Dum Spiro Spero: On Post-Pandemic Hope

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Abstract

This paper was originally delivered at *The Psychology of Global Crisis: State Surveillance, Solidarity and Everyday Life* virtual conference, 2020, at The American University of Paris. I discuss with my own lived experience of surviving COVID-19 as the basis for how the event of a crisis brings into focus hope's undecidable, ontological nature, thus shattering everyday presumptions about hope as located elsewhere than the here and now in what I call either imagineered prostaigia or salvaged and recycled nostalgia. I also discuss the challenge of the suicidal moment to the idea that hope is ontological. I close with a suggested link to various kinds of pandemics, either virally infective or racially oppressive or genocidal, in the shared, ontological nature of breath as hope, *dum spiro spero*, where, as I breathe, I hope. I note how this ontology of breath as hope, whether as *ruach*, *pneuma*, *prana*, *qi*, *alruwh*, or *roho*, is incomparably and ontically unique in both the different kinds of asphyxiations faced of breath and in what each is trying to breathe. My hope is that by knowing hope is ontological and inherent to existence, even in despair, and neither coupled to imagineered prostaigia nor salvaged and recycled nostalgia, that one can embrace life as is, knowing we gasp even when we cannot breathe.

Introduction

Pandemics have occurred in many histories, and in various forms. We typically only think of pandemics as global *viral* outbreaks, such as COVID-19, of which I have been a host, survivor, and long-hauler, and will share more about in detail momentarily, but I argue that pandemics can also be social, political, economic, spiritual, and existential, such as structural racism or genocide. I will return to a suggested link between these manifestations at the end of my reflections, but suffice it to say that whatever shape the pandemic takes, it can take our breath away, either by strangulation, suffocation or annihilation, and thus impacts hope's hope for solace. Nevertheless, there is an interconnection between breath and hope, hence, *dum spiro spero*, as we breathe, we hope.

As such, I argue that hope, like breath, is ontological, while a pandemic is not: viruses, structural racism and genocide can be mitigated, and are sinisterly selective, while the ontological, as my colleague and friend Erik Craig describes it, occurs for each and every

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person, in any and every situation, at all times (Craig, 2008). One major mistake of agents of hope is to forget the ontological status of hope when faced with the lived experiences of pandemic aftermath: despair, nihilism, meaninglessness. Hope, as ontological, is more powerful than a pandemic and will outlive it, though hope, like breath, is irreversibly transformed by a pandemic. My fuller unfolding of a *post*-pandemic understanding of hope presumes its difference from a *pre*-pandemic everyday view of hope. So, let us start with a more explicated everyday understanding of hope.

Our Everyday Pre-Pandemic Understanding of Hope

Phenomenologists of lived experience begin by bringing to mind what is often called the citizen's view or our everyday view of a phenomenon, that is our pre-reflective, common place, lived out assumptions, and conclusions we have about an experience. Hope, in our common, everyday understanding usually takes the form of imagined projections into the future about where one would like to be other than where we are, though without the ways and means of getting there. Hope puts the outcome into the hands of that which is more than we are, much like throwing a Hail Mary in the air into the future whose arrival or ending is beyond our control. We (the everyday citizen) use hope like a utility and as a coping mechanism in response to the impossible, or, as the experience of "no way out". Hope, because of its precariousness, its lack of certainty, can often be relegated to the banal and the mundane, such as in hoping the mangoes are on sale this weekend.

Hope is the remaining option when all else fails or when response-ability or accountability feel distant or unwanted, or we are simply too tired to do anything about our unwanted situation or our preferred one. Hope is then offered as a nice accessory, but not practical if not operationalizable and programmable, and waved away to the categories of dreams and prayers, and thus, with a take it or leave it attitude "if it works for you." Even the inflection and tone of voice of the hopeful has a sadness to it, a not-yet-but-maybe catch in the throat, with a smile and a tear.

All that said, much of the literature on hope remains committed to seeing it as a type of coping mechanism for easing the pain of current shattering events such as a pandemic, by inviting eyes on either a future oriented nostalgia, or a pined return for a reinstatement of the past in a nostalgia. A full exhaustive review of the literature on hope is not possible given the point and limit of this paper, as in doing so we would have to start with The Gilgamesh Epic, or the Book of Ruth or Quheleth in Wisdom Literature and come forward, but there are current representatives of this lineage of thought that are helpful to consider.

Let us start with nostalgia. Jill Bradbury (2012), for instance, recognizes that we hope from our present or current positioning (p. 1), even when nostalgic, and that hope is more about the one hoping rather than the future of what could be different from the past. Yet, the character of hope remains "as yet to be" (p. 2). Like Bradbury, Mark Freeman (2010), in spite of his focus on nostalgia, which I will return to in a moment, sees hope's purpose as "a possibility of identity transformation" (Freeman, P. 9), with which Bradbury nuances as a transformation between "the self that was and is yet to be" (Bradbury, p. 1). As mentioned above, though, *who* we are, is *how* we are in situations, and I believe what we hope for are *situations and events* that are more optimal than where we presently find ourselves, such as a place without structural racism or without Covid-19, not as much new selves—though such transformation follow from new situations in which we find ourselves. Self-transformation, however, remains secondary to situational concerns. The focus remains future oriented, as it would be hard to think of hope otherwise.

