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Hope

A Pathway to Adolescent Joy and Flourishing

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A Starting Point: Hope Matters

What do ministry leaders and other adults know about hope and joy in teens' lives? Truthfully these young people can tell us much. In fact listening to their voices reveals not simply their need to share but also a depth and poignancy in what they say. In our conversations with teens, one said, for example, "With all the violence that's happening everywhere we turn, I just have the question 'Will I live to see tomorrow?'" Another shared, "I've already learned that there will be challenges. . . . But I am capable. I am doing well, and I am determined to keep doing it." Still another told of "a big challenge to hope for youth today. The challenge is having something to believe in. The world today doesn't exactly have too many things a youth can have hope in or cling onto in hard times. I need hope. Hope is needed in the world. What do we do to get it?"¹ About joy a teen reflected, "That's a hard one. I mean, it's

1 Results of conversations with teens about their experiences and assigned meanings of hope appear in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Sarah Frances Farmer, *Raising Hope: 4 Paths to Courageous Living for Black Youth* (Nashville: Wesley's Foundry Books, 2017), 26–28.

not just one thing that comes from one thing. Anyway, to be honest, sometimes I have it, sometimes I don't."

Whatever their views about hope and its connection with joy, it is also clear that teens recognize their lives are unfolding in an ever-widening technological explosion and that they're involved in multiple forms of human interconnectedness. They are not unaware of political, interracial, and interreligious turmoil in an increasingly diverse and globally connected society; of changing family structures; and of varying life opportunities, often in tandem with tough concerns faced in schools, homes, and wider communities. They grasp the value of individual achievement and attaining material possessions that affirm esteemed social standing and well-being even in fragile economic times. From them come words such as "I believe in God, but church is no fun!" In short, meanings of hope and joy form amid these realities. Yet in truth human beings are born to hope—to anticipate or have expectations

for a desired good that brings satisfaction and intersects with joy.

Courageous, joy-filled hope is life-giving to teens in these rapidly changing and challenging times.

This chapter centers on meanings of courageous, joy-filled hope that must be empowered and nurtured in the lives of teens in rapidly changing and challenging times. We begin with a discussion of hope

as an active, dynamic, life-affirming quality in the lives of humans. Attention then turns to hope as expectations leading to human flourishing in the multidimensional sojourn of life as well as to impediments to hope and the nature of hopelessness. Theological meanings and attributes of the intersection of joy and hope precede a discussion of the role of agents of hope in youths' formation of courageous, joy-filled hope. We conclude with some pedagogical suggestions.

Hope as an Active, Dynamic, Life-Affirming Quality

Hope is defined by Erik Erikson as “the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive.”² An undeclared quality of hope that reveals a stance of longing or expectation appears in an infant child’s reach and cry for the caring contact of another and the nourishment of food.³ Anticipatory hope is implied in a youngster’s eager desire for birthdays and other celebration, vacations, and visits to or from someone special. Hope is also a concretely expressed attitude and conviction about an open and possible future by youths entering or graduating from high school as well as by others who seek a promising way forward in life in the form of a job, mate, or home. And it is present in the anguish of those who are longing for a way out of or around tragedy and loss.⁴ In fact, a plea for the necessity of hope is found in the words of a song: “Keep hope alive! Don’t let the dream die!”⁵ Hope is an essential aspect of human life. Indeed life has a way of evoking in

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- 2 Erik H. Erikson, “Human Strength and the Cycle of Generations,” *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), 118.
 - 3 Donald Capps draws attention to multivalent properties of hope that include *waiting* for the presence or appearance of something external to actually appear; *anticipation* of satisfying one’s longing for the presence of a desired object; *pining* or recalling a missed object and desiring the satisfaction that object could provide; and *hoping* that involves one’s believing that a desired object is not simply available but will satisfy one’s desire. See: Donald Capps, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 33–37.
 - 4 References of these opening views appear in: Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 29–30. Capps also identifies hope as an “attitudinal disposition or “the implicit conviction or tacit belief that the future is an open one, and that it holds possibility for us.” He also indicates that hope is an inherent strength. It is that sustaining element in life in the face of wounded confidence and impaired trust. See: Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 28.
 - 5 The words and tune to the song, “Keep Hope Alive,” were composed by Donald Vails with an arrangement of the music by Nolan Williams appearing in *African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001), #405.

human beings unspoken and spoken feelings, thoughts, declarations, and questions about hope.

Hope is also a dynamic, ongoing reality that crosses times, places, people, and circumstances. Jürgen Moltmann reminds us that the theme of hope is ongoing, because new experiences occurring across history force us to come to terms with it.⁶ He emphasizes the unequivocal necessity of hope, for without it, we succumb to “an internal catastrophe.”⁷ A teenager put it this way: “You have to have the drive that keeps you going when all odds are against you. For me, that is hope.”⁸ Yet it is also the case, says Christopher Rate, that courage matters: “It is increasingly difficult to face an unpredictable future—sure to offer challenges with varying levels of risks, fears, and moral decisions—without being able to call on courage if needed.”⁹ However, real impediments to hope exist. We have heard repeatedly the stories of teens reflecting barriers to hope that are marked by stress, anxiety, and grief and punctuated with the questions “What do we do to get it?” or “What hope is there?” or the cry “I don’t see it!” These responses point to the need to probe more deeply into what hope is, how it wanes or becomes absent, and what is needed to affirm, nourish, and revive it.

