

THREE FACES OF HOPE
Wicomico County Interfaith Group
April 22, 2016

What an honor to be here...on EARTH DAY...to be with all of you who, individually and collectively, are committed to being active stewards of the resources of earth. And I am particularly inspired by your commitment to starting and focusing here...in this place...this neighborhood, this watershed.

Caring for and restoring our environment...the air, the water, the forests...sometimes seems too big for us to really have an impact. So many people simply become immobilized at the scope of the issues. But when we focus on where we live...our unique place in the world, the issues are still large and significant but the conversation changes. Now we are not talking just about "the environment." We are talking about home. The people who live and work in this watershed, the creatures who walk and swim here, the plants that thrive in THIS soil, the water that we splash in, wash in and drink. It is at this level that environmental stewardship becomes deeply personal. At this level, unless we are really disconnected, we must care. Home is the best starting point of all as we engage in what really is holy work.

When Jodi first approached me about speaking with you tonight she said something about your work to promote healthy dialogue between environmental groups and the poultry industry down here. And my first reaction was, "oh no." I don't know anything about the poultry industry.

When I was about 8 years old my friend best neighborhood friend was Timmy Hershman and his family had chickens. They got eggs from them and they also had a huge old tree stump which was, as they said, the chopping block. I think my interest in poultry farming pretty much ended when Timmy explained what that was all about. I was thrilled when Jodi reassured me that I didn't have to research the particulars of Purdue industrial practices though I'm well aware that poultry litter (such a cute word for such a huge problem) is one of the largest sources of pollution in the Bay. So if we're serious about the issues here at home we do need to learn all we can and I'll say a bit more about that later.

You have invited me to reflect with you on Hope. I think I know a little more about that than about chickens but this is the first time anyone has ever asked me to address the concept of hope in the context of environmental stewardship. Isn't that interesting? So often when we talk about environmental issues hope isn't always much of a presence. It is easy to get discouraged.....give up...the results of what we do sometimes feeling like only a drop in the proverbial bucket. If hope is the same thing as optimism....an overly rosy expectation that somehow it's all going to turn out just fine...then a lack of hope sort of makes sense. We don't know how all of this is going to turn out. If you are simply optimistic about the environmental crisis we face you aren't paying attention.

But hope is something different. I think it is not simple but rather quite a complex orientation to this work and indeed to how we live in almost every area of our lives. As I thought about it three dimensions of an honest and authentic hope seemed to emerge.

Three “faces of hope” if you will. It is a new way of looking at it or thinking about it that kept emerging as I considered our time together and maybe it will be for you as well.

The first face of hope is the face of imagination. Children are pretty good at this...especially around birthdays and Christmas. “I hope I get an easy bake oven, or a new bicycle” or, if you are a twenty first century kid, an iPad. Many of our childhood “hopes” are trivial wishes but not all of them are. Children hope for friends, for family time, for a chance to play on a team or go to college. Some have poignant and profound hopes for Mom or Dad to stop fighting or for a cure for a difficult disease. But what all these “hopes” have in common is the ability to imagine something in the future that doesn’t necessarily exist in the present.

The gift of imagination is what makes dress up and pretend possible. I’ll be the mommy and you be the daddy and fluffy will be our baby. Fluffy will not like the bonnet we put on her and will fight to escape the pain and humiliation of it all. But Fluffy lives totally in the present and once she gets away she’s not going to be thinking much about it. But little Jane and Dick are imagining a day in the future when they will be a mommy and daddy and so their play is really the beginning point of growing into a future that does not yet exist.

Imagination is absolutely critical to the work we are being called to. We cannot do the work and make the necessary changes if we cannot imagine the world that we want. The classic example of course is Martin Luther King Jr’s “I have a dream” speech. Over and over he described his dream....*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.* King didn’t stop with a vague allusion to a better future in general. He described the future he was working toward. He painted a picture that others could imagine and through that imagining they were inspired and empowered.

Imagination was at the core of the message of the Hebrew prophets: *Do not remember the former things nor consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?.. I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*²⁰*The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my people.* The same prophet wrote in another imaginative vision of hope: *they will not hurt or destroy in all my Holy Mountain for the earth will be as filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.”*

That is the language of imagination....painting a picture of what the future should be like so that our HOPE is not just wishful thinking, not just saying what we hope doesn’t happen, but speaking specifically of what it can be. Can you imagine a future where the faith community, the environmentalists, the farmers, and the EPA officials regular gather together not as adversaries but as friends eager to celebrate the latest successes in the restoration of the Bay: the new farming practices that use chicken poop to generate electricity, (which is actually being developed I hear) and the news that finally all the congregations that use water in their sacred liturgies, like baptizing babies, will get it right out of the Wicomico River because it is so clean. When the faith community held workshops on how to put in a rain garden or to reduce energy consumption, people would be lining up to get in....knowing how important it is and knowing that the faith community was becoming the expert. That would be cool. And then everyone would gather for a cookout using sustainably grown food, of course because, after all, people in this

group are friends, all working toward the same goals, all eager to offer the next innovative idea that will create a sustainable future for the generations that follow us.

