

“I hope we get children off the internet and back to nature” *Victoria*

“I HOPE TO FEEL IT’S OKAY TO LAUGH, NOT CRY, EVERY TIME I HEAR TRANCE MUSIC”

Lilach

“I hope for a day when I wake up without the effects of long COVID”

Diana

“I hope healthy masculinity takes hold in Australia”

Coleen

“I hope the Kardashians evaporate”

Anne-Maree

ON A MORE POSITIVE NOTE . . .

Asking people to share their hopes for the future elicits quiet dreams – and a little despair. When all seems bleak, it’s the poets and philosophers, not the politicians, who provide the best salve.

BY *David Leser*

“Hope is vested in the young”

Kim

“I HOPE FOR VOICE, TRUTH AND TREATY”

Carolyn

“I HOPE THAT SOUL MAY DEFEAT EGO”

Futka

“I HOPE FOR THOUGHT LEADERS AND LEGISLATORS WHO SEE THE IMPORTANCE OF REINSTATING TRUST”

Vitek

“I hope my sons grow into men who give the world more than it gives them” *Andrew*

HOPE HAS many voices and Viktor Frankl's is one that echoes down through the years. He was the Austrian psychiatrist who survived the horrors of Auschwitz and then, in 1946, gifted the world a new approach for attempting to transcend life's most profound miseries.

He called his approach logotherapy – later named the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy – and it asserted that even amid the most appalling suffering, a person was still free to decide how to view that suffering. He could be beyond starvation, freezing to death, infested with lice, sick with typhus, but he could still walk back into the nightmare of his Nazi concentration camp hut and – as a few did – give away his last piece of bread.

A man was able to choose, therefore, not only how he thought about his agony, but whether there was any meaning – possibly even healing – to be extracted from its most desolate corners. This was the last of the human freedoms that could never be taken away.

“There is nothing in the world,” Frankl wrote in his landmark book *Man's Search for Meaning*, “... that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life... There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: ‘He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.’”

I don't know what Victor Frankl would say today to the families of the 14,000-and-counting [at the time of writing] Palestinians erased by Israeli bombs in Gaza, or the estimated 1.5 million more displaced, terrified and without sufficient food, water or medicine; or to the tens of thousands of loved ones of Frankl's fellow Jews sadistically murdered by Hamas in Israel on October 7, or to those held hostage in Gaza. What hope in such a carnival of death?

I don't know what he would say to the survivors of this year's massive earthquakes in Turkey, Syria and Morocco, or to the people of Ukraine still enduring the devastations of Russian bombardment. Or to the hundreds of millions around the world still reeling from a biblical year of scorching temperatures, wildfires, floods, storms, landslides, hurricanes and record-breaking rainfall.

What meaning to be derived from this, except that the earth is screaming, and we along with her? Scan the globe – or our own backyards – and the miseries of human existence are on full display: the women of Afghanistan banned by a resurgent Taliban from public life; the millions of their sisters in neighbouring Iran trying to resist the brutalities of the mullahs; the near one million Rohingya forcibly displaced to Bangladesh from their homes in Myanmar. What hope for them – and who am I to talk of such things from the moat of my white, middle-class existence?

And yet, as Frankl said: “Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by doing so change himself.”

When I read those words again recently I dismissed them as almost devoid of reality, until I reminded myself who'd actually written them. A survivor, someone who, as Masha Gessen observed recently in *The New Yorker*, had “stared into the abyss of catastrophe to imagine and enact new ways of living”.

I thought of the Holocaust survivors I had met throughout my life, as well as the victims of torture and imprisonment I had interviewed as a journalist; the asylum seekers who'd fled their homelands and survived days and nights at sea only to be incarcerated for years in this country. From what place in their wounded

bodies and spirits had they managed to find hope? How had they endured?

