

Introduction

Hoping against Hope

This book is about hope. In particular, it is about the presence and possibility of hope in the face of endings, in the face of death and trauma, in the face of the unalterable and unwanted crises in life. The bulk of the book explores diverse narratives of hope in which the recognizable yet mysterious presence of hope is intimated in the face of traumatic loss and death. We consider manifestations of hope that have emerged from the stories of people speaking from palliative-care beds and emergency rooms, from wheelchairs and long-term care facilities. In working with people facing death and traumatic loss, I have come to agree with William Stringfellow when he stresses, “Hope is known only in the midst of coping with death. Any so-called hope is delusionary and false apart from the confrontation with the power of death.”¹ Thus, it is in the face of such extremity of being and death that we dig deeply to seek out narratives of hope that emerge at the edge of the horizon of life’s possibility.

Before presenting the goals and outline of the book, I share here my primary location in this exploration of hope. While doing research in constructive-systematic theology on the crisis of hope through the lens of a contextual theology of the cross,² I was also serving as a chaplain and educator in a large teaching hospital.³ Many of the patients, families, caregivers, and students with whom I worked faced questions of hope and hopelessness every day. They included people in palliative care who were living their dying, survivors of trauma whose lives were stopped cold by sudden accident and violence, caregivers who yearned to find a means to hope in the face of extreme and multiple tragedies, and students who wrestled with questions of pastoral

1. William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word, 1973), 138.

2. See Pamela R. McCarroll, *Waiting at the Foot of the Cross: Toward a Theology of Hope for Today* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

3. *Spiritual care practitioner* is now the preferred name for chaplain in health care settings in Canada. However, for the sake of clarity, I will use the term *chaplain* throughout the book. In my capacity as an educator, I worked interprofessionally with other health care disciplines and as a clinical pastoral education (CPE) supervisor with groups of students training at the basic, advanced, and specialist levels.

identity and with how to hope when fix-it solutions were not available. As I struggled to write systematically about ideas of hope and hopelessness in my research, I found myself in the midst of experiences that, in devastating and profound ways, caused me to pause and to pay attention. How do we hope at the end of hope? These patients, families, caregivers, and students became interlocutors for me, inviting me to see the many faces of hope in the midst of crisis and death. Bearing witness to the multidimensionality of hope in these people and their stories has opened up for me the scriptural narratives and theological renderings of hope in new and revitalized ways.

While it is located within the discipline of pastoral theology, this book is an exercise in practical theology, as it brings into dialogue concrete human experiences with theology, the Scriptures, philosophy, and health care research so as to serve the deepening of the spiritual life, theological thought, and practices of care in the face of suffering.⁴ In collecting and writing people's stories, I have drawn on qualitative methods of research for many chapters in this book (chapters 3 to 7). As a participant observer and through field notes, interviews, and textual material, I have recorded the narratives of several individuals and families in the face of trauma and death. As much as possible, I have invited the individuals, families, and caregivers to reflect on the stories both to ensure accuracy and to enable the research process itself to serve transformative possibility in their lives. I carry a deep appreciation for qualitative methods of research and the extent to which lived human experience is held up as the focus of study and as a source of wisdom. Further, I appreciate the extent to which qualitative (and quantitative) methods can serve improved practice and can have therapeutic outcomes for participants, feeding a sense of purpose and meaning in the face of adversity. However, I count myself as part of an emerging group of pastoral theologians who respectfully challenge the propensity within the discipline to prioritize social sciences over theology.⁵ While I affirm that there are important dialogues that need to take place between theology and the social sciences and that some social scientific methods

4. See Peggy Way, *Created by God: Pastoral Care for All God's People* (St. Louis, Chalice, 2005); Sharon G. Thornton, *Broken yet Beloved* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002); Pamela Cooper-White, "Suffering," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (East Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2012), 23–31. Way, Thornton, and Cooper-White identify that pastoral theology has suffering as its starting point. Pastoral theology is, therefore, focused on responses to the reality of suffering in life.

