

When Hope and Fear Collide

The title of this sermon is taken from a book written by Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton: *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student*. The book focuses on the college student of the early 1990s—almost a decade ago. Yet, it still has relevance for our students today.

The study followed an earlier one done by Levine in the 1970s, entitled *When Dreams and Heroes Die*. After the Vietnam War and Watergate, and the challenging economic times of the early 1970s, students rejected almost everything institutional: politics, government, corporate America, religion, you name it. The students of the 70s were a distrustful, independent, and often cynical generation.

Levine was surprised to learn how much had changed by the early 1990s. Not a gradual shift over a decade or more, he said, but rather “It was like flipping a light switch.” Students now had a strong belief in the American dream, wanted good jobs, financial success, meaningful relationships, and a family. Moreover, they were remarkably optimistic about their personal futures.

At the same time, they seemed scared because everything around them appeared to be falling apart. This fear was best symbolized by the explosion of the Challenger, the Exxon Valdez spill, the Rodney King trial, and the Persian Gulf War. As Levine summarized, “This...generation...is desperately clinging to its dreams but their hope, though broadly professed, is fragile and gossamer-like. Their lives are being challenged at every turn: in their families, their communities, their nation and their world. What is remarkable is that their hopes have not been engulfed by their fears.”

This characterization ran through my mind all last fall as I thought about our current students and how they would try to make sense of their world after September 11.

I especially focused on this characterization since I had just finished a very interesting conversation on September 10 based on Neil Howe and William Strauss's book published in 2000 entitled *Millennials Rising*. Describing the students born in or after 1982, the authors argued that the “Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory.”

- They are optimists who describe themselves as happy, confident, and positive.
- They are cooperative team players who believe in their collective power.
- They accept authority and they trust and feel close to their parents.
- They are rule followers.
- They are the most watched over generation in memory.
- And they believe in the future and see themselves as its cutting edge.

After all, Howe and Strauss reminded us, this generation had only known peace and prosperity during their early youth and they matured at a time when America was seen as the world's greatest power. They had witnessed young adults become millionaires based on their own technological wizardry and they had seen young entrepreneurs realize incredible success in the stock market. They had lived in a country that had built a worldwide coalition and they had read about the success of democracy in parts of the world that for a long time had not been free.

Why would they not be optimistic and feeling safe? For many in that generation, their daily lives had been very secure.

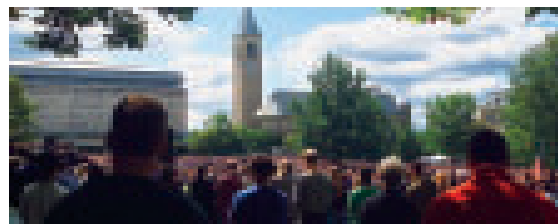
It was interesting to compare these two characterizations of students who were not that far apart in age. There are many aspects of the two studies that are quite similar, although the reader is left with a very different sense of the cohort of students being described.

Is this a generation of students who continue to “defy conventional wisdom about youth” as Howe and Strauss describe and “reject the Gen X pop culture, rebel against Boomer politics, dramatically redefine what it means to be young, and in time become America's next Great Generation?” Or is this the generation that would be “wearied by the enormous pressures they face economically, politically, socially and psychologically” and at the same time “be energized by a desire to enjoy the good life and make their corner of the world a better place?” as Levine described. Is this a generation in which fear and hope collide? The latter description seemed to me to be so much more on target during the fall 2001, although perhaps that was just the emotional and immediate reaction to the horrors of September 11.



Against the fears that are with us
 fear of the known and unknown
 fear of evil actions that may confront us
 fear for our well being, and our safety
 fear for our children, our nation, our world

We are reminded of the many, many reasons for hope
 through our God
 through nature
 through discovery
 through human connections



Just how do we balance our hopes and our fears? How, in the words of John F. Kennedy, "Do we not let our fears hold us back from pursuing our hopes?" The fears facing us today may not be any worse than what previous generations faced, but their quick succession, following such a time of peace and prosperity, make them feel so prevalent.

