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GENERATING HOPE: THE FUTURE OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. (Václav Havel)

INTRODUCTION

The statement above comes from the former president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel (1936–2011), and was the *Leitmotiv* of the last Religious Education Association (REA) conference in Pittsburgh (November 4–6, 2016). “Generating hope” (Roebben 2013, 12–14) in an educational context is not identical to an easy-going optimism about “learning outcomes,” but advocates for a more complex, realist, and above all voluntarist approach to teaching/learning as a meaningful process, even if the originally desired outcomes are not there and/or are replaced by others. This *Leitmotiv* was relatively easy to handle during the preparation and implementation of the REA conference, but became highly problematic two days after the conference, when the U.S. elections came to an end and the new president of the United States was presented to the public. In writing up the notes of my REA presidential address for publication, the issue became even more challenging. Questions arose, such as: how to remain hopeful in a globalized world that since November 8, 2016 is deeply affected by (international) political distrusts, social dissociations, and visionary disruptions—with all of these nouns deliberately written in plural; how to educate children and young people to live together in a socially peaceful and personally flourishing way in such a counterproductive environment; how to be critically aware of the (positive and negative) impact of religious and nonreligious worldviews on our educational efforts. In writing this article it became clear to me that, more than ever before, the reasons for hope need to be consciously collected, reflected, and re-enacted by teachers and educators who are really prepared and able to make a difference in the long run.

In this article the idea of hope in education will be developed in three steps: a philosophical, an educational, and a theological one. First of all, hope will be defined as a deliberate “dimension of the soul” (Havel), suggesting that readers should engage in radical existentialism. Secondly, hope will be explained in an educational setting as “the practice of overcoming isolation,” the practice of learning to say “Thou” in the immediate presence of and encounter with the other. And finally hope will be imagined theologically as an eschatological surplus, reframed as “the audacity of hope” (Caputo) in the struggle for a better world.

HOPE AS A DIMENSION OF THE SOUL

Václav Havel crystallized his thoughts on hope while being in prison. As a dissident to the communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia he was incarcerated, disconnected from his beloved wife Olga and his many artist friends. The hardest part was the experience of being deprived of communication. Especially when he was obliged to wait endlessly for a reply to his letters by his wife and when he became anxious that his writing would become a mere monologue—Olga was not a regular writer and when she answered, her letters were often censored (Havel 1990, 51)¹—he struggled with loneliness, isolation, and despair. At those moments his philosophy of hope was put to the test. Sometimes he completely collapsed, caught in a “swamp of innocence” (Havel 1990, 133), not knowing what to think or what to do. Sundays were the worst days in prison: there was nothing to do and nobody there, so that the ultimate “nothing” could be sneaking in (cf. Havel 1990, 116). At other times, however, he experienced his isolation precisely as a challenge to delve deeper into the meaningful foundation for his hope. He wrote: “Either we have hope within us, or we don’t. It is a dimension of the soul. It is not essentially dependent upon some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation” (Havel 1990, 29). Remaining hopeful, not being trapped in despair, is for Havel more than an observation or an estimation of reality, but rather a thoughtful decision made by the human person as a deep conviction of the soul.

Imprisonment is a root metaphor for hope-under-deep-existential-pressure (Havel 1990, 36). The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1951) in his groundbreaking book on the metaphysics of hope argues in the same way: “Does not he who hopes ... contend with a certain trial comparable to a form of captivity ...? From this point of view, hope means first accepting the trial as an integral part of the self, but while so doing, it considers it as destined to be absorbed and transmuted by the inner workings of a certain creative process” (39). That is mainly how Havel deals with his incarceration. He considers his letters to Olga as an act of mental resistance, as a sign of life, breaking out of prison. He enjoys writing, but he also believes that his letters make sense, that they can and should restore and revitalize communication, inside out and outside in. He consolidates his hope through the ritual act of writing (Havel 1990, 65), through the permanent act of reconstructing himself with an eye to the future. He writes: “I do not want to change myself, I do want to become a better self” (Havel 1990, 23). He wants to be prepared for his life after prison.

Craving communication, but being locked up in isolation, reveals another central feature of hope: the human being wants to be on the move. “Hope never stops; hope is always on the way and makes us walk,” said Pope Francis in his 2016 Christmas address. This is why hope can disappear when people are not able to walk physically (anymore) because they are locked up in prison or in a hospital bed or an elderly home. They can even be locked up on the road: hope can vanish when people are stuck as refugees on the road to nowhere, “belonging in a world when you are not a citizen of anywhere” (Regan and Hoeksma 2012, 159).