6 See: Ibid.; and Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975, Reprinted 1994), 14–17).

7 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment of Hope*, Edited and Translated with Forward by M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 186.

8 This statement was among many views of hope shared by youth and included in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, ed., *Keep It Real: Working with Today’s Black Youth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 120.

9 Christopher R. Rate, “Defining the Features of Courage: A Search for Meaning,” in *The Psychology of Courage: Modern Research on an Ancient Virtue*, ed. Cynthia L.S. Pury and Shane J. Lopez (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 63.

Cultural Historical Understandings of Hope

Meanings of hope take shape within particular cultural settings. Hope happens contextually. For example black predecessors, African-Americans in the historic past, offer an understanding of hope infused by courage that was active, dynamic, and life-affirming. For them it was neither docile nor life-negating. Indeed this understanding provides a helpful foundation for conversations with young people about courageous hope and activities that help them act in positive and life-affirming ways. Four images of the nature of hope infused with courage emerge from a black historical perspective. These images offer guidance for embracing four particular dispositional qualities that point to markers of courageous hope to be formed in young people: courageous hope as a choice, as an empowering attitude, as a faith-filled posture in life's wilderness, and as an ongoing creative sojourn.¹⁰

Courageous Hope as a Choice

At the center of courageous hope is one's view of oneself as an actor on one's own behalf. Courageous hope evolves from a person's knowing that they have a choice and can decide on an optimistic course of life while at the same time recognizing the barriers life presents.¹¹ Such a choice, then, presumes an existing view of hope that centers on the psychological attributes of optimism and positivity. Donald Capps refers to this kind of perspective within the self as an "attitudinal disposition" or attitude toward life that things will work out in the unfolding of time. Within this disposition lies the belief in a future that holds possibilities rather than despairing outcomes.¹² Further understanding of this view

10 References of these four images appear in Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 58–68.

11 References of these four images appear in: Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 58–68.

12 Donald Capps, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 14, 28.

is set forth by Gillham and her associates, who cite an explanatory style that makes possible persons' maintaining motivation and the ability to cope and continue on amid adversity.¹³

The courage to choose hope simply means claiming for oneself the view "I'm gonna make it," which is akin to having the psychological frame of mind that reflects the resilient self.¹⁴ Of course we recognize that difficult, dehumanizing, and traumatic life events or experiences emanating from racism and other forms of abuse have the propensity to impede a sense of positivity and bring about a sense of pessimism. We also recognize that hope cannot be forced on anyone. People cannot be made to choose hope. The truth is that a person may succumb to fatalism, as Capps notes.¹⁵ On this basis the role of leaders is to be agents of hope who find ways to inspire, instill, and support courageous hope in young people.

Courageous Hope as an Empowering Attitude

In addition to being chosen, courageous hope also has an empowering capacity in young people's lives to the extent that they are enabled to envision goals that hold the potential of contributing to a hopeful outcome and are accorded pathways to move toward those goals. Even amid obstacles this capacity makes possible an inner power that we have already named as human agency. It includes the mental energy or psychological verve to move toward an identified goal, however great or small, quickly attained, delayed, or even unseen. The empowering capacity of courageous hope has at the center hope-filled positivity, the push from within that is likened to the slogan of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign: "Yes we can." But it also requires the embrace of

13 Jane E. Gillham, Andrew J. Shatte, Karen J. Reivich, and Martin E.P. Seligman, "Optimism, Pessimism, and Explanatory Style," 53–75, in Edward C. Chang, Ed., *Optimism & Pessimism: Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 67.

14 See Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 14.

15 Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 24–25.

several key empowerment perspectives that may be called “weapons” against pessimism, passivity, and actions that negate self-affirmation and human flourishing.

The empowering function of courageous hope has particular salience in young people’s lives because, as it made possible black forebears’ courage to prevail and persevere in life, it engenders in youths the belief that they have both the physical wherewithal and mental energy to move toward and achieve an identified goal. Hope functions as an empowering capacity in young people in ways that allow them to see, reach for, and accomplish positive goals, even amid obstacles. This view reflects Carl Richard Snyder’s definition of hope as “the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency-thinking to use those pathways.”¹⁶ Empowering hope energizes what Dana Michelle Harley calls “self-talk,” or the push from within to shout: “I can do this! I’m not going to be stopped!”¹⁷

Courageous Hope as a Faith-Filled Posture in Life’s Wilderness

What also comes across from the perspectives of black forebears is the centrality of faith in their embrace and practice of courageous hope. Their perspectives underscore the necessity of knowing and relying on God and of engaging in spiritual disciplines such as prayer. Moreover a gift of forebears from the era of slavery forward is the recognition of life as wilderness in which to learn and claim the ability to live and keep

16 Carl Richard Snyder, “Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind,” *Psychological Inquiry* 13(4), 2002:249–75 (249). See also the perspectives of Snyder in: C. R. Snyder, “Hypothesis: There Is Hope,” 3–24, and “Genesis: The Birth and Growth of Hope,” 25–38, in C.R. Snyder, *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures and Applications* (New York: Academic Press, 2000).