Lauren Berlant, however, in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), shows how we get in our own way of hoping by reaching for unachievable views of the good life sold to us by various influences in our lives, such as the American dream, assured upward mobility in a secure professional trajectory, a conflict free and trauma free nuclear family experience, among other examples. Berlant leans us in the direction of a well-known critique of humanistic views of the future as progressive, when often the future is tragic and destructive. As John Caputo notes in his book, *Hoping Against Hope*, “Our hope is always that the future is worth more, but experience proves that in fact it often turns out to be worse” (p. 146). As the character, Red, remarks in the film, *Shawshank Redemption*, “Hope is a dangerous thing” (Warner Brothers, 1994). This is particularly the case when we hope for what cannot be the case, but hope, in being hope, does this very thing.

Nevertheless, hope still remains hopeful that dashed hopes can be overcome, albeit with a tempered hubris. As Christopher Castiglia argues (2017), in *The Practice of Hope*, realizing our disenchantments of future projections of hope need not result in apathy as we can still redeem experiences from broken hopes for further future attention. This is similar to more recent work on hope, such as in Anne Lamott’s (2018) *Almost everything: Notes on hope*, as she poetically put it: “I am stockpiling antibiotics for the apocalypse, even as I await the blossoming of the paperwhites on the windowsill in the kitchen” (p. 1). Likewise, Terry Eagleton (2019), in *Hope without Optimism*, uncouples hope from optimism, and, instead, suggests we look to formulating “tragic hope” possibilities after devastating loss. And Sean Austin Grattan (2017), in *Hope isn’t stupid*, reminds us that negative affect discloses desires for new ways of being.

Even the former President Barack Obama offered even more poignant examples of the history of hope against the odds, expressed in his Democratic National Convention speech (2004), which laid the foundation for his book two years later, called, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006): “It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker’s son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too.” Obama’s thoughts are like others that caution us about viewing hope as a free pass beyond contingencies and inviting us to see how hope occurs in potentially hopeless situations, and, thus, is tougher than we imagine, hope remains an imagined nostalgia for another world other than this one, whether spiritual or political, economic, social or moral.

This stance voices a classic theological position, such as that of Ernst Bloch and Jürgen Moltmann, and their emphasis on a two-world’s theory of hope. Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope* (in three volumes, 1954, 1955, 1959, published together in 1995) was advanced by Moltmann in his books, *The Theology of Hope* (1993), and *The Experiment Hope* (2012). Even contemporary discourse in postmodern, radical theology, and continental philosophy of religion speaks about the centrality of the theological event as *that which perhaps or might be* (Caputo, 2013, 2015; Kearney, 2011).

Bloch’s theological utopianism, interwoven with Marxist ideology of transformation, posited the possibility of a future state of absolute perfection. Although Bloch’s work gave us a whiff of hope as ontological in his focus on our not-yet character as human beings, his focus, as I see it, was still a hope for a place in the future where the crooked are made straight and hope is needed no more. Similarly, Moltmann argued for an alternative new world opposite of and driven by current divinely inspired dissatisfaction. This eschatological focus or Messianism is nostalgic in a way that intends a reformulation of identity based on this promise, unless Messianism, as Derrida and other continental philosophers of

religion have redefined it, is the coming of the Other that never quite arrives. Even then, we are looking to the prostatic horizon (Derrida, 2002, p. 362).

One can see the two-world theory of hope, began with Augustine, in these theological stances that inform literary and psychological views on hope as imagined nostalgia. The world may not be an ethereal dualistic afterlife world of eternal, pure spirit, sans contingent finitude, but from this stance, hope is about an/other than this current state of existence, no matter what form of heaven it seeks: health, safety, freedom, equality, painlessness, peace. The seduction of the new and the fresh, of the washed and the novel, or the possible beyond the actual are the nutrients of nostalgic hope, which occur in the distant future and somewhere else. Future oriented frames of hope keep their proverbial eyes on the prize. We may hobble our way into the future, with wisdom hopefully replacing naivete, but the focus remains on hope as an imagined nostalgia.

A pandemic crisis, however, devastates hope defined as confident projections of future gratification, unfettered by contingencies. Wisdom literature as old as *Quoheleth* reminds us that all is vanity, meaning that we cannot rely on imagined, nostalgic utopianism, for, at least, two reasons: its ever receding out of touch quality, and its inevitable possibility of collapse and disappointment, particularly if framed as a simplified and idealized abstraction in confrontation with complex realization. This is why hope is often offered in half-hearted ways: it knows better than to trust the assuredness of things to come.