¹I used the Dutch version of Havel’s letters to Olga and translated the quotes into English.

On a psychological level hope is under pressure when people are no longer enabled to continue their life journey as growing, learning, and communicative human beings. Thomas Aquinas argued that curiosity and inquisitive learning can be considered as the “Hoffnungsstruktur,” the structure of hope within the human being in his/her life journey as a “viator,” as a traveler (Pieper 1953, 44). As long as one is “at home on the road” things can be learned and can be discovered as never-endingly meaningful. Immobilization creates not only moral but also intellectual despair. For Paulo Freire this awareness is the starting point for every form of education: the learner can only learn, if he/she becomes hopefully aware of the road as learning process, as a necessary but always incomplete process (cf. Freire 2007, 101). Hope is for Freire the motor for learning.

Radical existentialism, the search for meaning as an ongoing “grass roots” journey, even when one is immobilized in prison, is the philosophical concept that encompasses best the ideas of hope and meaning for Havel. Hope means that things make sense, regardless of what their outcome is, even in prison. He is convinced of the fact that there is an ultimate horizon of meaningfulness for everything. But he hesitates profoundly to name this horizon God (Havel 1990, 61–64; see also Muchová 2016). For the sake of the argument I will postpone the theological position as well. It will be addressed in the third part of this article.

HOPE AS THE PRAXIS OF OVERCOMING ISOLATION

Hope is the deliberate act to interrupt isolation and to dare communication. To break down the path of learning implies the encounter with others—to accompany others and to be accompanied by them, to interrogate them and to be interrogated by them. No one is able to learn on his/her own. This is an interesting dimension of the journey of hope, but also a demanding one. It pulls me out of my comfort zone; I was looking for the meaning of life and now I am confronted with the other, asking me for respect and more than this, for my unconditional love. Based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, the Australian practical theologian Terry Veling develops a philosophical perspective on the “answer-ability” or “response-ability” of the person, that can be very well adapted to the educational act (2014). Paraphrasing Veling this sounds as follows: “In the face of the other I am not only invited to learn from the other as if it were a helpful contribution to my own identity, but it is the other way around: my identity is ‘exposed’ to the vulnerability of the other and ‘singled out’ as an answer of love to the other. Learning-to-say-Thou—moving outside of myself and focusing on the vulnerable singularity of the other—is, according to Levinas, the noble pathway to becoming human and, *mutatis mutandis*, to ‘learn’ to become human. ‘You’ make me act and make me attentive to my action. Your presence stimulates the best in me, when I act and reflect. You ‘e-ducate’ me: you lead me out of myself and, in re-action to this, you make me think of what needs to be done and said appropriately” (Roebben 2016b, 53–54). Overcoming isolation and hitting the road of hope is a communicative act with huge moral and intellectual implications. Or to rehearse in the words of Veling: “I cannot ask someone else to answer for my life. I have no ‘alibi’ that can come to my defense. I cannot evade ‘the answerable act or deed’ of my own life—no one

can answer for me or take my place. Only I can respond to another, and this is what constitutes the singularity of my unique place in existence, and the unique vocation or answerability of my life. In other words: I am required" (2014, 133).

So learning to say "Thou" in the encounter with the other implies my immediate, unique, and cultivated presence as a Self. In order to build society as a "New We," there is a huge need for "New Me's." The Dutch philosopher Harry Kunneman (2005) argues that a new perspective on autonomy is needed, making a shift from the "thick I" to the "deep I," to the person who is aware of his unique contribution to the world and who is able to communicate this contribution critically and aptly, always in interaction with the voices of fellow human beings. Autography then replaces autonomy, for Kunneman. Questions then arise such as: Am "I" ready to say "Thou" for the benefit of "Us"? Can "Thou" count on "Me," so that hope is generated for "Us"? Is my "New Me" deep enough, so that I can invite "Thou" to become part of the "New We"?

I must admit, this looks like a *déjà-vu*. In 1994 I defended my doctoral dissertation on moral education at the KU Leuven, confronting European post-Vatican II voices in moral theology with the discourses on both character education and values clarification in the United States. One of the main results of my research in those days was that moral education is all about authentic adults, offering valuable life orientation and models of human flourishing to the next generation. It all boils down to authenticity in human relationships, to honesty and courtesy, and to positive action, to deeds of effective altruism. Response-ability is the "pen with which we write the story of the new creation into the history of being," says Havel (1990, 96). Teaching how to write and how to write responsibly and creatively—as mentioned above as "autography"—is in this respect a more important task for teachers and educators than, for example, teaching how to calculate.