5. See, for example, Russell Herbert, "Introduction: The Importance of Hope," in *Living Hope: A Practical Theology of Hope for the Dying* (Werrington, UK: Epworth, 2006), 1–14; Thornton, introduction to *Broken yet Beloved*, 1–4; Stanley J. Grenz, "The Hopeful Pessimist: Christian Pastoral Theology in a Pessimistic Context," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 54 (2000): 297–322.

allow space for theological commitments to be central, I am concerned that several social scientific methods eclipse transcendence from ways of knowing and, as such, do not provide an appropriate ground for pastoral theology.

As a pastoral and practical theologian, I begin with lived theology and with particular faith commitments to the Creator revealed in Jesus and mediated in the world by the Spirit. The essence of God is love; thus, the experience of love⁶ reflects the presence and power of God. My perspectives on the world have been deeply influenced by a theology of the cross. Viewed from that position, expressions of glory—of triumphalism and power, of unmitigated positivism, optimism, and success, and so on—are considered suspect, requiring critique and deconstruction. In a theology of the cross, experiences of suffering, failure, vulnerability, and limit are held up as contexts where hidden truth may be revealed. Indeed, in focusing on experiences of death and trauma as the context out of which authentic hope may be found, I follow a “method of the cross.”⁷ My theological commitments shape my understanding of who we are and what we are made for—creatures made by love and for love in contexts where love’s presence and possibility are most often hidden and distorted.

Following ancient ways of thought,⁸ a priority on love shapes my epistemology, which affirms that the deepest knowing or knowledge of a thing comes with the enlightening of love.⁹ Rather than things being solely known as objects to be examined by reason and research methods common to modern science, deeper knowing comes with the enlightening of love wherein a thing’s beauty or belovedness is glimpsed. This is not to say that there is not a place for reason or quantitative and qualitative research methods in practical and pastoral theology. However, it does mean that these methods are intended to serve the deepening of love and awe, rather than the opposite. This epistemology presupposes that the illumination by love is the goal of knowledge. It affirms that love’s source is transcendent while its presence is experienced in the real

6. Here, love is considered to be manifested in many recognizable experiences and actions—compassion, forgiveness, respect, justice and peacemaking, a sense of awe and so on.

7. See McCarroll, “Part 1: The Method of the Cross as Waiting,” in *Waiting at the Foot of the Cross*, 27–88.

8. In ancient sources, including the Hebrew Scriptures and philosophers of antiquity, loving and knowing were deeply intertwined. One could not truly know a thing without loving it. For more on this, please see George Grant, “Faith and the Multiversity,” in *Technology and Justice* (Toronto: Anansi, 1986), 36–77.

9. In several places, Simone Weil describes the importance of the enlightening or illumination of love for true knowledge of things. Please see Simone Weil, *Formative Writings, 1929–1941*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987). Weil’s thought influences my epistemology.

world of relationships as a movement of energy among and between humans and in creation. Love is what recognizes the essential *imago dei*, the essential beauty of a thing, as a creation of the Divine. Love honors difference and particularity without fear; love pays attention and waits upon the hidden beauty of a thing to be revealed; love seeks to deconstruct and resist the tragic and oppressive blocks that mar and hide the possibilities for creaturely belovedness to flourish. Given all this, the following practices have been central to my chaplaincy work and to the narrative priorities of this project: deep listening, focused attention, and waiting upon the illumination of love (Weil). These practices have shaped the way I have sought to be with people in the face of trauma and death even when I have failed miserably. They have shaped the way I have borne witness to the sometimes unlikely narratives of hope that emerged from hospital beds and from the stories shared in these pages.