The loved ones of over 256,000 people (and horrifically climbing) who have died from COVID-19 surely hoped for an outcome other than the cruel one handed them. This is when people stop hoping and praying, if they ever did, and for those who do not, existence thickens with even more mundaneness of fatalistic “whatever.” A crisis takes away our heretofore assuredness, potency, and confidence that everything is going to be alright, that things will work out in the end, and that there is a reason for everything.

Nostalgic salvaging and recycling fairs even worse. Unlike a Nietzschean eternal recurrence that embraces life as it is, even and especially in its horror and pain, hope as nostalgic salvaging and recycling attends to the horror and pain of the past and seeks to reinstate a revisionist past glory once again as our future. Mark Freeman (2010), in *Hindsight*, points out how hope defeats itself by yearning in the future for what was best, which was in the past. The Trumpian slogan, Make America Great Again, is a case in point, as is the belief that I will have the endurance and strength now in my late 50s as I did when 17, or in our persistent hunt for a post-pandemic “return to normal.”

Nostalgic hope, however, presumes a transferability and continuity of a revisionist history of that which is behind me is better way of thinking, a kind of back to the future hopefulness. But contingent situatedness in differing historicities is incomparable in their uniqueness, and plural: there is no The Past, The History, but histories, just as much as there is no Future, but futures. Freeman reminds us of Kierkegaard’s wisdom in *Either/Or* that the unhappiest state is a person who confuses “the light of hope” with “the ghosts of recollection” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 1987, p. 229; quoted in Freeman, p.7). This stance is a revenant of the ancient myth of the eternal return, which for our purposes, means we will get there because we have been there. We need not fear the unknown as we know what has worked for us, and we presume it will work again. Of course, what works and for whom is most often narrowed to the likened to the one speaking, who almost as inevitably forgets that his history often mitigates against her-stories or their-stories. As such, one person’s nostalgic hope can become another’s continuing nightmare.

Either as imagined nostalgia or salvaged and recycled nostalgia, hope is presumed as located in distant temporal and spatial situatedness other than in the here and now, even though one hopes in the here and now. Moreover, hope as nostalgia or nostalgia

functions prophylactically as a coping mechanism to assuage the contingencies of life that imagineering escapes—it is a utility, a tool, used as protection and as an analgesic, but only intermittently, PRN, on an as needed basis like Ibuprofen. This is what is embedded in the when-all-else-fails comment, “All we can do is hope.” This is exactly the view of hope I want to challenge.

On the contrary, I hope to show that hope that is on an as needed basis is not hope as hope is ontological and thus in every moment, for every person in any situation, including hopeless situations. But ontological hope is an impossible possibility that is undecidable—a concept I will unfold momentarily. Hope, thus, is a *pharmakon*; it can deliver us or debilitate us. The undecidability of the pandemic exposes the undecidability of hope, about which I have had, and will share, personal experience as a COVID-19 survivor.

Our Crisis: Pandemic’s Unveiling of Hope as Undecidable

A pandemic unmoors hope as either as a coping mechanism via either an imagineered proslavia for an eventual utopia or by way of salvaged, recycled nostalgia of getting “back” to what was happy, great, and normal. Any crisis is an encounter with the impossible. The impossible is the lived experience of having “no way out.” Yet, part of the impossible is the unmitigated call of the possible present each moment. The impossible is the lived double-bind of being called each moment to respond while simultaneously thwarting any pathway as definitively the way out. We are called to respond, and existentially have to respond (with Sartre, no response is a response), but we have to respond. It is an experience of the impossible-as-undecidable.

Undecidability, as I am using it here, is as described in Continental philosophy by the late Jacques Derrida, and more currently, in John Caputo’s work, as an event that is both possible and impossible at the same time, and, yet, an event that nonetheless calls for decisiveness (Dooley, 2003). The undecidable is both the impossible “hard no” of the incurable, irreversible, inconceivable and unmitigated, but also the inescapable “hell yes” of the irreducible and unconditional. A crisis dismembers and reconfigures horizons of expectations and dependencies on having, knowing, expecting, concluding and producing. A crisis is often initially experienced as a betrayal by life-as-planned, resulting in a vivid experience of the impotence of the “should,” drenched by a jarring cold shower of ontological insecurity. Hope, then, becomes infected itself with viral doubt and feeble trust such that it is barely distinguishable from the proverbial throwing in the towel and hoping the fight will end. We then hope for the end of something rather than something new.

When living through having COVID-19, I vividly remember the night when I was not sure whether to go to bed and risk not breathing again or go to the ER, and risk being put on a ventilator. We all were instructed to go the hospital if we could not breathe, but I *could* breathe...at least barely, and I did not want to take a bed from someone else if I could avoid it, let alone having fear that if I go in, I would not come out. I stood in the hallway with my partner, herself infected with COVID-19, both of us traumatically unsure of what to do. My dry cough had gotten bad enough that it felt as though I was breathing hot cotton. Terrified that my airway was closing, my partner held my hand and kept reciting “you are breathing, keep breathing.” Our French bulldog, the bravest companion throughout this experience, shored up next to me. “Keep breathing,” I told myself. I have sleep apnea and so I sleep with a CPAP machine; I think it very well could have kept me alive. My mantra: *dum spiro, spero*, while I breathe, I hope...but I also still hoped that I could breathe.