What are now the concrete implications of this idea? How can teachers and educators become real hope generators for children, young people and young adults in their efforts to overcome isolation and to dare communication—as response-able storytellers of their own lives? In my answer to this question I focus briefly on seven dimensions of the professional act of teaching: diagnosis, socialization, elementarization, communication, "slowification," appropriation, and humanization (Roebben 2016a). First of all, the teacher or educator needs to assess the situatedness of his/her learners in a correct way, with respect to their capabilities and with a view on the unique person within every student. Assessment can be done in a calculative way ("In this class we have three kids with ADHD"), but also in a respectful and differentiated way. Second, the teacher needs to offer as much as possible interaction chances and moments of exposure ("You are required!"), so that the learners can overcome "immunisation by communication" (Masschelein and Simons 2003). Sometimes this implies counteracting violence by "honoring the dignity" of young people (Parker 2003), even if they are not at a first glance willing to cooperate—by not being afraid of them, by "breaking the cycle" of inarticulateness, by keeping the door open and the conversation going (Regan and Hoeksma 2012, 64–71). The third element is content-related. Young people deserve solid, plausible, and accessible information about the topics at stake. Teachers need to show them a wide range of possible elementary solutions to solvable and unsolvable questions, in such a way that they can discover for themselves how these contents connect appropriately to their own learning biography.

Communication is the fourth dimension of good teaching. Is the floor open for the vulnerable act of probing one's position as a learner in the presence of fellow learners? In an authentic learning community, argues the American philosopher of education David T. Hansen, "a teacher and his or her students should be moving closer and closer apart and [...] should be moving farther and farther together" (2001, 156). The metaphor of the tree is helpful here (Roebben 2016a, 57–59): the teacher not only supports children to develop their own branches based on the trunk of the tree. He/she also challenges them to build on each other's insights, to grow toward each other and to become new varicolored foliage. Sometimes, however, the carefully prepared learning process needs to be interrupted, because children raise unexpected questions or differences of interpretation. This is step five. The teacher then needs to "slowify" the process (Roebben 2013, 207). This is not an easy thing to do: to enhance patience in the mindset of a young person longing for direct and clear answers, to introduce "the element of patience into non-acceptance" (Marcel 1951, 39). Gabriel Marcel argues in his book on hope as follows: "A simple expression borrowed from everyday language is a help here: to take one's time. (...) 'Take your time,' an examiner would say, for example, to a flurried candidate. That means, do not force the personal rhythm, the proper cadence of your reflection, or even of your memory, for if you do so you will spoil your chances, you will be likely to say at random the first words which come into your head" (Marcel 1951, 39). The next step is appropriation: creating space for the person's *proprium*, for his or her personal relationship with what has been taught and communicated, for his/her vocation as a responsible learner. Learning by doing is the main pathway to appropriation—in acts of performing (experience), of storytelling (thick description and interpretation) and of theory-driven conceptualization (meta-reflection) (Roebben 2016b, 92). Becoming a person of character is the traditional aim of *Bildung* (edification), but in our globalized and purpose-driven world this aim seems to be more and more unachievable (Nussbaum 2010).² In the scattered world in which we live today hope consists then of providing a gentle spotlight on the stage of learning—so that appropriation can take place *on stage* (performance), *back stage* (storytelling) and *post-stage* (conceptualization). The final step is not under control of the teacher: he/she needs to step back and let the wonder of education happen. What a child or a young person finally takes from the table of learning cannot be determined, despite all the available educational research papers in the world. How the learner becomes a person and an authentic human being in school, in his/her encounter with study materials, traditions of knowledge, fellow students and supportive teachers, is in the long run a mystery. "The deepest core of the human being, the soul, cannot be grasped in education, in what a person has learned or 'imagined'. A human person cannot and should not be identified with his or her education. ... [The teacher] needs to open up the learning space for personal storytelling and dealing with images, but he cannot decide whether or not a specific idea or representation will be successful in the learner's mind. The teacher can make a case, but he cannot make a person. This responsibility—to deal with one's own personhood—belongs to the secret of the human person who is learning" (Roebben 2016b, 124). The vocation of the teacher

²I agree with the analysis and the model of "human development" of Martha Nussbaum, but I am not convinced by her critical and sometimes disqualifying interpretation of European academic programs in comparison to the ones in the United States.

therefore should be anchored in a habitus of hopeful respect and respectful hope. In hoping that something unique can happen in the life of this specific young person, the teacher should use his/her “ordinary” professional competencies and prepare the ground for the “extraordinary” event to come: the learner becoming a “New Me.”