Think what our students experienced in the fall of 2001. On September 11, for the first time in their lifetime, and only the second time in our history, we were attacked by outsiders. This attack was seen "live" on morning TV, and replayed again and again. You could not avoid experiencing the horror of the attacks and the fear of people fleeing. For so many of this generation, this unspeakable event occurred when they were away from their families and their homes for the first time.

If the fear from the attack were not horrifying enough, not knowing from whence it came and whether it would continue was almost paralyzing. We were experiencing terrorism firsthand, a unique experience for this country and one that resulted in some of the worst responses imaginable. Fear was palpable wherever you turned.

And then, just as life seemed a tad less frightening the anthrax deaths and scare occurred. As awful as the discrete events were, the fact that they were associated with the American institution that touches everyone's lives every day, and one that is trusted to keep us connected...the U.S. Postal System...just triggered even greater fear.


Then the economic downturn plummeted. While the unbridled growth and continuous prosperity was already ending before September (the dot-com bubble already had burst), the shutdown of the airline industry for several days and the incredible change in our tourist industry gave real life to the theory of economic change. The attacks of September 11 on the financial center of this country became a symbol of the change that would occur. We find ourselves amazed at the resilience of our nation's economy, knowing that the stock exchange was closed for several days, or that corporations like Citicorp lost several buildings and had 16,000 workers displaced, or that a premier hotel in San Francisco had single digit occupancy post September 11. All of this made us wonder what would happen to us economically.

Then we went to war against a people we did not know, a country we did not know, and a movement we did not understand. So this is the world our students faced at the start of their academic year in the fall of 2001. How, with fear for life, safety, and security could they ever have any hope?

First, let us consider what hope is. Webster's tells us that hope is confidence in a future event. How does hope emerge? Where does that confidence in the future come from? How can we expect that something good will indeed occur?

For many people, hope will come through their religion. As many of us gathered on Ho Plaza on September 12 for an interfaith prayer service, we heard this message of hope and of humanity...from the Catholic, from the Protestant, from the Rabbi, from the Muslim, from the Buddhist monk. Believe in a Supreme Being, God, Allah, or the Son of God, and you will find hope.

What about those who do not have these faiths or any faith? Where is their/our source of strength? We can experience such inspiration on a daily basis right here at Cornell. Sources of hope are with us every day. The beauty of



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medical technicians to
care for their neighbors.”

Cornell and the Ithaca region is an inspiration, a source of strength, and a source of hope. The inspiration that comes when one sits in those deep chasms of the gorges puts the challenge of the moment or the fear that seems so all encompassing into a different perspective.

Nature gives us hope also in its ability to be reborn, sometimes against all odds: the first crocuses that emerge after a long hard winter; the song of the first robin appearing each spring; and the growth that emerges in a land devastated by fire. Nature ultimately means life. This is evident in some of the most devastated habitats where humanity backs away and lets nature take charge. Jane Goodall speaks eloquently of this in her book, *A Reason for Hope*, as she describes the rebirth of Nagasaki, Japan, the return of life to the River Thames, and the restoration of the Gombe Forest in Tanzania allowing her beloved chimpanzees to have a home.

The work that takes place at a research university like Cornell provides another reason for hope. The potential for new understanding in the sciences, social sciences, humanities and arts, is inspiration. There is a belief that if we can understand something in greater detail, if we can observe interactions that may not have been apparent before, if we can apply new interpretations to traditional works, then perhaps something even better or more successful or more promising will emerge.

That belief in the power of ideas as a way to build confidence was also evident in the aftermath of September 11. Once the basic human needs for safety and security were met, there was a huge desire to try and understand why something like this might happen and what it would mean for our future.