Undecidability surrounded and infused these moments. We have to live into a situation that was uncertain “as if” our comportment knew what it was doing, though could not explain it. Any symptom we were experiencing could be re-contextualized to mean something else. “Science” was and is posited as a singular, essentialist capitalization, equated with “fact,” and polarized against “opinion.” But the incessant reinterpretability and politically motivated hermeneutical violence inflicted on what was true, overlooked the need for prowess in the human sciences, namely phenomenological bracketing, unfixable existential depth, and a radical hermeneutics that there are no facts that are not couched in interpretive valuations and agendas. Science itself is undecidable, which did not cloud hope as a post-pandemic phenomenon, but brought hope’s own undecidability to mind.

We were continually offered contradictory information, by experts, disclosing the politics of statistics, which merely showed us the “fact” that there is no raw empiricism. Each day, press conferences are held by those who knowingly tell us that they know and do not know what COVID-19 really is, how long it is going to last, what symptoms “counted” that particular day, and then prescribe us hope-as-whistling-in-the-dark 6–8 feet from each other while we wait on an antidote or vaccine that has yet to come. Hope became 6–8 feet from each other, bolstered by the talisman of a mask. I realized, though, that hope as future oriented imagineering itself had been infected by COVID-19, as it is by any other crisis, and had been intubated.

Thankfully, Dr. Anthony Fasci brought a strange sense of comfort to me by naming the undecidability, even while looking for scientific insight, when he confessed how after 50 years of studying infectious diseases he did not know why an elderly person survives COVID-19 while someone healthy in his thirties dies within 12 h from a blood clot. When knowers do not know, and own it, I, paradoxically, did not feel so alienated. I should have felt more hopeless, but knowing the greatest minds around the world were on it, and the greatest hearts were working non-stop in tents caring for those infected by it, even when bewildered and unproductive, brought, strangely, hope. And this is undecidability. Undecidability is disclosed in the impossible, and the impossible discloses the undecidability in hope.

Science does not mitigate against the undecidable but has its own undecidability inherent in it; this is why we use hypotheses! The reversals and unknowing of pronouncements have been numerous throughout this pandemic, including the incessant reinterpretability of symptoms and symptom management discussed in the reflections. More to the point, there is a science of how the virology of COVID-19 works, which is variant itself, particularly in the earlier stages of our understanding of it, but the biology of having COVID-19 is not the only lived experience of it. A human science of lived experiences of quarantine for instance cannot be addressed by natural science. There are, therefore, multiple scientific narratives and values to address. When I was in the undecidable moment of whether to go to the hospital or not, this was not due to irrationality, whatever is meant by that word here, but due to the undecidability of symptom contextualization (is my difficulty breathing due to some other reason than COVID, and thus not severe enough to go to the hospital) and ethical considerations (should I go in and take a bed and respirator from someone else who may be more severely needing them, as well as if I go to the hospital, who will look after my partner?).

The undecidability unearthed by pandemics dislodges hope from its chronological housing as well as from its task as a coping mechanism—both nostalgia and prosthesis are reached for, but vaporous. The possibility shows up when faced with the impossible. Unknowing a variability can damn, but also bond us in our vulnerability. Our social distancing alienates *and* protects. I have not hugged my adult children in nearly four months

now, having to remain in quarantine, yet I am inspired at the comradery of us all being in this together. Distance protects our lungs, yet alienates our embodied souls. A crisis throws us into a hermeneutical vertigo where the truth is revealed that there is no absolute, static and stable truth; It is both/and, either/or, this *and* that, appearance *and* illusion, a trickster shape-shifting at any moment.

Given that undecidability clips the wings of hope's prostatic imagineering and nostalgic recycling, and, thus, weakens hope's coping skills, one wonders if hope can be hope anymore. Are we then just left with the misery of hoping for an end to despair, meaninglessness and nihilism, thus seeing our Weltschmerz or existential ennui as the broken heart of existence as a Goliath against our stone? Is despair all we are left with in the rummage after crisis, and should we despair about such despair? Despair is a mournful recognition, a dys-appointment and loss of what we hoped hope would be. Despair is not a privation of hope, nor a pathology, but a dark wisdom of its own that requires a different kind of courage to feel and share.

Post-Pandemic Hope and Nihilism: A Dance of Subjugation or Conjugation?

