

ON HORROR, HAIRCUTS, AND HOPE

by Beth Roy

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A week after the last election, as Republican victory-gloating seeped from every omnipresent electronic screen, I cut my hair. I hadn't cut it since 1961, the year I graduated from college. That time, I went into a barber shop in Manhattan and ordered a crew cut. A very shocked barber who had never cut a woman's hair before, reluctantly complied. I did it in rebellion. I did it in anger about racism, conventionality, the limited options open to women newly graduated from college, and who-knows-what more.

This time, I cut my hair more in sadness than in anger. The fact that it is not as short (indeed, I'm told it's quite stylish) probably denotes my more settled station in life now. But it is still a significant act. I felt hopeless about stopping war in Iraq, blocking the Bush administration's attacks on civil liberties, on immigrants and the environment – well, let's not go on with the list – but at least I could cut my hair.

For me, hope is about effectiveness, and effectiveness is about action, and the worst loss we can suffer is to hope so little that we cease to act. But it's a stretch in times like these to resist despair. Optimism has always been my trademark. I'm known for my inspiring speeches. My colleagues and clients tell me I'm the mistress of reframing: I can always find a way to recast the perilous as adventure, the misfortune as opportunity, the tragic as ennobling.

Just at the moment, though, I simply haven't the heart for the comforts of rhetorical inspiration. I think we often confound hope with comfort, and comfort is a hazardous thing because it leads to complaisance. We may know in our bones that the ointment we've applied soothes the wound without healing it. We feel the tension of knowing and denying. But at the end of the day, isn't it better to accept respite than to suffer, hopelessly, the pain of powerlessness?

I am an advocate of comfort, but differently enacted. Rather than illusion or denial, I want the comforts of unity, the hope that comes from connecting, with other human beings, with nature, with my own sense of a long expanse of time within which the troubles of the moment become more treatable.

One evening I met with a book club who had been reading *Bitters in the Honey*, my study of racism in America. Trying to articulate the reasons why I believe racism injures white people as well as those it targets, I described what portion of our humanity is lost when we relinquish a sense of entitlement to justice. Every child knows about justice. "That's not fair!" rolls easily from the lips of a three-year old. Yet, I argued, as adults we live with knowledge of so many injustices: higher mortality rates for African-American babies, outrageous numbers of young men of color in prison, obscene inequities of wealth that mask the reality of hungry children of all races throughout America. Every day in our cities, we step around the homeless with annoyance rather than pain, with no cry of protest. What might happen, I asked rhetorically, if we looked full in the eyes of every homeless person we met?

A man in the group paled. "I couldn't do that!" he cried.

"Why not?"

"It would be too painful. I couldn't live with it."

Well, precisely. How do we live with it, with a multitude of “its”? We put that question to history as genuine inquiry. How did ordinary Germans live with knowledge, however subliminal, of the Holocaust? How did decent Rwandans look away from, in many cases participate in, the massacre of hundreds of thousands of their neighbors? How do Israeli Jews, themselves so wounded by genocide, perpetrate horrors on Palestinians; how can Palestinians become so immersed in rage that they sacrifice the innocent lives of Israeli citizens and the lives of their own young?

Whether we do acts of violence or simply look away, we all participate in the dehumanization that is the precondition for such horrors, because we cannot look squarely into the face of injustice, and we cannot look because we do not know what to do, and, in the absence of action, we cannot live with the pain of compassion, nor the knowledge of complicity.

So what does that say about hope? Many of the people I most admire find hopefulness in faith. I deeply respect their way, but I am not myself seated in a religious consciousness. Born into a secular Jewish family, my own route to hopeful engagement in the world lay through politics, cast, you could say, in a deeply humanist perspective. People, not god, are the well-spring of my faith, and action is its celebration.

For me therefore, hope is about social and personal change, and this essay is a welcome opportunity to repossess some things I know on that subject. Or perhaps they are not “knowings” but simply beliefs, axioms about humanness derived from my six decades of living and working. I offer these perspectives in the hope they suggest directions that are, in the end, hopeful.

The first thing I believe, and believing it have seen it to be true, is that people are, at root, good. The badness done by humans is not, I’m convinced, because humans are bad. In fact, I think the will to well-being and to caring is so strong that it takes a monumental effort to subvert it.

But that’s precisely what the institutions within which we live do: they bend humankind toward selfishness and violence. The second belief that sustains me is that fault lies in the ill conditions to which we unthinkingly consent. The nuclear family, woefully understaffed, brutally underfunded, ensures parenting at the edge of exhaustion, which so often translates into parenting with the back of a hand. Combine searing scarcity with moral injunctions to be always right, always alert, always maternal, always responsible, and you have a recipe for despair visited on the young. Those same descriptors apply almost as well to the public education system. We place on the schools the burden of correcting all the failures of our social system, and, guess what!, they fail. The young people turned out are well prepared for only one thing: to accept inadequacies, their own and those of the organizations they encounter. Inadequate prospects, inadequate satisfaction in jobs if they do get them, inadequate economic security, inadequate help as they begin to raise families, inadequate respect all along the way. No wonder so many of us regard the world with an angry eye and a ready fist. No wonder we learn to look out for Number One, grab what we can get, cut off empathy for the other fellow.

I don’t believe the problem is greed. Nor is it arrogance, although both those qualities are pervasive and extensive. But I see them as outgrowths of the social conditions I’ve described, plus, of course, many more. If our goal is to bring about peace, therefore, our task is to change real-world conditions. Engaging minds and morality matters, but it is a means to an end, paradoxically. We will never have enough

enlightened individuals to make a new reality if the reality in which masses of us live makes monsters of us.

Which leads me to my third belief: that change, on all the many levels on which social life takes place, is possible. We can change the way we relate to children, to honor them with gentleness and respect, by seeking support and help in the hard business of parenting. We can change the way we treat each other, by practicing lessons of right-speaking and acceptance that grow from our work as conflict resolvers. We can change the way we engage in our communities, inventing forms of shared action so infused with sweetness and fun that they nourish the soul at the same time they change the world. We can stay true to our visions of a just future by refusing to forsake the public arena, through whichever door we choose to enter it, no matter how discouraging a particular election, how unrelenting the drumbeat for an impending war.

While it may periodically falter, hopefulness reasserts itself when I am in dialogue with others: listening to my grown children's version of the world, witnessing the progress of the people who come to me for help, hearing of the work of dedicated people in so many walks of life, engaging with colleagues to create a new workshop, a new organization, a new vision, a new approach. I am grateful to many of you for a future rich in those – and more – hopeful encounters.

PS: I've discovered a bonus in the "doing-something-is-better-than-doing-nothing" approach. My new haircut is fun. People smile when they see it. They give me compliments. Cutting off hair has lightened the load on my spirit as well as on my neck. It won't bring about world peace, but life's a little better than it was before, and I feel a little more hopeful, a little more energized to go back into the fray, one more time.