

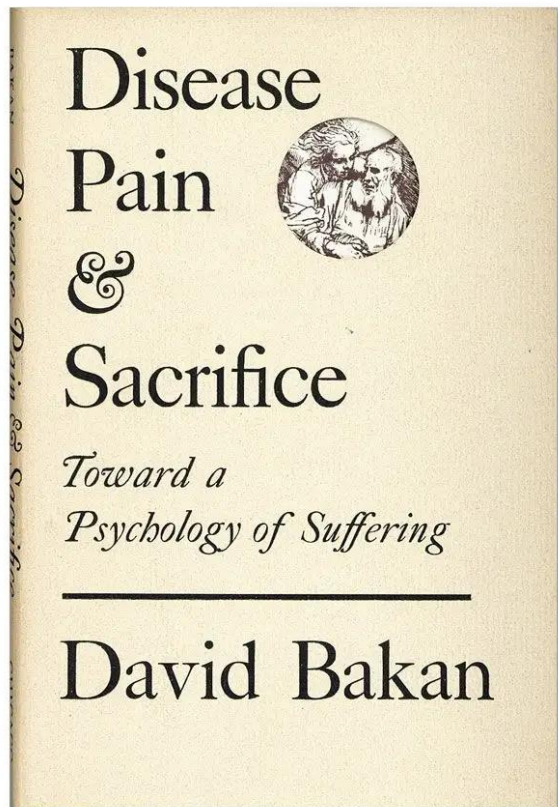
You Can Hope Again

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In this Christmas session, the world is full of bad news, from devastating wars and humanitarian crises to mental health problems (CBC News, 2023). But we can hope again because Christ was born in a manger more than 2 thousand years ago. My 2002 Christmas message reflected hope. I want to share it again with a new generation of readers.

Believe it or not, after 20 years, the International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM) still represents a unique voice of hope and meaning for the suffering masses. My course on [Adventures with Viktor Frankl](#) represents our latest project to provide a new vision of meaning-centered approach to mental health and flourishing. It is still not too late for you—INPM members and newsletter subscribers—to enroll and discover how this course can transform your life.

You may not know that my vision for INPM was developed while teaching at York University more than 50 years ago. I'm grateful for the many long conversations I had with the late Dr. David Bakan, author of *Duality of Human Existence* (1966) and *Disease, Pain & Sacrifice: Towards a Psychology of Suffering* (1968), during my time at York.



He was interested in my work because I taught "Learning Theory" and "Research Methodology" while having a strong faith in Christianity. The topics of our conversation could range from Job's

suffering, the meaning of Abraham's sacrifice of Issac, and the resurrection of Jesus. I argued for a tripartite model of human beings:

- (1) Agency - peace with one's true self by devoting one's life to his or her calling (exemplar: the leadership of Moses).
- (2) Communion - peace with others through love and forgiveness (exemplar: the patience of Job).
- (3) Spirituality - connecting with God and doing God's will (exemplar: the faith of Abraham).

I also argued with him that all three connections can be achieved through the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus as our redeemer.

We did not always agree but we enjoyed the dialogue. These deep discussions laid the foundation for my self-transcendence paradigm of existential wellbeing, which is the main focus of my current research.

Towards the end of 2023, I could not help but enjoy a sense of bitter-sweet nostalgia. I happened to remember my [2002 Christmas message of hope](#) which is still relevant today. I want to reproduce it here for your enjoyment.

May God bless you with a wonderful new year.

Most people take oxygen for granted, until they have respiratory problems. Similarly, we don't realize the importance of hope, until it is shattered or taken away from us. Without the magic of hope, all life withers away.

Just last week, a 16-year old youth hanged himself, because the coach threatened to remove him from the hockey team. About the same time, a 22-year-old woman drowned herself after a heated argument with her boyfriend.

Each day, thousands of young people complete suicide. Their night falls fast because they give up hope too soon. Somehow, they cannot see beyond their present difficulties.

Martin Seligman, proponent of 'learned optimism', offers a simple but effective solution. If individuals learn to explain away their problems as temporary and specific setbacks, then they can remain hopeful that better days are ahead.



Other psychologists, such as C. R. Snyder, emphasize the importance of agency. If people have confidence in their own competence and resourcefulness to achieve success, then they would not easily succumb to despair.

According to Michael Scheier and Charles Carver, some individuals are simply optimistic by nature. They possess what may be called 'dispositional optimism'. They tend to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. They expect good things to happen to them most of the time.

Psychological research by Shelly Taylor and others have also shown that a positive bias may be beneficial and adaptive. A little illusion can be good medicine.

Often, the above ideas of optimism are predicated on the assumption that people are entitled to the good life, which means the absence of suffering and troubling thoughts.

People who hold this kind of worldview may ask: "What good could possibly come from pain, fear, or despair?" They would suggest: "Banish all negative thoughts from our consciousness, then we can enjoy authentic happiness and lasting hope."

Unfortunately, the opposite may be true in many situations. Consider a woman who has just been diagnosed as having no more than six months to live. After enduring surgery and chemotherapy, that is the only hope her physician can offer her. How far can positive illusion carry her?

You may also consider visiting a hospice. The patients there know why they are there; they are only keenly aware that their physical life will soon come to an end. Could they maintain confidence in their own competence when their fragile existence is based on dependence on the care from others?

How about the less fortunate people who live in parts of the world which have been devastated and decimated by wars, AIDS, poverty, and natural disasters? Could they explain their misfortunes away through learned optimism?

Is hope possible in such desperate situations? How could one find hope beyond hope? Do we need to believe in miracles in order to keep hope alive?

Some people refer to December as the month of miracles, because of Christmas. They believe that God—loving us so much that He gave us His only son—would surely perform other miracles in our lives, if only we believe. They pray for healing of terminal illnesses, for delivery from chronic pain and suffering, and for rescue from the jaws of death.

But there is a catch for miracle seekers—those who demand miracles are most likely to be disappointed. God is not a miracle worker at our beckon command. Belief in miracles can give us false hope.

If belief in miracles is not the answer then what kind of hope can survive the most devastating blows of life? Where can we find the hope that springs eternal?

The following is what I have learned from those who are suffering and dying—they can teach us a great deal about hope:

- You need a hope that is stronger than your best strength, greater than your highest success, and bigger than all the world could offer.
- You need a hope that is born of a tragic vision and baptized by fire in the sacred chamber of suffering, in which you can discover the essence of your inner being.
- You need a hope that transcends the present circumstances and physical bodies, a hope that is connected with the spiritual reality which endures forever.
- You need a hope that is based on affirmation in the essential goodness and ultimate meaning of the Source of Life, which becomes increasingly real as you travel further along in the long night's journey into dawn.

Such is the mystery of tragic optimism. Such is the true miracle of Christmas, which shines forever, regardless of what happens to our present lives or our physical bodies.

Yes, you can hope again, even when the world, as you know it, is disintegrating right before your eyes.

You can hope when you, with trembling, feeble hands, embrace life in the valley of death.

You can hope when your eyes are open to the enchanting, transcendental reality beyond the physical realm.



References

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