it also provides support and accountability for our hopeful actions (Moyer et al., 2016). God does not act (only) through isolated human individuals but through his church, the body of Christ on earth. The church foreshadows God's new creation both through the restored relationships between members of the church and through the ways in which the church collectively acts to bring renewal and restoration to the world. God can also act through other kinds of communities, such as those created by location, culture, or common interest. Macy and Johnstone note that in times of natural disaster, people naturally tend to gather to help each other as "the closeness of danger activates our wits and our cooperative tendencies in ways that bring out new levels of aliveness and community" (2012: 123). They argue, however, that we need not wait for disasters to occur before seeking this kind of community, noting that in current times, awareness of disaster is always with us.

Remembering that God works through communities frees us from the burden of feeling we have to do it all on our own. As 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us, each of us has been given different gifts, to use in service to all. Working together, we can accomplish far more than we could ever accomplish alone. We can also encourage and support one another; when one grows discouraged, another can lift that one up.

Authentic, collaborative learning tasks can help to build this sense of community among our students. Working together to accomplish a common goal, students can learn to discern their own particular gifts, to welcome the sometimes surprising outcomes of collaborative action, and to trust and rely upon one another. As anyone who has participated in group work knows, it will not always go well, but this is also an opportunity to build resilience.

Community can also be built through activities that model depending on each other for accountability and support. In one of our classes, students are required to adopt a practice of simplicity for six weeks during the semester. As part of the activity, they select a fellow student which whom they share during designated class time about their successes and struggles with becoming a vegetarian or giving up their car, etc. This element of the activity, in addition to class discussions addressing community more explicitly, helps students understand its important role.

Building capacity for reflective action

We defined faith as the courage to live today as if God's future was a present reality. Even in the limited context of a classroom, we can help our students faithfully, actively, live into this hope, in ways that will equip them to continue living hopefully in the future.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) explores the kind of education that can equip students to seek liberation and transformation. He contrasts the "banking" method of education, in which the teacher fills empty, ignorant "receptacles" with content, with "problem-posing education" in which the teacher and students together problematize reality:

> In problem-posing education, men [*sic*] develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in progress, in transformation. (1970: 70–71)

Seeing reality as a process of transformation cultivates hope because it opens up the possibility of acting to transform reality in new ways. In problem-posing education, students learn to analyze and understand the world themselves, rather than simply listening to the analysis of the teacher. This equips them for *praxis*, or "*reflection* and *action* directed at the structures to be transformed" (1970: 120).

A learning-centred approach to education can help to build these capacities among students (McEwan et al., 2016). This approach asks students to actively engage in the process of learning, as co-creators of knowledge. It invites them to "ask questions, explore implications, consider examples, test assumptions, and discuss how new ideas might apply in different situations" (2016: 313). They do this together with the instructor and other students, in the context of authentic dialogue based on active listening and mutual respect. Our economics courses are built on this model, using a "flipped" classroom approach. Students are introduced to content outside of class, and spend class time actively analyzing news stories and case studies, reflecting on their personal and societal implications, and proposing solutions. They realize that their role is not just to "learn about" economics but to practice acting faithfully in economic life as citizens, consumers, workers, and entrepreneurs.

Authentic assignments can also invite students to practice hopeful action even within the confines of a course. In various courses, we ask students to write letters to politicians on issues of concern, to advocate for changes in university policy, to undertake personal lifestyle changes (e.g., the practices of simplicity described above) and journal about them, and to volunteer at non-profit agencies as part of an experiential learning opportunity. Our senior environmental studies students do a major group project to either improve campus sustainability or assist a non-profit agency in the community. They have worked on developing trails in park areas, produced a sustainable harvest protocol for an old-growth forest, and audited the university website for sustainability content. These and other types of assignments help to foster among students a sense that they, too, are able to take small steps along the way of hope.

Conclusion

None of these practices require grand reinventions of our courses. Like any other step along the way of hope, they simply require us to pay attention and make small changes, trusting that God will guide us and bless our efforts. To cultivate hope, we act in hope – imperfectly, incompletely, but in the knowledge that we, too, are participating in the renewal of all things.

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