I thought about the Palestinian doctor I'd interviewed for this magazine more than a decade ago, not long after Israeli forces had killed three of his daughters and a niece with tank fire aimed at their Gazan home. Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish had been the first Palestinian obstetrician and gynaecologist given a residency inside an Israeli hospital. He'd assisted scores of infertile Israeli couples realise the joys of childbirth. He'd regularly helped save Jewish and non-Jewish lives. He'd even hosted Israelis in his home, a generous shelter amid the degradation of his heaving refugee city.

He'd proved himself repeatedly a man of peace, someone prepared to condemn his own side's suicide bombings, in private as well as in public. “Israelis are our friends,” he'd often told his daughters, “and we should love them as we love one another.”

And then, following the slaying of his daughters in 2009, he had doubled down on his efforts to combat extremism in all its guises – racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism – by writing his international best-seller *I Shall Not Hate*, as well as establishing Daughters for Life, an organisation dedicated to changing the status and role of women in the Middle East.

“I think the world is drowning in hate,” he told me during that 2011 interview, the tears spilling down his cheeks. “Hate is destructive. It is a toxin that affects all aspects of life. It doesn't just affect the individual who carries it, it affects the community. If I hate, who is

going to suffer? Myself. My children. My relatives. My community. I will be disconnected from the world.”

Perhaps this Palestinian doctor remains the embodiment of what Victor Frankl meant by “tragic optimism”, an almost impossible-to-conceive notion of finding meaning in spite of – or through – suffering.

And yet who can blame those who would scorn such an idea? “F--- hope,” Indigenous academic and author Chelsea Watego declared in her book *Another Day in the Colony*, published

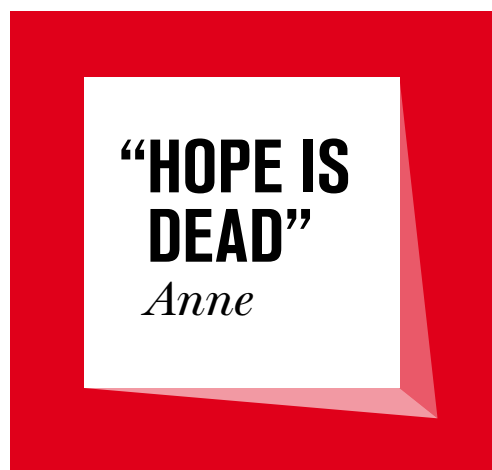
two years before Australia resoundingly said No to a constitutional Voice to parliament for First Nations people. “Hope to me,” she wrote, “has always worked for the folks for whom everything turns up trumps, through whatever adversity they meet. Hope was... always the stuff of fairy tales and fables, which were reserved exclusively for white people and, occasionally, those respectable ethnics.

“Some might attribute suicide rates in our communities to the result of having given up hope. I would argue it's a result of our reliance upon it... hope is a most ridiculous strategy for Blackfullas in the colony precisely because it doesn't actually do anything – for us.”

I heard the same thing from a friend of mine – white and privileged, just like me – who told me: “My real hope is that people give up hope to become better acquainted with reality.” Then he referenced the Greek myth of Pandora, where hope became imprisoned inside Pandora's jar after all the other evils had escaped. Best not to hope – so went his interpretation – as it would only prolong the torment.

I have no answer to this despair, certainly no good answer, except to use the quote frequently misattributed to American poet and author Maya Angelou: “The bird doesn't sing because it has the answers, it sings because it has a song.”

And as you can see, I am desperately trying to raise a song in the closing weeks of this torturous year, if for no other reason than to remind myself of what I still



believe to be true: that no matter who we are – black or white, straight, gay or gender diverse, healthy or sick, rich or poor, abled or disabled, loved or lonely, living or dying – hope is, to paraphrase Victor Hugo, the one word written on the “brow of every human being”.

AS I ruminated on this topic, I thought long and hard about the things I hope for, beyond an end to the slaughter of innocents in Israel and Gaza, and a just and lasting resolution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Oh yes, and an end to our destruction of the planet and the strongman-in-history era.