As the pandemic discloses hope's undecidability, the certainty of and arrival or a return is called into question. Hope as prostatic or nostalgia remains on quaking foundations, and although trying to act prophylactically to assuage loss and uncertainty, one wonders if hope can be hope if stripped of its everyday understanding as such. But I argue that in being laid bare of its prostatic and nostalgic proclivities, hope becomes more powerful in that its ontological nature comes more into focus, ironically, first in and through despair, meaninglessness, and nihilism.

The endurance called for in surviving COVID-19, and the unpredictable attacks from any direction that could occur, can take you to the edge and invoke a call for surrender. One feels the undertow of surrender when patterns of suffering are unmitigable, when endurance has no finish line, when one's pain overrides any felt love and concern for those (if any) in one's life, when the cost analysis of continued biological existence pays out nothing but continued suffering. A kind of COVID *ennui* or *Weltschmerz* settles in, a weariness, a being fed up and having had it with the interminable illness, how it has been handled, the aimless guidance, the politics of masks, the selfish non-compliance, the annoyance of the same old same old, and confinement. Suicide crosses many a mind and heart, as it would save a bed and end the entrapment, but is usually kept to oneself so as to not be put in another kind of bed and entrapped even more.

In October of this past year, new stats were surfacing that up to 10% of the American population was considering suicide. Hope seemed to have checked out, decided to play golf, tweet nonsense, or watch mindless television. But the suicidal moment must be addressed directly by any surviving possibility of hope worth substance. It is *the* question for hope, but most often avoided for fear of its dangerous enticement. Strange how the place most needed for clinicians often becomes the place most avoided. As a supervising psychologist with over thirty years of experience, I continually notice how when suicide is even mentioned, and all hands appear on deck to prevent and rescue with mountains of reprimand and negative professional consequences if one goes rogue and actually respects the suicidal moment. This lived valuation of privileging quantitative existence over qualitative Existenz is telling, as is the assumption that the suicidal person is organically or psychologically compromised too much to make rational decisions, which, presumably would be to continue to live. The other presumption is that what is rational is safe, and what

is unsafe is irrational. Did we forget Kierkegaard altogether? We live our lives irrationally every moment!

Each moment is lived pre-reflectively, and the irrational leap of faith in each moment need not be seen as dangerous, nor does the rational and considered be seen as safe. The Final Solution took deliberate rational calculation as does how much water to waterboard someone during torture, but this could be considered dangerous or madness. Moreover, my own exploration of suicide notes quite often shows deeply detailed and considerate planning and care of survivors. We may be uncomfortable with the idea that suicide could be an act of hope for liberation, but just because something is uncomfortable does not mean it is automatically dangerous, and if something is dangerous does not mean it is unethical or is not edifying.

The parameters of this paper are too narrow to fully unpack this concern. For our purposes here, though, if “dangerous” means uncomfortable or an expansion of the possibility of suicide being a meaningful response worth providing space for to unfold, then so be it. It remains the case that in spite of our sadness of anyone suiciding, or energies to prevent it, suicide, phenomenologically, is an act of hope. That one may be disturbed by suicide being an act of hope does not make it not so.

It may be uncomfortable to take in how suicide, thought to be the absolute example of the death of hope, can be viewed as actually a courageous act of transcendence. I am saddened by any act of suicide, short of those suiciding to end unmitigated and excruciating pain, as I believe we are all responsible for creating a world in which any one of us feels it is worth going against self-preservation to avoid any further oppression of pain. I prefer finding a way to clear and light up some time to find other ways to live that are more meaningful and less painful. That said, it remains the case that suicide, whether pathologized (unfairly) as a pathological escape or as a Camusian cowardess to avoid facing the absurd, or as act of the most extreme courage, it seeks an otherness-than-here that is presumed better. In fact, Simon Critchley, in his *Notes on Suicide*, borrowing from Cioran, writes that suicide is too optimistic (p. 12)! He notes that “...a belief in suicide as the only way out derives from an arrogant over-estimation of our capacity for salvation through self-destruction (2020, p.12).” The point remains that tragic irony is that even suicide is an act of hope, whether as it occurred at Masada, or when jumpers leaped hand in hand out of the Trade Towers at 9/11, or simply someone who wants to end their suffering before being ended by it. But this moment discloses the essence of hope, not its end. We are hoping when we host hopelessness.

This is not a romanization of nothingness, but form of liberation to a something-else-ness. In the act of suicide, we begin to see, paradoxically, the glimmers of light that hope incessantly lingers around even in despair. Based on the Kabbalah’s *eins-sof*, or that which is without limit or end, Richard Rubenstein, in *After Auschwitz*, argues that hope after another pandemic like genocide, can only be out of a nothingness, a holy nothingness. One way to understand the holy nothingness is a reminder about ground or source without limit or end; one could even talk of it as ground-less-ness. Pandemics call back to our attention such holy nothingness (1992, pp. 293–306). Despair hurts because of hope, not due to the absence of it. David Newheisser’s new book, *Hope in a secular age: Deconstruction, negative theology and the future of faith*, writes that “disappointment is always possible, though people persist” (2020, p. 2), arguing against Hagglund and others seeing deconstruction as ushering in radical atheism, and instead, showing how the unforeseeable future, which I note is Derrida’s undecidability, need not result in nihilism. John Caputo further notes that nihilism has a grace about it that

can be liberating for possibilities (2013, pp. 223ff). It is hopeful in its flexibility and freedom from hegemony and orthodoxy.