The Harvard Business Journal once published an article that used a term that has now become commonplace in many contexts: They said in order to move ahead on your organizations mission you must be able to articulate a “Big Hairy Audacious Goal,” or BHAG for short. We all hope for a future that is healthy, sustainable and beautiful and gracious but in our current context it is a big hairy audacious goal. So we need to be clear about exactly what it looks like so that we can plan the steps for getting there. The roots of hope lie in our imagination and the ability to dream sacred dreams.

But dreams and visions aren’t enough. We might be able to describe the future we seek for this planet and its inhabitants....or more specifically for this watershed, this neighborhood, and all those who draw their life from it. But then we need to define what it is that we need to do to get there in ways that move us beyond our cultural emphasis on the individual to the spiritual truth that all of life is connected, as Pope Francis as so eloquently pointed out in his encyclical *Laudati Si*. This is the face of moral urgency.

The future we can imagine will not be realized if we don’t work together...with the emphasis on both words: work and together. This is why it is so significant that the workshops you will be engaged in tomorrow bring together faith leaders, political leaders and environmental organizations like IPC and the Environmental Trust. Each of these voices and perspectives is necessary in understanding present conditions and what the future requires of us. The role of the faith community is particularly important and urgent because we have are able to bring the ethical imperative to the conversations.

I’ve been involved with many people of all faith traditions that are offering a powerful witness to the moral and spiritual imperative to protect and restore the environment. For them...for us...it is what the Holy One calls us to do. You are here today because you get that. But, not all faith communities have yet embraced the reality that creation care is a core spiritual or religious value.

I’ve talked to many leaders of congregations and communities who think care of creation is “another program” or an interest group that they really don’t have time for. But it is not one option among many for people of faith. Rather, environmental stewardship is integral to every aspect of our lives as God’s people. How can we worship the God who created the mountains and oceans, the tree frogs and the dolphins if we don’t include these things in our prayers and hymns? What value are our confessions if we don’t repent of the practices that have exploited and wasted this home that the Divine gives us and, indeed, is part of? How can we put a recycling program in place and not reflect deeply about the consumer culture that thrives on over consumption? How can we work on behalf of the poor and addressing systems that perpetuate injustice without connecting the dots and discovering so many issues have environmental roots. Just think of the faces of the children in Flint Michigan.

In other words, whether or not people define environmental work as spiritual, it really is. Our hope for the future is contingent, to a large extent on understanding this as and working for a change of heart and the development of an holistic approach to how we live on this planet. Aren’t we in the business of changing hearts, of learning better how to live with God and neighbor? Our faith traditions are full of teachings that guide us. Our sacred texts teach loving our neighbor is a common core value and an essential practice of an authentic life lived before God. Each religion, in its own way, understands that creation is a manifestation of the Divine. All authentic religions hold dear the imperative to live simply. Our consumer culture has all but blotted out any robust public discussions of some of these most basic spiritual and ethical principles. This is OUR work to do.

To live in hope means to embrace a powerful truth at the heart of religious prayer and practice. And that is that we CAN change. We are not destined to keep barreling down the road to destruction. “Create in us new hearts, O God,” says the psalmist. Within a generation

or two we must have a change of minds and hearts to embrace a more communal approach to life. Friends, this is where we shine. Or should. Frankly, I would not have the hope for the future that I do have if it were not for the faith community that brings the moral and ethical conversation to the table. We just need to stop being shy about claiming this responsibility. I actually think people, especially those millennials that are not rushing into our houses of worship are hungry for these conversations and they just don't know where to find them.

So helping to lead the moral arguments is an important part of what we do and lifts up the essence of hope....that we can change ourselves and thereby turn this thing around. But if we talk the talk we also much walk the walk and show people how it's done. And what you all are doing this weekend is such a vital part of this face of hope...the realism that rolls up its sleeves and gets to work. Planting rain gardens, researching and implementing and supporting sustainable farming practices. Community gardens! Love that. It is a way of demonstrating in the most public of ways a new approach to food production while building relationships and showing that sustainable farming is actually possible. When people see success they want to be part of it.

I have recently read some interesting studies on the nature of hope. There are a number of them out there, no doubt inspired by the cynicism and despair that seems to saturate the airwaves these days. One of the chief components of hope is a sense of "agency", according to a 2011 study published in the Journal of Happiness Studies (yes it exists). College students were asked to rate how much they agreed with statements such as "I can think of many ways to get out of a jam." Then they asked them to identify a goal that inspired them, identify multiple pathways to the goal, name the hurdles that existed and all the pathways around those hurdles. They found that the students who had engaged in this exercise felt more hopeful, in general, than their peers. So the more people you get actually PARTICIPATING in tomorrow's activities and all that you will continue to do, the more they will know the hope that comes with empowerment and the knowledge that they really can make a difference.