There was the hope that my daughters would feel cherished, safe and inspired by their work; that my 94-year-old mother would know peace when her time finally came; that my beloved friend would get better; that Donald Trump would go to jail; so, too, Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin; that we could repair the earth, and the seasons would resume their normal patterns; that we would begin to see the humanity in people with whom we disagreed; that we would drink from the well of Indigenous knowledge and the practice of *dadirri*, or deep listening; that women would continue rising around the world; and that inspired leadership would end the housing crisis and create a truly regenerative, circular economy.

I located a hundred different hopes and then I posted a request on Facebook asking for people to share theirs, because what hope did I have of giving voice to anyone's but my own? The responses came pouring in, as if I'd crept into the shadowlands of a collective longing just waiting to be articulated: “I hope for romantic love, simple and kind,” said Caroline. “I hope I meet my grandchildren,” said Kristin. “I hope the cancer doesn't come back,” said Sally. “I hope people reflect on their own conduct,” said Matthew. “I hope to keep hope alive,” added James.

Simple, beautiful paeans to hope; predictable ones, too, about peace and connection and loving kindness and an end to this sadness and madness, but also how to get front-row tickets for the Madonna concert... (Thank you, Mandy – Taylor Swift tix would be handy, too.)

I thought about all these hopes and whether they were false hopes, imaginary hopes, hopes in vain, and whether hoping was the same thing as wishing, praying, trusting, desiring, believing, or placing one's faith in a god or some inexplicable organising principle impossible for us mere mortals to fathom.

Then I turned to the Irish poet Seamus Heaney – because I often turn to Irish poets for consolation – and there was Heaney paraphrasing Václav Havel, the former dissident, playwright and first president of the Czech Republic: “Hope is not optimism, which expects things to turn out well, but something rooted in the conviction that there is good worth working for.”

Everywhere we look – if we care to – we can find people working for the good, as Renato Redentor Constantino, a climate campaigner in the Philippines, noted: “We are witness today to daily displays of love that remind us of the many reasons why humans have survived this long. We encounter epic acts of courage and citizenship each day in our neighbourhoods and in other cities and countries, instances that whisper to us that the depredations of a few will eventually be overcome by legions of stubborn people who refuse the counsel of despair.”

Each week I receive a newsletter from an independent Australian media company, Future Crunch, showcasing stories from around the world of progress and inspiration. These stories have become a necessary balm for me, like poetry, music and plunging into the ocean. Stories of the “White Helmets” volunteers rushing in to help when the bombs rain down in Syria. Stories of restored lakes and the return of migratory birds in Kashmir; of a free-ration scheme for 800 million people in India; of the elimination of the rubella virus from North Korea; of a coalmine in the United

Kingdom being transformed into the world's largest battery energy storage project. Stories of a sustainability revolution to match the Industrial Revolution for scale and the digital revolution for speed.

Not Pollyanna-ish stories of unbridled optimism; rather, stories vested with courage and a faith in possibility. Stories like the Ukrainian economist rescuing wild animals amid the Russian onslaught of his country; of the janitor in Florida preparing 1000 meals a week for the homeless; of the Afghan woman Shabana Basij-Rasikh, who founded the first and only boarding school for Afghan girls – in Rwanda of all places – after the Taliban resumed power in 2021. She managed to evacuate 256 female students and staff from the chaos of Kabul. “It's people like these,” says Amy Davoren-Rose from Future Crunch, “who are stitching our world back together. These are our menders. These are the people that fly under the radar.”

IN HIS 2019 international bestseller *Human Kind: A Hopeful History*, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman asked his readers to imagine a new drug on the market



that was causing heightened anxiety, a misperception of risk, darker moods, a growing sense of helplessness and a contempt and hostility towards others. “Would we use this drug?” he asked. “Would our kids be allowed to try it? Would government legalise it? To all of the above: yes. Because... that drug is the news.”