17 Dana Michelle Harley, *Perceptions of Hope and Hopelessness Among Low-Income African American Adolescents*, PhD dissertation, Graduate School, The Ohio State University, 2011, 24. Available at: http://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/osu1313009132/inline.

on keeping on, with courage and hope in life and even in the face of death.¹⁸

A faith-filled posture in life's wilderness must not be missed in the sojourn of today's youth. In fact we contend that there is the necessity of exploring a wilderness theology with young people by inviting them to openly and honestly name the struggles and painful and broken places of their lives, engaging them in lament before God, and involving them in spiritual practices such as communal worship, Bible study, praying, singing, liturgical arts, and service that provide openings for them to search for, hear, find God, and discern God's actions in their lives in the wilderness.

The Bible is particularly rich in offering perspectives on the wilderness and stories of exemplars who journeyed in the wilderness and encountered God there. For example the story of Hagar, a servant, reveals the difficult wilderness experience of being impregnated by and bearing a child, Ishmael, son of her master, because of the failure of the master's wife to bear a child. Her abuse by the master's wife and subsequent abandonment in the desert made even more difficult her painful struggle. Yet in her period of exile, Hagar recognized God's existence in a spring of water and in God's voice of promise. In short it must not be forgotten that, just as the dimension of faith was pivotal for past generations, so also it holds significance in the lives of the current generation of youth. Indeed Philip Dunston and Anne Wimberly, in their discussion of the connection between hope and self-discovery, state that "there is no empowerment, growth, or transformation without recognition and appreciation for the transcendental force present in all life forms. Black youth need guidance, on how to effectively commune with and develop a relationship with God."¹⁹

18 The idea of wilderness as a classroom appears in Scott C. Hammond, *Lessons of the Lost: Finding Hope and Resilience in Work, Life, and the Wilderness* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2013).

19 Philip Dunston and Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "A Matter of Discovery," in Wimberly, ed., *Keep It Real*, 39.

Courageous Hope as an Ongoing Creative Sojourn

The perspectives of forebears also remind us that past realities of life do not disappear completely with time. Rather each generation is met with concerns that are similar if not the same as previous ones. On the one hand, recognition of the repetition of issues over time raises questions about the germaneness of hope for transformation or change. On the other hand, while the ongoing presence of life's travail threatens to overwhelm and stifle efforts to continue on the journey, creativity can become a remarkable and renewing pathway of meaning making, survival, and inspiration. The ongoing creative spirit is further affirmed in Emilie Townes's personal perspective: "Trying to understand racism and other forms of hatred has been one of the most formative things I've done in my life, and I have now come to realize that it will remain a challenge until I draw my last breath. I learned at an early age that I must learn how to survive the daily small and sometimes large indignities of racism by negotiating it with creativity, imagination, and sometimes humor while maintaining my integrity and sense of self."²⁰ Reference has already been made to music, dance, and other artistic expressions as central to black people's chosen expression of agency. These idioms have been key means by which a black people's eschatology emerged.

Hope, Life Direction, and Human Flourishing: Expectations and Impediments

The foregoing ethnic-cultural views of hope point to particular expectations or desired prospects in the multidimensional affairs and passage of life. Actually for all human beings, hope centers on an anticipated direction of life that moves toward holistic well-being and flourishing. To draw on the views of Miroslav Volf, at the heart of hope is human beings' seeking an experience of life that goes well, feels well, and is

20 Emilie M. Townes, "Teaching and the Imagination," *Religious Education*, 111(4), July–September, 2016:366–79(367).

lived well, otherwise regarded as an experience of the good life.²¹ This anticipated direction contains thoughts and beliefs about a positive outcome in a particular facet or attribute of life and what is involved in reaching it (a cognitive attribute of hope), associated feelings (an affective attribute of hope), and actions needed to influence the outcome (behavioral attribute of hope). Hope, then, is about an overarching human process of being and becoming that centers on the finest vision and optimal expectation of young people as they encounter and move through the multidimensional affairs of life.

Multidimensional Aspects of Hope

The question may well be asked: What expectations are associated with the multidimensional affairs and passage of life to which hope is connected? We propose here that hope is linked to seven interrelated dimensions of life: relational well-being, physical well-being, psychological well-being, vocational well-being, spiritual well-being, leisure and creative well-being, and environmental well-being. We present hope in the form of the finest vision and optimal expectation of young people in these dimensions.²²

21 Volf describes these dimensions in terms of life that goes well as a circumstantial dimension; life that feels well as an affective dimension; and life that is lived well as an agential dimension in: Miroslav Volf, "The Crown of the Good Life: An Hypothesis," in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 127–36.