Anthony Scioli, author of the book "Hope in the Age of Anxiety," says hope has four major components and two of them were empowerment and survival: empowerment being a sense of being capable and survival a trusting that one is not trapped in a bad situation but that there is a way out. It is easy to see how these things are related and how both of these are so integral to our hope for the future. People of all faiths can lead the way with our message that in reorienting our hearts to what is good and right and changing the world in the process.

So there is the face of imagination...of being able to see and describe the future that we are building. There is the face of moral urgency grounded in a sacred commitment to the common good that keeps the conversations going, that engages in the public demonstrations of what is possible. It requires smart and informed people, knowledgeable about the issues while approaching our environmental future as the moral and ethical issue it is...a deeply spiritual work that honors both God and neighbor.

And finally, a truly hopeful future requires persistence and courage. These are no less important than either of the others....maybe more so. Because this is hard work and the results are not immediately obvious. You plant a rain garden in faith that it makes a difference, even when your particular contribution will never be obvious in the data that come out yearly. You explore alternative food trends because you are ahead of a long curve and your knowledge and commitment will shape the choices our grandchildren will enjoy. You keep showing up and having the conversations even when people get angry or call you some awful name like "idealist."

Let's face it. We are working for a future we will not see. It brings us back around to what I said at the beginning. Hope is not the same thing as a rosy idealistic optimism that simply thinks all will be well no matter what we do or don't do. I like to think of hope, not as a feeling or an attitude, but as a job description. In the face of all the pessimism that is all around...all the resignation and complacency we must BE the hope. How? By seeking out the

places where the consequential work is being done and joining in. By doing all those daily activities of recycling, and energy conservation, and using water carefully, and not wasting so much and not buying so much....all that because we know that it is the way we are called to live....gently and in community. As people of faith we know something that many don't yet know. That living with awareness and integrity on this planet actually creates a better life than the individualistic and consumer oriented lifestyle does. We learn to value things like relationships, and music and simple rituals share in community.

Jay Marshall, author of a book on the Sacred Art of Thanking and Blessing, writes, "Hopeful people are catalysts. If you come bearing hope you introduce the possibility for change. You've heard the phrase "be the change you want." We are called to be the hope the world needs.

Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake, one of the sponsors of this weekend's events believes this deeply. If you go on our website you can get all sorts of information about the practical but significant things you and your community can do to make our shared neighborhood...our watershed...a healthier sustainable place for everyone. But we also tell stories....stories of faith communities that are the face of hope in their corner of the world. St Camillus Catholic church is a recent story about a church that is getting attention through their watershed projects. They are inspiring others also to act within what IPC calls "circles of influence," recognizing that every action has a ripple effect and contributes to the building of a movement. We are going to tell YOUR story...about what YOU are doing.

So hope is not simple. It is complex and requires imagination, a moral framework that focus on the common good and the possibility of change and the courage and persistence to work for a future that is beyond us. Each person and each community is probably more gifted at one more than others. Maybe you have the gift of imagination...you are needed to paint the picture of what we are working toward. Whether in words or song or poetry your can offer a compelling vision for what the future can and must be. Many of you are leaders in communities of faith. You study the issues and act on what you have learned. You invite people to workshops, plant the trees and dig the gardens. But you also place the work in the broader context of moral imperative. You teach others to see creation care as woven into every aspect of our lives lived with God. Others of you just might be the faces of courage and persistence, telling the stories, writing letters to the editors, advocating for policy, connecting the dots so that others can see that all the individual actions really are coming together into a movement, creating a groundswell of hope.

I recently attended a worship service that had printed in the bulletin an affirmation that seems like the perfect final word for us tonight. It was not attributed so it might have been one of the pastors who wrote it. Whoever it was understands what this work is all about....indeed what life itself is all about...and the hope that we are called both to embrace and to be:

There is an envisioning
And a shaping
That starts with who we are – how we are,
But that sees us, today, as a starting place,
Not as an end result.
Satisfaction too often stalls growth
And precludes our seeing ourselves as means
To ends still beyond us.
But us, the same, leads to the same tomorrow.
A different tomorrow requires a different us—
Means that who we are
Is not just gift and blessing,
But also a becoming—
An ongoing process subject to discipline and priority.

May we pray ourselves into being—
Narrate ourselves –sing ourselves into being...
That the story unfolding in and through us
Might include the story also beyond us—
Unfolding into God—into love and grace
And the redeeming of all creation...

May it be so. And thank you again for inviting me to be part of this evening and this conversation with you.