Like many of us, Bregman was raised to believe the news was good for his development, that as an engaged citizen it was his duty to follow the news. Scientists, however, were now reaching different conclusions. “The news, according to dozens of studies,” he wrote, “is a mental health hazard.” Not decent-quality journalism that tried to make sense of the world, Bregman argued, but so-called news that was forever tilted towards the shocking, the violent, the extraordinary.

“A few years ago, people in 30 different countries were asked a simple question: ‘Overall, do you think the world is getting better, staying the same, or getting worse?’ In every country... the vast majority of people answered that things are getting *worse*. The reality is exactly the opposite. Over the last several decades, extreme poverty, victims of war, child mortality, crime, famine, child labour, deaths in natural disasters and the number of plane crashes have all plummeted. We're living in the richest, safest, healthiest era ever.”

So why didn't we realise this, Bregman asked. Because particularly in this digital age, the news was only getting more extreme, more constant, more capable of knowing exactly what grabbed our attention, made us click. The more exceptional, the more newsworthy. And this, in turn, informed our view of humanity. If we believed most people couldn't be trusted, we'd treat others with mistrust. If we believed the world was doomed, we would go looking for the

evidence to support that view, never more so than on the subject of climate change.

“Given that scientists who study 100 per cent renewable energy systems are unanimous that it can be done, why do we hear daily on Twitter [now X] and everywhere else by those who don't study such systems that it can't be done?” US writer Rebecca Solnit asked in a stirring essay earlier this year in *The Guardian*. “A significant percentage of the general public speaks of climate change with a strange combination of confidence and defeatism: confidence in positions often based on inaccurate or outdated or maybe no information; defeatism about what we can do to make a livable future. Maybe they just get their facts from other doom evangelists who flourish on the internet, no matter how much reputable scientists demonstrate their errors. They're surrendering in advance and inspiring others to do the same.”

Many things can obviously be true simultaneously. The physical condition of the planet is getting worse, as this year's extreme weather conditions have shown us, but so, too, are solutions for climate change getting better. “I respect despair as an emotion,” Solnit continued,

“but not as an analysis. You can feel absolutely devastated about the situation and not assume this predicts outcome; you can have your feelings and can still chase down facts from reliable sources, and the facts tell us that the general public is not the problem; the fossil fuel industry and other vested interests are; that we have the solutions, that we know what to do, and that the obstacles are political; that when we fight we sometimes win; and that we are deciding the future now.”

Christiana Figueres, former executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, echoed these thoughts a few years ago when we spoke for an article on climate change for *Good Weekend*. Figueres had helped steer the world towards the most important climate accord in history – the 2015 Paris Agreement – and she talked at length about her theory of “stubborn optimism”.

“We have to adopt a determined, gritty conviction that we do have what it takes... [and while] that is no guarantee of success, it definitely increases the probability of success. That's optimism, and why I call it ‘stubborn optimism’ is because we will encounter many challenges and many barriers along that path and none of them can be reasons strong enough to give up.”

That is both a political and social call to action. It is also a call for a radical shift in consciousness which contains at its heart an understanding that all of us are inextricably linked to one another and to nature, and that in order to change the world, we also have to change ourselves.

This kind of thinking borrows heavily from Buddhist scholars like Joanna Macy, whose work on “Active Hope” argues that not only is there a “Great Unravelling” occurring in the world, there is also a “Great Turning”, one where civilisation is being reinvented by millions of organisations and individuals working towards ecological sustainability and social justice. “Active Hope”, therefore, becomes not only an acknowledgement of our hellishly painful circumstances but also a way of becoming active participants in working towards the healing and recovery of our world.

As Krista Tippett, host of the *On Being* podcast, concurred recently, hope has nothing to do with wishing, rather everything to do with facing reality. “It lives open-eyed and wholehearted with the darkness that is woven ineluctably into the light of life,” she said, “and sometimes seems to overcome it. Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice that becomes spiritual muscle memory.”

It's also a dedication, perhaps, to living with the unknown, with mysteries both too magnificent and too terrible to be understood. ■