22 The dimensions being presented here appear in conversations on hope with Black adolescents including examples appearing in: Wimberly, *Keep It Real*, 120–22. The multi-dimensional and interrelated character of well-being is also described in pastoral care literature, principally by Howard Clinebell. See: Howard Clinebell, *Anchoring Your Well-Being: A Guide for Congregational Leaders* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1997). The dimensions are further framed in: Anne E. Steaty Wimberly, "Congregational Care in the Lives of Black Older Adults," in Melvin A. Kimble and Susan H. McFadden, Eds., *Aging Spirituality, and Religion*,

Hope and Relational Well-Being

Young people envision, expect, and seek positive connectedness with the past or their memories of life behind them, with other people, and with the environment. Moreover, for them relation-oriented hope is about their longing for mutual participation in social environments, including peer, family, religious, and communal networks that affirm their value and belonging as human beings. When a group of youth in the Youth Hope-Builders Academy (YHBA), a theological program for high school youth at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, were asked the question “What would you name as one big desire or hope you have of adults?,” their answer was “We would want someone to tell us that they love us.” When asked what was the one thing they would want most to happen in their congregation, they answered: “That they would involve us, let us do things, and not just sit around.” This aspect of hope also focuses on youths’ need and search for life-sustaining human resources in community, such as programs that help them and respond to their interests and needs.²³

Hope for Physical Well-Being

Young people envision, expect, and seek wellness of the body. This dimension emerges from their pointed opinion that nobody wants to be sick. They want to be able to function physically, to live healthy lives, to contribute to the same for others, and to have the necessary resources available to assure this outcome. They want to be safe and

Volume 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 105–6. It is well to add that several dimensions including those associated with identity, emotional, social, cognitive and physical development appear as developmental domains in the report of the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, “Resilience in African American Children and Adolescents: A Vision for Optimal Development” (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), 25.

23 A view of relational well-being is found in Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 19–20.

out of harm's way. In a seemingly persistent climate of violence, there is among youth a tenacious holding onto hope that impediments to safety will depart. Their hope is couched in a yearning for life, not death; and this hope takes on an active stance in demonstrations that spell out their insistent optimism that their life matters.²⁴

Hope for Psychological Well-Being

In our ministries particularly with black youth, we have discovered that these young people envision, expect, and seek wholeness of mind, personal acceptance, and the valuing of their identities as youth for themselves as well as others. Black youths increasingly place this aspect of hope in practice with Afro-inspired hairstyles and dress while still desiring an inner peace and positive affirmation of their appearance, color, physique, size, motives, language, and cultural artifacts in a culture that repudiates black ethnic norms. But the reality is that all teens desire a positive self-identity and not only a personal sense of value of their humanity but also their being valued and affirmed by others. Young people also seek the capacity to deal with harsh realities of life in life-affirming, life-giving ways in contrast to self- and other-negating and destructive approaches while, at the same time, needing guidance and models in carrying out these approaches.²⁵

Hope and Economic and Vocational Well-Being

Young people envision, expect, and seek access to economic resources needed to sustain life and care for self and others for whom they are responsible materially. Moreover this facet of hope extends to their desire for a sense of life accomplishment, a recognition that God gave them intelligence, gifts, and talents that they're supposed to be able to

24 See Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 40–41.

25 See Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 41.

develop and use, that somebody is supposed to help them develop, and that should lead to and go beyond economic and material sufficiency.²⁶

Hope and Spiritual Well-Being

Earlier we referred to youths who proclaim their belief in God but do not consider the church a place to connect. At the same time, there are youths who communicate a clear need and search for a spiritual anchor or experiences with something beyond themselves that could provide purpose and hope amid the tough stuff of life. These youths are not shy in raising the questions “Is God for real?” and “Where is God when I need God?”²⁷ Spiritual well-being is about persons’ experiencing God as a life-giving, meaningful force on whom they rely in pressing forward with hope along the journey of life come what may. Importantly we have heard this view in the stories and statements of youths who speak of hope as a belief or faith in God as they encounter both triumphs and trials of life. When teens in the YHBA were asked about their understanding of hope, they said, for example, that “hope is believing there is a higher power that you can turn to in times of need” and “hope is an awareness of a spiritual presence that can guide you.” Their views reflect an understanding that the source of hope is God or a transcendent, life-giving, meaning-generating force beyond themselves that is necessary for life to count for something.²⁸

Hope and Leisure and Creative Well-Being

Young people envision, expect, and seek opportunities and modes for self-expression and recreational endeavors that revitalize the self, reaffirm one’s gifts, and open avenues for fulfilling hope in other areas of life. Visual and performing arts as well as sports are high among these creative efforts. However this form of hope as an active endeavor

26 See Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 42.

27 This aspect of hope in Black adolescents is very much akin to that found in other adults. See: Wimberly, “Congregational Care,” 105.

28 See Wimberly, “Congregational Care,” 42–43.

encompasses young people's appeal for cultural enrichment that is found beyond the bounds of their neighborhoods.²⁹

Hope and Environmental Well-Being

Young people envision, expect and seek places to live that are environmentally safe and that includes their role in advocating and caring for the surroundings in which they live and the wider material, social, and political environment that impacts the whole of their lives.