This book seeks to demonstrate multiple ways to recognize the presence of hope in human stories especially in the face of trauma and death. I present these narratives of hope as a response to the crisis of hope that emerges in the face of endings (on individual, collective, and societal levels) and as an invitation to more profound recognition of the presence and possibility of hope in our midst. The narratives shared here are not exhaustive, but rather invitational, that we might continue to seek out the unique and unexpected ways that hope is present in human life. My goal is fourfold: First, I seek to open up space and to complexify understandings of hope wherein plurality and diversity can exist. It is through such complexity that we most honor our existence as creatures—embedded within creation, unable to know reality in totality, yet given glimpses of a larger whole within which we exist. Second, I present these narratives with the role of the caregiver in mind. What does it mean to provide care in contexts of crisis and death, when hope is at its end? How do we take seriously the call to witness to hope as caregivers, pastors, and chaplains in ways that fully enter the darkness of human experience and hopelessness? Third, central to my project is a desire to bring into dialogue the emergency room and the Scriptures, the deathbed and a cruciform faith. How can these sources speak to each other and draw forth multiple ways to discern the presence and possibility of hope as it moves in human lives? Finally, a background interest of this book is to begin to consider how these multiple narratives of hope may suggest certain practices in response to the crisis of hope that dominates many mainline churches in North America at the end of church as it has been known.

In chapter 1, I provide a brief sociocultural-historical discussion of hope as it has been construed within the modern West, especially in the North American context. While I have written on this extensively elsewhere,¹⁰ this

brief chapter locates our discussion on hope within a broader framework and helps illuminate the larger crisis of hope that impinges upon and frames the contemporary experience of hope in human relationships and life journeys. As well, in highlighting the crisis of hope that has emerged in the modern West, this discussion helps to illustrate the need to further broaden our understanding of hope and to recognize anew unexpected manifestations of hope in the face of endings.

The second chapter is an extensive review of the pastoral and practical theological literature on hope over thirty-five years (1976–2011). While this chapter is lengthy, it helps to provide a general landscape of the dominant themes and tensions present in the understandings of hope in the field. It examines hope within these disciplines with reference to much of the secondary literature within multiple other disciplines, including psychology, health care research, philosophy, and systematic and biblical theology, all of which influence working understandings of hope in pastoral and practical theology. The chapter ends by presenting a descriptive definition of hope that is inclusive of all the many different emphases and tensions present in discussions on hope within a large and diverse body of literature. This definition becomes a central area of exploration in the chapters that follow.

Chapters 3 to 7 explore five different narratives of hope: hope as fight, hope as meaning, hope as survival, hope as lament, and hope as surrender. Each of these chapters presents a story that is based on experiences of people with whom I have worked or whom I have known in the hospital, congregational, or church context. In all cases, except when the story has been published,¹¹ names and details have been changed so as to ensure confidentiality. Further, as mentioned previously, where possible, individuals involved in the cases have reviewed the material, given permission for its use, and added changes and suggestions to the text. In each of these chapters, the narratives are explored inductively in relation to the specific theme of the chapter, in terms of the descriptive definition of hope and in terms of practices of care. Finally, following the inductive discussion, each chapter focuses on the respective theme of hope in relation to the larger body of literature. We consider how each narrative can feed hope and what this means for caregivers, pastors, chaplains, and all those called to bear witness to hope. These five different narratives of hope are intended to be invitational explorations of hope's presence and possibilities in the midst of contexts in which hope is least expected.

10. See McCarroll, *Waiting at the Foot of the Cross*.

11. Chapter 7, "Hope as Surrender," is based on the book, used with permission, Chris Vais, *For Words: A Journal of Hope and Healing* (Guelph, ON: Susan McLeod, 2003).

The concluding chapter summarizes some areas for further exploration and concludes by raising questions about what these narratives and this working definition of hope might suggest for further nurturance of hope in pastoral practice. Finally, it points to possibilities for churches in decline. How might broader perspectives on hope open up multiple ways to nourish and enact hope in Christian communities that exist at the end of church as it has been known?

This book is intended to feed hope in a way that attends to the suffering and terror of life head-on, in a way that feeds hope's possibilities in human life and practices of care. In bringing together several different narratives of hope, I seek to open space for wondering, for meeting, for seeing anew the hidden possibilities in life. In honoring stories of people with whom I have worked, I bear witness to the absolute meaningfulness of life as it is lived in all its particularity—an offering of hope in the midst of difficult times. *The End of Hope—the Beginning*: as the paradoxical, open-ended title suggests, the way ahead is unknown, and the pathways are numerous. Such paradoxical open-endedness requires trust, courage, perseverance, and an eye for hidden possibility.