This line of thinking in these and other authors not only begins to show hope's indestructible ontology, but slouches toward a Nietzschean affirmation of life as is, rather than what we want it to be, even though for these thinkers hope is still an "in spite of" act rather than in-light-of or as-a-part-of affirmation. Any critique discloses a utopian hope; this is what I am meaning by the hope embedded in despair. Answering to the critique that my description of hope leaves little differentiation from despair, indeed! IF we understand hope not as a polarity of despair, but embedded in it!

As to the critique that I am erasing the distinction between hope and despair, I reiterate here where I have discussed at length elsewhere that meaninglessness is neither a privation of meaning, nor a form of anonymous meaning (DuBose, 2016). It has an integrity of its own, as does its "family resemblances" with despair and nihilism. But like the phenomenon of suicide, these experiences, like all other experiences are co-constituted by situated webs of meaning that birth their significance. It is like hot being meaningful only in relation to cold, and vice versa, but not merely as a dialectical comparison and contrast. There is more of an interpenetration of despair being what it is due to the in-carnation in it of what could have and should have been, but never will be. Hope, on the other hand, would not hope were it not for a response to hopelessness that drives the hopeful moment in its inception.

For hope to stand the test of its lifetime, it has to remain when all else falls and remain as an affirmation of times in life when all falls. It is a misunderstanding of the Nietzschean affirmation to try to make what is devastating not devastating. The affirmation, which is a will to power, a hope itself, is paradoxical in that affirming life that has negations moves hope from being a remedy to such negations to being a host, like Rumi's Guest House, to a negation's transformative nature, even if excruciating. Not only take the pain, but bring it on. Hope has to work in this big dog arena, or it will remain ineffectual except for mundane, banal and surface annoyances. We are not affirming of the pandemics of death by virus or racial violence or genocide as beneficial and the good, but affirming that hope arises out of the ashes of these destructive forces as shaped and transformed by them. We push for vaccines, we institute police education about implicit racial biases, we elect a new President, we make reparations.

This does have the flavor of a character building theodicy to it. But there is a difference between an "in spite of" quality to it and a "due to" quality to it. Here, what we hope for is already in process. Even more precisely, hope is *be-ing* when there is *no-thing*. *Hope is who we are*, and this realization does not come about until baked by a pandemic. As Erich Fromm writes in *The Revolution of Hope*, "...hope is a state of being...an inner readiness...a psychic concomitant to life and growth... When hope has gone life has ended, actually or potentially. Hope is an intrinsic element of the structure of life, or the dynamic of man's spirit...it is the vision of the PRESENT (sic) in a state of pregnancy." (2010, pp. 12–14). We are ontologically, pre-reflectively hopeful before we even know we are. My hope is that knowing hope is ontological will bring hope, even if as an abyss-mal consolation.

It may seem like the undecidable express will only give us one way ticket to nihilism or despair (de-sperare, without hope), I argue that it releases hope from the commodification of an engineered product it the future and the eternal return of nostalgia, so as to place us in the here and now, the eternal now. And, moreover, this now is ontologically hopeful.

An Abyss-mal Consolation: The Gift of Hope as Ontological

Elie Wiesel's poignant story in *The Trial of God*, of the Rabbis at Auschwitz putting God on trial, condemning God and then convening for evening prayer highlights the hope that comes out of despair and the possibility of hope's ontological status (Wiesel, 1995). A prayer may become a prayer only when we no longer know to whom or about what to pray. What may be considered a broad stroke about those who do not pray, this is on the contrary another way of seeing how prayer can happen for those who do not think they pray, again, an alternative understanding of what we typically call prayer, not a conclusive statement on the definition of prayer. Moreover, it shows that prayer-as-hope is as ontological as breathing, whether one is theistic, atheistic, polytheistic, agnostic or misotheistic. As John Caupito notes, "... we are all praying and weeping for the coming of something, even if, especially if, we know not what, which leaves us praying to be able to pray (2006, p. 18)." Wendell Berry, put it succinctly: "...when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey... the impeded stream is the one that sings (Berry, 2011)."