Hope, Impediments to Hope, and the Nature of Hopelessness

The research of Dana Michelle Harley does not describe in detail each one of the aforementioned dimensions and their connection to hope; however, she confirms that hope is insinuated in youths' experiences of spirituality, having educational goals and the desire for life's basic needs, and possessing the mentality or psychological frame of mind that they're going to make it, which may also be referred to as verve or resilience.³⁰ More important, Harley's study of youths aged thirteen to seventeen includes findings of qualities that promote hopelessness, including external constraints, the behaviors of others or self that impinge upon life quality or life itself, and deleterious environmental conditions.³¹ In other words there are instances in which particular expectations or desired prospects in the multidimensional affairs and passage of young people's lives are called into question or are stunted. The anticipated direction of life that moves toward personal and communal well-being and flourishing goes awry.

Hope for positive future direction and human flourishing become short-circuited where bullying prevails, ill-treatment in school and

29 See Wimberly, "Congregational Care," 44.

30 Harley, *Perceptions of Hope*.

31 Harley, *Perceptions of Hope*.

society occur, and threats of injury, sickness, and even death exist. This eventuality becomes further exacerbated by the internalization of adverse views of the self and future outlook that begins far before adolescence. This latter situation of preadolescent experiences of impediments to hope are highlighted in the research of Susan Weinger, in which black children ages five through thirteen living in poverty were found already to have low expectancy of a promising career path. In these instances “the children associated having money with being able to get a job, even if developmentally they weren’t yet able to understand this interconnection.”³² The children intuited the links between a probable thwarted future and living in poverty, low school achievement, inappropriate clothing, and the improper completion of job application forms. It was as though the child’s background functioned “as an intractable ‘scarlet letter’ that would close the doors to job possibilities.”³³ At the same time, however, the researcher found that these children’s hope died reluctantly, as reflected in their statements: “She could be anything she wants just as long as she gets good grades in school”; “If he gets pride, he can. He can try to be anything.”³⁴

The findings of research undertaken by Lopez and his colleagues link levels of hope to health. They show that high levels of hope in young people lead to their care of self and to making healthy choices. Hope, in turn, leads to positive views, expectations, and actions for the future.³⁵ Conversely youths may imagine a positive life direction for themselves, but the reality of limited access to health care compounded

32 Susan Weinger, “Children Living in Poverty: Their Perception of Career Opportunities,” *Social Work Faculty Publications*, paper 5, Western Michigan University ScholarWorks at WMU, 1998, 324. Accessed on http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/socialwork_pubs/5

33 Weinger, “Children Living in Poverty,” 324.

34 Weinger, “Children Living in Poverty,” 325.

35 Shane Lopez, Sage Rose, Cecil Robinson, Susana C. Marques, and Jose Pais-Ribeiro, “Measuring and Promoting Hope in Schoolchildren,” in *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools*, eds. Richard Gilman, E. Scott Huebner, and Michael J. Furlong, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 40.

by unemployment and lack of other positive life chances results in untreated physical and mental health problems that stymie their hope. Additionally overall health and well-being has continued to be linked with poverty, unemployment among teenagers, living in substandard housing, and disconnection from needed resources and/or relational support.³⁶

Researcher Janice Joseph also makes the point that truncated hope or hopelessness has the effect of contributing to drug and alcohol use, gang involvement, teen parenthood, crime and delinquency, and early death.³⁷ Moreover research results make clear that interpersonal struggles and violence between young people and adults or peers, whether experienced directly or observed, have the effect of cutting short youths' hopeful thinking.³⁸

The Nature of Hopelessness

The portent or actual experience of hopelessness happens when the vision, expectation of, and search for any of the above dimensions of hope are thwarted, repeatedly interrupted, or denied. Much has already been said about this very real and concrete circumstance of black youth. Yet it must not be assumed that hopelessness necessarily or always occurs spontaneously. Young people move into hopelessness in stages.

The first stage may be called hope questioning. In this stage youth ask the pointed question, "What is the use of hoping?" They don't

36 See: Alwyn T. Cohall and Hope E. Bannister, "The Health Status of Children and Adolescents," in *Health Issues in the Black Community*, Second edition, eds. Ronald L. Braithwaite and Sandra E. Taylor, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001), 27-31; and Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, "The Role of Black Faith Communities in Fostering Health," in *Health Issues in the Black Community*, Second edition, eds. Ronald L. Braithwaite and Sandra E. Taylor, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001), 133.

37 Janice Joseph, *Black Youth, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 168–69.

38 Joseph, *Black Youth*, 42.

experience hoped for changes or outcomes in their situation or chances. They question if God really answers prayers and conclude, "Right now, I don't see it." This stage is really a time of lament; if acknowledged with the help of caring support and direction from others, hope is restored.

