

Hope

You can stand in the parking lot behind our little drop-in center and look up at the hemlocks splashing greens and blues across the mountain that looms over the entire village. You'll pay 4 dollars to park there in the summer, when the town is filled with people who drive up from the city on weekends. Everyone complains about having to pay, never conceding the mountain might be the cheapest attraction in town. And for a place proud of its edgy individualism, the mountain might be its best emblem, refusing to do anything but sit there and be itself. It doesn't care what you think of it and it isn't going to get out of your way any time soon.

Now in winter, the lot is empty of cars and even the stores seem sleepy. The bars are not. The stools and tables have been reclaimed by the locals and the price of a beer has dropped considerably, I'm told. I wouldn't know. It's been a long time since I sought answers while staring at myself in a mirror framed with bottles.

Retired now, I come into the village to listen to people, each for about an hour. To be a companion. Sometimes when we listen to others struggle with what puzzles them, it helps us to find our way. We are, after all, on the same journey.

"Tell me about your childhood," I said one day to an older man, knowing his answer would be, "Oh, it was fine," telling me nothing. So I also asked about a time when he had been deliriously happy as a child. He spoke of Christmas and a brightly colored toy long ago, before his father died.. And then I asked about another time when he may have been very, very sad. His response was unforgettable.

"Looking for my mother's teeth," said the man.

"Her dentures?" I said, hopefully.

"No, her teeth. My stepfather beat her awful, knocked them out. I was still quite young," he said, "but I remember I saw a bunch of them go flying. I got down on the floor when all the commotion was over and tried to find as many as I could. I wondered if teeth could be put back in. I found three or four and brought them to her."

He sat there quiet, and after a few moments I asked, "Did she take them?"

"No," he said. "I guess she was dead by then."

There wasn't anything I could think to say to him. When we listen to ourselves try to comfort a person, we hear phrases like, "it'll be all right, time will heal, there's nothing to be afraid of" We speak words of hope, because hope is what heals us. But often we can find nothing to say.

An older woman dressed in terrifically bright colors once told me, "I'm seventy three years old, and they won't give me another mortgage. How am I supposed to live?"

"An apartment?" I asked, carefully.

"What about all of my art, my tools, my workspace?" she said. "How will I paint?"

I had no answer for her. But I remember thinking that all of her creativity and her sense for the beautiful would not solve the crushing reality of getting old and being broke. I will face separations one day, myself. My wife and I brought up children while living not far from here on what's left of an old mountain farm. We put our hearts and souls into the place over the years, sprucing it up. I've lived there more than half my life and I don't want to leave. It will break my heart when I have to go.

A young man and I walked about the parking lot one morning when he felt too antsy to sit inside our little building. It was in spring and temperatures had just warmed up.

"I've felt for years that I am missing something from my life," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"I have lots of stuff," he said, "even lots of friends, but I don't have any hope."

"What do you mean by hope?" I asked.

"You know," he said, "like when I was a kid, the future felt exciting. I didn't have to know what it held, but I somehow knew it would be wonderful."

"And you don't know the future now, either," I said.

"But now I find myself yearning for something and I don't know what it is," he said

"I suppose," I said, "that yearning for the indefinable is like a spiritual journey."

"Please," he said, "no God stuff."

"Fair enough," I replied. "But there are those who think yearning represents a need to fill something in the soul."

I didn't tell him, but I often have the same feelings. And the same questions.

A middle aged woman sat opposite me on a snowy afternoon, her mood somber. Outside the window a naked tree, now dark and wet and leafless, grabbed the falling snowflakes to cover itself with a coat of innocent white.

“He kicked me out!” she said, “my own father. Called me a whore and dragged me out the front door and slammed it shut. And locked it! I was only 16, for god’s sake. My idiot mother stood there frozen like a statue.

“That’s pretty awful,” I said.

“It was snowing, for god’s sake, and I looked behind me on the sidewalk and saw my stuff coming down from the upstairs window. He’s up there throwing my clothes and my dolls and my makeup and all my stuff out the fucking window like a crazy man. I went nuts. I started banging on the front door and I kept it up until my hands bled and I screamed into the windows and I cursed them and I threw up and I choked and I cried until I thought I’d die, for Chrissake.”

She became quiet as she stared out the window at the falling snow.

“What happened,” I said.

She pulled her eyes away from the window and looked down at her hands.

“I died,” she said quietly. “I think I died.”

All I ever wanted from my father was his hope for me. Had he withheld it, I would have been devastated. A child of any age needs a parent to stand by her side, wishing for success and happiness. A man or a woman needs a woman or a man who loves them unconditionally and hopes only for the best.

The mountain above the village reminds me how solid we feel when we know someone is on our side. When we know they can’t be moved in their devotion to us, perhaps even when we are roiling in the agony of our self doubt. The mountain inspires hope that there are people who won’t budge when we want to push them away. They stand there and love us any way.

When I first began to meet with people in the village, I told my friend Julia that sometimes I felt I wasn’t of much help to them.

“You should have more hope,” she said.

“Sometimes I don’t,” I replied.

She looked up at me and said, “You have friends who sometimes do your hoping for you.”

Julia is an elderly Irish woman and a “solitary,” as she is called by the order of nuns she retired from. I call her a hermit. She is an artist and lives with her paints and pastels

and chickens and a cat and a dog on the backside of the same mountain we see in the village. She is also a companion on my journey and I travel up to see her each month, even in winter if the road to her cabin isn’t blocked with snow. We call the time we spend together spiritual direction.

“What’s your hope, Julia? Or are you too old to care?” I said, just to needle her.

She looked up from scratching the head of her cat who sat comfortably in her lap.

“There’s a scripture,” she said, “that says my name has been called and I belong to him.” *

“I’m not very religious, as you know,” I replied.

She snorted, knowing me well enough.

“Did you love a girl so much your arms ached?” she asked.

“Or a woman so much my head ached?” I interjected with a smile.

“Or,” she continued, “did you love a child so much your chest hurt?”

“Yes,” I said, “yes to all.”

“Then that is your hope,” she said. “That you are human enough to feel those things as much as the next person.”

When I left her that day and had walked a short distance from the porch, she called, “David.”

I turned around and looked back at her quizzically.

“I can’t do it as well as the Big Guy,” she said, “but that’s the sound of your name being called. You shouldn’t forget it.”

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Obviously, for confidentiality, the above are compilations, not real people. I’ve changed enough so that even those I had in mind would not recognize themselves. Except for my friend Julia, who with a name change played herself.

*"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Isaiah 43:1, RSV

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