A crisis or pandemic brings us *to* hope, not away from it, and intensified hope's ontological nature. A crisis spotlights undecidability, but undecidability is not in-decidability; it is a call to act *in spite of* our hermeneutical vertigo. And, to highlight the most paradoxical aspect of finitude of all, existentially, ontologically, we cannot *not* act! This apparent nihilism of both an absence of hope as a coping mechanism via repeatable nostalgia and/or imagineered prostaigia, and the nihilism of no way out of having to respond to not having a way out, sits us down with a clarity of hope being the ontological experience of a pre-reflective "in-spite-of-ness". The in-spite-of-ness is not an against-ness, but an and-so-on-ness, or as-well-as-ness. Hope as ontological and undecidable, untethered from future oriented chronology, can be temporally and spatially multi-directional: we may hope for something in the future, or hope to remain in place, or hope to reconcile past alienation, *and* each direction will be *both* a gain and a loss.

Post-pandemic hope is not a configuration of deferred gratification off in the future, but an immediacy. It is an ontological and inescapable and involuntary as receptive inspiration and releasement of expiration. I can only hold my breath, to keep it in or out, only so long. The involuntary takes over, in the present. So, it is with hope. The choice to hope is the derivative enactment of hope already and involuntarily lived. Hope is inherent even in the most apparently hopeless or even innocuous situations. Suspicious eyes hope for finding or averting danger. Walking hopes for the risked step to support us. Sitting in a chair discloses our enacted hope that it will hold me. Typing these words hopes my electronics will hold up enough to make a point. The act of rising out of bed is an act of hope for what might be or a hope that one can face it, just as remaining under the covers or throwing one's hands in the air and surrendering hopes for safety and peace. Rather than look for hope in life-denying ways either in an imagineered prostaigia or a salvaged and recycled nostalgia, hope occurs in each and every present moment with an integrity of its own.

In his work, *Notes on Suicide*, Simon Critchley (2020) advises us to stop trying to find meaning in life, noting it will never come. He is writing about meaning seeking as life denying affirmation or at least tolerance of the moment at hand. As I read his argument, he seems to equate how most others use the word, meaning, to denote a need for life to be other and more positive than it is, or as a state of feeling that is beyond or

above the tragic. I agree with Critchley that the ordinary is enough, and need not be forfeited or subsumed under the extra ordinary, as in imagineered proslavia or salvaged and recycled nostalgia. I also agree that we can set ourselves up, and set others up, for nothing but disappointment with the advice to seek meaning elsewhere than where you are at any given moment, or that there will be a final wrap-it-all-up experience someday, somewhere, sometime. But these convictions confirm my point that each moment is meaningful, that is, has its own significance, if not beauty, and thus, is ontological. Meaning, to me, does not signify a feeling or place beyond the tragic, but is in it, or, as Critchley so poetically puts it, is found “in matches struck in the dark” (p. 92). I would just add that the dark is as significant as the struck match.

What is harder to see, if hope is ontological and thus in any moment, is the undecidability of hope in and as the dark. If the dark is such acts as suicide, we must admit that in the midst of the pain-induced myopia of the suicidal moment, the event itself remains a hope for liberation from suffering. In moments of dark resignation, one hopes in the turning away, in the giving in, of what might be Other than what has been. The ontological presence of hope is all the more confirmed by the presumed most despairing moment of existence being itself nevertheless an act of hope.

Comportment, visualization, and respiration are as existential as they are physiological, and evidences of hope as ontological. Hence, what is often called hopelessness is disappointment, even if abject in its intensity; it is mourning. But inescapably attached to such mourning is an indestructible “in spite of”, and even more vital, “included in and along with.” One finds oneself in each moment having *already* hoped, which propels the next moment’s hopeful call. Not only is my response to what the moment brings an act of hope, so is the reception to the coming occasion. Crises bring into focus that hope becomes what it is when we are without givens, as when the givens are presumed, we miss the ontological nature of hope that will cry out even when there is no one in the darkness and we see no way out.

In short, *hope* in post-pandemic times, *is the inescapable, pre-reflective decisiveness in undecidability*. Hope is inescapable, *IF* understood as an *enactment, nevertheless*. The evidence of hope is in what we *are* doing when we cannot be evidence-based, what we *are* doing when we have neither conclusions nor measurements, and what we *are* doing when our *raison d’être* is fogged. Hope is our gasp when breath is short. Long before we know we are doing it, we are always and already living into what the Continental philosopher of religion, John Caputo, describes as a theology of what might be, perhaps (Caputo, 2013). We are *not* looking *at* what might be, but *living a perhaps*. We do not have to find, muster or create hope; we *ARE* hope. As long as we breathe, we cannot *not* hope.

Conclusion

The Tie That Binds—Our Shared Breath

At the beginning of my reflections, I note that a pandemic is varied, and includes both viral and racial components, even to the point of genocide. Indeed, ontically, the COVID survivor’s gasp is not the gasp of the victim of structural racism. When I say I cannot breathe as a white male COVID survivor and long-hauler, I do not mean that George Floyd’s cry that he could not breathe is in any way the same experience. Ontologically, though, breath as reality and metaphor binds us as our existence relies on the biology of

respiration and our Existenz relies on the existentiality of respiration. More to the point about hope, *dum spiro spero*, is that it is automatic in existence, unless cut off by viral load or racism, or other forms of non-biological apnea.