A second stage may be called hope contingency. This stage is reflected in a reluctance to relinquish hope. Hope is maintained on the basis of potential yet uncertain outcomes. We note the embrace of this stage in the research of Weinger, who found that children as young as five held onto a fragment of hope of fulfilling their aspirations even in the face "of society's prejudicial assaults" if they were able to be a certain way or have a particular attitude.³⁹

A third stage may be referred to as hope stagnation. In this stage one or more dimensions of hope wanes, but utter hopelessness has not yet occurred. When asked about how they are feeling about a particular situation in their lives and what they are looking forward to, young people may share statements rather than questions: "I don't know"; "I can't figure it out right now"; "I have to think about it." The danger in this stage is the movement of the young person into depression and reticence to talk with anyone.

The fourth stage is captured in what may be called activated hopelessness. This is a stage of utter hopelessness in which there may be pronounced depression or, as Janice Joseph demonstrated, drug and alcohol use, gang involvement, teen parenthood, crime and delinquency, black on black violence, and early death.⁴⁰

Each stage toward hopelessness represents a movement away from meaning, purpose, and a valued sense of self. When young people cannot make sense of their circumstances and feelings, they are more likely to surrender to hopelessness. Where there is hopelessness, joy cannot abound. At the same time, young people who have the internal and external resources to contend with the many questions and feelings

39 Weinger, "Children Living in Poverty," 325.

40 Joseph, *Black Youth, Delinquency*, 168–69.

that emerge during these stages can overcome hopelessness. When young people have joy, they are more likely to have hope.

The Intersection of Joy and Hope: Theological Meanings and Attributes

But what is joy? Joy is a person's taste or experience of God and the good gifts that God offers. As people sense or perceive internally and externally this nature of God, they become enlivened, built up, and nourished by God, and their hope is enriched. Romans 15:13 illustrates this biblical theology of joy: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." In this passage the writer connects hope with joy. Hope flows from the God of hope, filling those who trust in God with joy and peace. A person's experience of joy, then, is rooted in placing their confidence in a reliable God who has the capacity to walk with them in the midst of life's circumstances while at the same time imbuing them with what is needed to transcend those very circumstances. But how does this apply to young people in circumstances that inflict pain on their being? As part of God's family, young people are among those who can transcend life's circumstances and be filled with joy and peace when they have a taste of the God of hope. God as giver of hope provides the grounds of joyful existence by which they can trust in the future while enduring the present.

A biblical theological view of joy is experientially captured in the testimonies of young people. In one instance a young participant in the Black Joy Project asserted that joy is holding to the assurance proclaimed in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want; As I walk through the valley of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me." For this person both joy and hope derive from God as the protector who

enables the resistance to the troubles of the world and the temptation to stop pressing forward.⁴¹

It is important to note that the presence and power of hope does not always appear as a uniquely separate expression. Hope is a distinctive feature of joy. While it might be possible to experience hope without an outward expression of joy, we contend that it is impossible to experience joy void of hope. Hope is a prerequisite of joy, and joy is a sustainer of hope. Hope makes joy possible. Where there is hope, joy often bursts forth in ways that

**It is impossible to
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void of hope.**

affirm a close connection between the two. We have found, for example, that songs, sermons, and prayers reveal at least four attributes and meanings of the intersection of joy and hope: joy as an evocative trigger and sustainer of hope; hope as an expressive prelude to joy; joyful expression as outcome of claimed hope and joy; joy and hope as equal dispositions and works of God.

Joy as an Evocative Trigger and Sustainer of Joy

Where is joy found? Kirk Franklin's contemporary gospel song "God's Great Joy" testifies to the evocative nature of joy made possible by God's presence deep in the human soul.

Joy, joy, God's great joy.
Joy, joy, deep in my soul.⁴²

The song conveys the message that this nature of joy evokes within the self a vital resistance to hopelessness. Joy abides within the very essence

41 This religious basis for a hopeful way of moving forward is captured in the voice of a young person in: Cody Charles, "Black Joy, We Deserve It," February 17, 2017. Accessed on: <https://medium.com/reclaiming-anger/black-joy-we-deserve-it-1ab8dc7569b1>

42 Kirk Franklin, "God's Great Joy," as sung by the Georgia Mass Choir, accessed on <http://allgospellyrics.com/?sec+listing&lyricid+12908>.

of the self. It gives strength and power to continue with hope in life even when food that nourishes the physical body is in short demand. Joy is deemed a “sweet, beautiful, soul-saving” gift of an able God that provides hope for the present and anticipation of life with God after mortal life. From this perspective joy is an eschatological reality deeply felt in the present and expected in the future. Joy replenishes the soul and provides a greater depth of hope in the face of insurmountable odds.

Hope as an Expressive Prelude to Joy

While movement away from hope leads to hopelessness, the decision to hold on to hope, rooted in God, moves one toward joy. In a prayer of Richard Allen, who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, hope is claimed as a way of life based on trust in a suffering God. He addresses God by declaring that in the throes of danger, “I will hope in thee who art almighty power, and therefore able to relieve me; who are infinite goodness and therefore ready and willing to assist me.”⁴³ For Allen the suffering God in whom he trusts knows about human suffering and is a model of hope, thereby making possible his assertion that “I undoubtedly know my Redeemer lives and shall raise me up at the last day.”⁴⁴

Allen continues by connecting hope in God to joy in God. For him the sadness of hope in God amid affliction embraces the surety that “tears shall one day be turned into joy and that joy none should take from me” (Ps. 30:5).⁴⁵ The intersection of hope that is a prelude to joy is not passive. Hope that turns to joy requires active and steadfast engagement in enacting God’s hope for the world. Thus Allen prayed: “Blessed hope! Be thou my chief delight in life, and then I shall be steadfast and

43 James Melvin Washington, ed. *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayer by African Americans* (New York: Haper Collins Publisher, 1994), 10.

