“Genuine hope can occur no matter what the circumstances.”

The inner choice of hope

People hope for a better future, and it’s hard to avoid doing that. But there are many matters that we cannot affect. We cannot choose some of the circumstances that befall us. “Real hope,” say Maja Djkic and Keith Oatley, “is about making inner choices, about matters we can affect.”

Is hope a dream? Is it a fantasy of a better future? If hope depended on imagining a future, what should we say about the quiet despair of refugee camps, nursing homes, crushing poverty, or the processions of days of physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual imprisonment. The more imaginative the victim, the worse would be the hopelessness, because of the thought of forfeiting the future.

But it is not any inability to imagine a better life that brings about hopelessness. It is the reality of circumstances of the world that prevents the despairing from making choices that allow them to live their lives as they would wish. Hope is an ability to make choices that allow the self to keep moving forward despite circumstances. As Maya Angelou put it: “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”

Blind hope

Every kind of suffering seems to contain within itself a glimmer of hope. One may believe that this is because hope is tied to a future goal—that things may get better. But what about a cancer patient who knows he will die, and then does die? Is not his situation hopeless? Would not any hope he may have be an illusion? Is this the meaning of “blind hope,” that humans may hope no matter how irrational the circumstance, to protect themselves from unbearable truths? It depends. If a patient’s hope is for future survival, the hope is not so much blind as false. The blindness of hope has more to do with the fact that genuine hope can occur no matter what the circumstances. Even the most constraining circumstance can allow choice as how to experience it: with despair and fear, or with courage and dignity.

An early writer on this issue was the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who argued that we should not identify ourselves with our bodies because we cannot affect what they are,
and sometimes cannot affect what happens to them. We should identify ourselves with what is up to us. Epicurus was born a slave around the year 55, and was crippled. One commentator said his leg was deliberately broken by his master. But as Epicurus later wrote: "You can fetter my leg, but not me." His hope depended on learning to cultivate an attitude within himself, because what he thought and felt was not up to circumstance. It was up to him.

Internal decision

In reflections on his time in concentration camps, Viktor Frankl said "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way." According to Frankl and other existentialists, there is always choice, but sometimes it cannot be seen. The choice is not in doing something externally to pursue one's goals, but an internal decision of how to experience what happens, and possibly maintain one's growth as a human being.

Like Viktor Frankl, Nelson Mandela suffered imprisonment, yet he made an inner choice, which he set at the center of his experience: he chose not to hate his jailors, but to become compassionate towards them. Concentrating on inwardness does not mean neglecting the world of others. A healing and reconciliation service in December 2000, dedicated to HIV/AIDS sufferers and for the healing of South Africa, Mandela said: "Our human compassion binds us one to the other... as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future."

Existential state

Hope may seem to be just another emotion, like fear or anger. It waxes and wanes, as emotions do, and appears triggered by circumstance. We may think of others as more or less hopeful or hopeless, as if hope were a personality trait. Hope, though, unlike the emotion of anger or the personality trait of introversion, may be thought of as an existential state, cultivated by increasing awareness and the opportunity for choice. Whatever our circumstances—illness, disability, imprisonment, or a desolate state of the world—we are one insight away from hope, an ever-present if not always perceived gift of choice.

The keys

- Hope seems to be about wishing for a better future, but really it's about cultivating an inner attitude. Hope is an ability to make choices that allow the self to keep moving forward despite circumstances.
- Some things we cannot choose. The choice is not in doing something externally to pursue one's goals, but an internal decision of how to experience what happens.
- Hope, unlike the emotion of anger or the personality trait of introversion, may be thought of as an existential state, cultivated by increasing awareness and the opportunity for choice.

Maja Dijkic & Keith Oatley