Through teach-ins, special seminars, dialogues, and meetings, we all gathered to learn: about a part of the world that has had a history and significance, but one about which Americans knew very little; about the politics that might have led to such a tragedy; about how buildings which were struck by airplanes full of people and fuel managed to stay standing long enough to save thousands of lives, but eventually collapsed, despite their structural design; about a religion that had been hijacked by the terrorist acts—a religion initially portrayed as one of evil but one that has love and honor of life at its core; and about how we can respond in a just manner to a direct attack without seeking revenge and promulgating hatred.

Our need for understanding was insatiable and still is. Yet hope comes not just from understanding what's already known; it comes from knowing that we are capable of new insights. We can produce new knowledge. We can develop new science. We can create new ways to appreciate the beauty of this world. The power and creativity of the human mind can create a better world.

Another source of hope comes from the simple acts of kindness that are shared between individuals each day. On a grand scale, this was so powerfully evident on the Arts Quad last September 14 at the Memorial Convocation.

The glory of music shared that day gave inspiration to us all. The participation of Samite, the Ugandan refugee who fled his home country to avoid persecution and now calls Ithaca his home, gave us strength. How fitting it was to have him be a part of our community convocation. His very presence gave hope to those whose lives were

so disrupted by the tragedies. And as he led the gathering in singing “Onyoyo”...is anyone out there...you could feel the hope spread through the crowd. Watching thousands of Cornellians join hands and sing in a foreign tongue, you knew that someone was there for you, whether it was the person sitting beside you, or across the quad, or around the world.

There was hope because of the human connection that was present; because we could declare our commitment to truth and freedom; because we cared deeply for one another. Having such specific human connection can be life sustaining.

I am reminded of the impact of this combination of hope and action when I speak with one of our alumni, Dr. Martha MacGuffie. Bobbie, as she is known, graduated from Cornell in the late 1940s and went on to become a renowned plastic surgeon in Rockland County, New York. As a young child she always dreamed of going to Africa, especially after hearing stories from her father who spent time there. That dream came true when she was called to that continent as part of an international humanitarian medical effort. When she arrived, however, she discovered there was no clean running water, no hospital, no drugs... nothing to do the surgery for which she was trained and for which she was summoned.

She also discovered the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Bobbie had learned the hard way of the horror of this disease, having lost three of her own children, two to AIDS because of infected blood transfusions. She decided to “make a difference.”

She built an orphanage in Bondo, Kenya, in honor of her two sons who died of AIDS. In addition, she helped that community to build a hospital, develop an irrigation system for clean water, and begin an education program. Can the work that she is doing through her organization S.H.A.R.E. stem the tide of the AIDS epidemic in Africa...a part of the world where millions of children will be victims of AIDS in the foreseeable future? No. But Bobbie brings hope to those children who are orphans because their parents died of AIDS. She brings hope to the community members who now have a hospital and clean running water and who are becoming emergency medical technicians to care for their neighbors.

It is important to remember that hope alone will not combat fear. It is essential that we accompany this desire or expectation of something good with action to make it happen. That is what Bobbie MacGuffie is doing in Kenya. Her hope for a future for the children in that country is made real because of the actions of the local community members that she is able to support through her organization.

That is what our students who are so passionate about the environment are doing. They have hope because of the research they are doing and the partnerships they are creating, defining new directions that will help preserve the environment. That is what our students who are working so hard to make this a better community are doing. Hope for ourselves as a united community can exist if we fight oppression and fear and affirm the value of each person in our midst. That is what our students who engage in the greater Ithaca, New York, and world community are doing. As these students do something for and with others, they gain hope.

So as we continue to live in a time filled with uncertainty; in a world that knows war and death as much as it knows peace and life; on a planet that is threatened by our own daily actions but has survived eons; in a community that increasingly is filled with those who are different than ourselves, let us remember that “he has no hope who has never had a fear” (W. Cowper) and with fear, we can experience despair, or we can have hope. When your hope and fear collide, choose hope.

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