44 Washington, *Conversations with God*, 10.

45 Washington, 10.

immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.”⁴⁶ Overall Allen’s prayer indicates the important view that hope expresses itself in a joy that imbues strength for one’s own journey while at the same time embodying God’s joy in the world.

Joyful Expression as an Outcome of Claimed Hope and Joy

One’s ability to rejoice is a direct result of an inner disposition of the heart. In Tramaine Hawkins’s contemporary gospel song “I Never Lost My Praise,” the key message is one of praising God, which is an act of rejoicing. Joyful praise is evoked by an inwardly claimed hope and joy.

Joy and Hope as Equal Dispositions and Works of God

The contemporary gospel song “As Far as You Can See” reveals hope and joy as attributes of God. They are equal dispositions and works of God, given to us by faith in God. They are attributes for which we can petition God. Thus the song reiterates the biblical message that “Eyes have not seen, ears have not heard . . . what God has in store for those who truly love him (1 Cor. 2:9)—simply ask him and believe. God is our joy in sorrow, our hope for tomorrow. God will give you as far you can see; all you have to do is look ahead—keep the faith.”

Hope and joy are also justly claimed in “I Never Lost My Praise.” The testimony is that even amid life’s crisis, losses, disappointments, and seasons of pain, struggle, and wayward focus,

I never lost my hope,
I never lost my joy.

This reality is also tied to never losing faith in God. Moreover, because of this claimed experience, “I never lost my praise.” Both hope and joy are declared as unshakable truths of life accessed in relationship with God even in the throes of unbearable hardship; this claimed and concretely experienced truth of both hope and joy is reason for praising God.

46 Washington, 10.

Despite the difficult things that happened, the songwriter declares over and over again, “I never lost my praise.” This declaration of unwavering praise is another way of saying that one never lost sight of the good. Joy-filled hope flourishes when one can keep the good in sight.

Courageous and Joy-Filled Hope: The Role of Agents of Hope

Our position is that it is both possible and necessary to nurture courageous, joy-filled hope in young people. By nurturing hope youth workers enhance the possibility that youths might experience joy. Indeed youth workers must use approaches that oppose and prevent activities and circumstances that lead to youths’ entering stages of hopelessness. Pathways and means of achieving them are needed to stimulate courageous and joy-filled hope and rekindle destroyed hope. This is the role of agents of hope. In every instance the underlying view is that there is an eternal hopefulness on which Christian faith stands and pathways through which courageous and joy-filled hope are activated. The intent of pedagogies of hope to which we turn in the final section is the necessary task of agents of hope. The starting point is the agents’ belief in God’s promises, the faithful nearness and activity of God, and God’s empowerment of youths and all of us to embrace and activate the courage to hope that makes possible a vision of life’s possibilities and the ability to act on it.⁴⁷ But more important, this belief is intended to be passed on to youth.

47 This theological framework is set forth in a Black pedagogy of hope that uses a historical biographical method that engages the role of the adult griot/guide as a key agent of hope who tells the stories of forbears, engages participants first as listeners, then in conversation that is to evoke mirroring through artistic expression. The pedagogical model is found in Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, “A Black Christian Pedagogy of Hope: Religious Education in Black Perspective,” 158–77.

Why courage? Agents of hope must be aware of the plain truth that it's difficult, if not impossible, to face and move beyond life's mayhem and its associated dangers and anxiety without summoning courage, which may also be known as an audacious faith or just plain guts. But they must also be attentive to some caveats. Courage is not the opposite of despair. It is not construed as stubbornness; nor is it about thoughtlessly roughing one's way forward in order to prove one's "bigness" or need to compensate for perceived inadequacies. Rather it is what Rollo May calls "the capacity to move ahead in spite of despair."⁴⁸

The task of agents of hope is one of promoting youths' claiming their God-given agency and the wherewithal inside themselves that propels them forward in ways that prevent their giving up and embracing apathy and hopelessness. As agents of hope, we are after young people's enactment of the attitude that they must keep on keeping on in spite of whatever the challenge or situation of mayhem is. Moreover the intent is for them to choose to resist the impact of internal and external impediments to hope and, in fact, to consider what God is calling them to be and do to confront and repudiate these impediments. In a real way, it entails guiding teens to consider critically the nature of false hopes offered by activities in the world that take them nowhere and to bring into view the kind of joy that is articulated, for example, in an African American spiritual: "This joy I have, the world didn't give it and the world can't take it away." In short the courageous and joy-filled hope we are after in the lives of young people privileges their agency as a source of hope while claiming God as the ultimate source of hope and joy.