What ties obvious differences together is the relationship between the ontological nature of breathing and our relation of choice to it. You wrote, “Yet, the material and political situation of those who suffer from suffocation differs.” Ontological givens are taken up in ontic ways. These ontic ways, those suffering from the impact of structural racism and those suffering from the oppression of COVID 19 are ontically different, but share an ontology of hope. Breath is both a lived reality and metaphor. Suffocation is a restriction of breath, either by drowning by COVID-19 induced pneumonia, or by asphyxiating strangulation. Breath is also a thrown given of our bodyhood, operating out of thematized awareness unless interrupted. Both COVID and structural racism are lethal, and both can be prevented. (those who died in spite of all prevention??? not sure what to do with that; those who are oppressed by those who choose not to mitigate structural racism, not sure what to do with that). But in both situations, if respiration is taken, there is no inspiration. One wants to breath uncontaminated air while the other wants to breath racial justice. Resiliency discloses ontological hope, whether it is marching in the streets in spite of over 400 years of oppression or caring for COVID in spite of mass casualties. Hope seems indestructible, which is another reason why I talk of suicide as itself hopeful rather than a foil to hope.

What breathes is soul. Breath is connected to cross cultural foundations of ancient spiritual traditions: ruach, pneuma, prana, psychologist is an *iatros tes psuche*, a physician of soul, of the immeasurable and invisible *pneuma*, *jingshen*, *ruach*, *prana*, *alruwh*, *roho*, The Force, of breath. The *Seelsorge* is a guardian of soul-as-breath, and hence, of hope, but a post-pandemic hope. may we all work to breath freely and to breath equally.

In that dark night of intimate mingling with COVID-19, when wondering whether my breaths were numbered, I began to realize what monks and sages from multiple traditions have offered to us for eons: it was not *I* who breathed, but that *I was being breathed*. My agency was, and is, in response to what is out of my hands. Taken up by the Other can be comforting and terrifying. Stating that I am breathed by the Other points to the ontology of hope, not to a reneging of responsibility of what I do with what is ontologically handed to me. One does not have a pass to forfeit accountability of how I take up my existential givens, just the opposite. Ethically, and theologically, the stance that we are breathed mitigates against the narcissism of pure self-creation or supremacist segregation (only I create hope). Presuming oneself to be as the gods is as, if not more, dangerous than disowning accountability. Neither is this stance a romanticization of nothingness.

I have addressed suicide above as also an act of hope. I reframe what is experienced as abject despair unto death to shown hope embedded in it, not as an erasure or minimization of the experience of its pain. The reframe of even despair as disclosing hope, does not undifferentiated hope from despair, but points to the sine qua non experience of undecidability in hope that this reframe brings hope. If despair incarnates an unknown hope, then maybe there are other possibilities of being otherwise than that of the bullet, the pills, the ledge or the noose.

The inescapability of hope is the always and already moment to moment leaning into the next moment and what it will bring, hopefully as a gift, and not as a replacement of what has been or is. Understanding hope as ontological does yield a different outcome than locking hope into chronological remedy or fantasy in proslavia or nostalgia. Hope as ontological, and pre-reflective, is not a product to be engineered, but an opportunity to step into at any moment. Even in that decisive moment, if choosing not to trust hope, hopes in not doing so one may feel safer. But given that hope is undecidable also invites variance and diversity in

the ways one can be hopeful. The Latin phrase, *abyssus abyssum invocat*, need not mean either the aphorism that one misstep leads to another, or music by the extreme metal band, *Behemoth*. The call of the abyss to us in the abyss is an unexpected, undecidable, call of hope. There is wisdom of focusing on one moment at a time as this advice backs us up to the present lived moment that discloses the ontological of hope.

Many others are living out the middle space between inspiration and expiration in various circumstances. As some people are trying to breathe in spite of COVID, others are trying to breathe in spite of institutionalized racism and racial targeted violence. Some people are catching their breaths from marching miles as activists, while others are snatching air between sobs after working interminable shifts alongside death as healthcare workers. Children are heaving breaths running from bullets in their neighborhoods, while others are taking a breather after their third job so they can eat tonight. Others are breathing sighs of relief as police cars either drive by, or stop, while somewhere lonely parents are sighing relief as they receive news that there is a special kind of care for their child's diagnosis, and that their child is more than their diagnosis.

We often forget to breathe when considering these realities and our roles in them, or we can be inspired by them, or both, but whether marching in the streets, listening to someone tell their story of survival to you when they have never told anyone else, helping a child find her best fit at school, writing about what others hope someone will write about, creating a space for another person to feel esteem for the first time in his or her or their life, or offering a myriad of other tender mercies, we are helping us all breathe. We are existential respirators for each other that clear space for us to hope until our last breath. How could we not help? How could we not meet each other, even at 6–8 ft apart, or as pixels? We are breathed. And hope is, itself, ontologically pandemic.

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