48 May, *The Courage to Create*, 12–13. Additional features of courage are set forth in Christopher Rate, "Defining the Features of Courage: A Search for Meaning," in *The Psychology of Courage: Modern Research on An Ancient Virtue*, Cynthia L.S. Pury and Shane J. Lopez, eds. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association), 2010.

Agents of Hope as Conduits of Courageous and Joy: Pedagogical Suggestions

Agents of hope help to create pathways to joy. These pathways represent experiences that serve as channels for young people's multidimensional well-being and environments for joy.⁴⁹ Pedagogically the role of these agents in contributing to young people's courageous, joy-filled hope happens through hearing the stories of teens and providing guidance that fosters this hope. As with hope, leaders' attention to joy evolves from recognition that there is much adolescents want and need to tell about their lives. Joy becomes an outgrowth of hope as young people experience the welcome and caring presence of adults and, in this presence, form a deep knowing that their lives are given by God—that they are valued, affirmed, and nurtured and have a purpose given by God. Within caring relationships courageous, joy-filled hope emerges from their surety of God's love, which does not come from simply saying to them, "There's reason to be hopeful and joyful. So have hope and be joyful!" Rather the conditions for hope and joy begin to surface when caring others hear and invite young people's stories both of struggle and lament and of triumph and celebration. In this way agents of hope become the incarnational presence of Christ who sit with, listen to, walk with, share with, support, and encourage youth and engage them in rituals of blessings, communion with God, and service.

As conduits of courageous, joy-filled hope, the role of agents of hope extends to that of praying for and finding ways to take action in the church to assure young people's rightful participation in the public sphere and to assure their well-being. In our age of interpersonal discord, a public theological stance occurs when a congregation offers conflict transformation initiatives or experiential activities intended to engage youths in talking, role-playing, and listening actively to the things that matter to them as means of learning alternative paths by

49 References of these pedagogical pathways appear in Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 93–94.

which to understand and act on new responses to conflict.⁵⁰ Courageous, joy-filled hope is nurtured when congregations engage young people in

- Spiritual enrichment opportunities that seek to awaken one's soul and promote spiritual growth. In an earlier section, we suggested inviting youth to openly and honestly name the painful places, struggles, and broken places of their lives that characterize a wilderness; engaging them in lament before God; and involving them in spiritual practices such as communal worship, Bible study, praying, singing, liturgical arts, and endeavors that provide openings for them to search for, hear, and find God and discern God's actions in their lives in the wilderness. We add to these youth-led worship, discipleship studies, labyrinths, retreats, and nature walks.⁵¹ Ultimately these opportunities are to promote what Howard Thurman calls "a discovery of the soul, when God makes known [God's] presence" to young people so they discern their identity in God and their purpose in the world and experience courageous, hope-filled joy that the world cannot give.⁵²
- Cultural enrichment opportunities that "provide valuable life skills by enhancing youths' awareness of diverse cultural practices," including "increasing awareness of cultural, intellectual, social, and artistic achievement of one's own culture as well as other cultures."⁵³

50 See "Help Increase the Peace (HIPP) Program—PEACE in Action," accessed on: <http://www.promotingpeace.org/2006/2/liss.html>; and Ed Mahon, "Teens Give Peace a Chance Four Week Program Helps Chester-Area Youth Find Healthy Ways of Resolving Personal Conflicts," Posted July 2008. Accessed on: http://articles.philly.com/2008-07-20/news/25245691_1_peace-camp-chester-area-peace-program

51 Wimberly and Farmer, *Raising Hope*, 209.

52 Howard Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, Reprint from Harper and Row, Inc., 1951), 160.

53 Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 209.

- Community service opportunities that enhance youths' formation of hope and joy occurring deep in the heart by caring for others through, for example, supplies for needy students, "mission trips, service in hospitals, nursing homes, shelters for homeless people, and soup kitchens, and neighborhood clean-ups."⁵⁴
- Overall health and well-being opportunities carried out by congregations that include, for example, adopting a school and promoting it as a safe zone; providing mentors for youth and supplies for needy students; supporting and celebrating teachers; sponsoring forums for youth and parents; and advocating for neighborhood or church-sponsored health clinics to promote physical and mental well-being. These actions contribute to a hope-bearing future for young people.

These pedagogical suggestions actually reflect a pastoral theological perspective that, to build on Mary Clark Moschella's view, shows courageous, joy-filled hope as action. In this perspective "hope might be considered a form of anticipatory joy. Experiences of hope have a future-oriented focus that can support our capacity to imagine new and better worlds."⁵⁵ The aim is for young people to arrive at the point of saying, "I get it! I know that God knows me and God has placed God's hands on me!" When agents of hope also become conduits of joy, young people are placed in a position to claim that joy is "confidence in the midst of struggle and hope in the midst of pain. It's pep in my step that keeps me energized just enough to keep going."⁵⁶

54 Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 214.

55 Mary Clark Moschella, *Caring for Joy: Narrative, Theology, and Practice* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 225

56 See Charles, "Black Joy," accessed on <https://www.instagram.com/theblackjoyproject/>.