HOPE AS AN ESCHATOLOGICAL SURPLUS

This view on teaching and learning as “growing in shared humanity” (Roebben 2016b, 43–61) does not need a theological foundation. In the human intellectual and moral genius there is enough capacity to realize this project without reference to an ultimate being—a position held by the main authors of this article, Paul Freire and Vaclav Havel, and of course by famous educationalists, such as John Dewey and many others. In a post-secular society, however, the major world religions can provide educators with “semantic potential” (Habermas 1988, 23)—a universe of images, words, metaphors, stories, and identification figures—conveying ideas about how this world can become a better place through education, offering a long-term perspective on all the efforts being made in education, offering a deeper perspective on the vocation of the educator.

One of the central concerns in his “theology of hope” and in the biblical stories conveying this theology (or God-talk) is, according to Jürgen Moltmann, the tension between what human beings actually can achieve in the future (*futurum*) and what transcends their efforts in an ultimate or eschatological way (*adventus*) (1965). Hope for the future becomes effective in planning and preparing, but always includes openness for what cannot be planned and prepared as well. Hope always includes an eschatological reservation (*ta eschata* is Greek for the ultimate things) and always hopes for an eschatological surplus to be “full-filled.” The specific modus for this theological approach to hope is a weak theology, according to John D. Caputo, in which

hope means that things are neither steered mightily unto good by an invisible wisdom nor hollowed out at their center by some primordial catastrophe and doomed to fail. Hope means that things are just unstable, risky, nascent, natal, betokening neither an absolute plenum nor an absolute void. [...] Hope means that the world contains an uncontainable promise, which is also a threat. Hope means that a great “perhaps” hovers over the world, that what holds sways over the world is not the Almighty but a might-be. But “perhaps” does not signify an attitude of lassitude or indifference. “Perhaps” is risky business, a resolute staying open to a future that is otherwise considered closed. “Perhaps” continues a discussion that the authorities considered closed. “Perhaps” is not indecisive but is fueled by the audacity to hope. (2015, 19)

Hope is a voluntary act, an audacious decision and an act of critical thinking. *Spes quaerens intellectum*—hope in search of reason (Moltmann 1965, 27–30)—engages in society and education, based on the assumption that “perhaps” something radically new can happen, regardless of the human effort, but never without the human effort. Participation in the human dynamic of hope and conformation to the idea that this dynamic is never-ending and thus transcending the human sphere are two central reason-related features for teachers. To put it in the theological words of Mary Elizabeth Moore: “The measure of our teaching is the degree to which our message and manner conform to the love of God and participate in hope for a transformed world” (1995, 78).

It is a difficult issue for a teacher, to keep the balance between the two: between already and not yet, between immanence and transcendence, between participation and conformation, between the action of the day and the contemplative rest of the night. As in the parable in the Gospel of Mark, the teacher “scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how” (Mark 4:25–27). Spiritual resilience and resilient spirituality are perhaps the best way to describe the complex phenomenon of the two dimensions interwoven with and in each other. In the bosom of this balance—in the blessing of “he who hopes and who sleeps” (Charles Péguy)—eschatological hope can be grounded. Or in the words of Caputo: “Hope hovers over us like a ghost, whispering in our ears impossible things, waking us with a start in the night. Hope is a spirit, the aspiration, the very respiration of God’s spirit, of God’s insistence, which groans to exist. Hope dares to say ‘come’, dares to pray ‘come,’ to what it cannot see coming” (2015, 199).

CONCLUSION

This written version of my presidential address³ is concluded with a self-made poem, originally written in Dutch (on January 11, 2007). It is an exhortation to be kind to the teacher, knocking at our door. It is an invitation to be kind to ourselves, as teachers craving to generate hope in these scattered times.

*Close the door behind you, otherwise the wind will suck you out.
 In this swirling mass you will not survive.
 Come in and warm yourself at the hearth.
 Take off your shoes and pull on new socks.
 Because you are tired of the burden of the day
 and your eyes are a dim mirror of the darkness
 that looms behind you.
 Close the box of the abyss now.
 You don't have to fear any false step.
 Come and tell me your story, don't forget a word.
 Disgorge everything.
 I will select.
 Don't worry about the night.
 She will take good care of everything.
 Her memory is large and fertile.
 Tomorrow you will continue your journey,
 all of your stories packed in your backpack.
 In three layers: underneath the fact the explanation
 and down below unfathomable depth.*

³Based on Caputo’s words, which say that “hope is hope in the promise of the world, inscribed on the surface of matter in a distant corner of the universe, in a rose that blossoms unseen, blossoming because it blossoms, without why” (2015, 199), I finished the spoken version of my presidential address on November 4, 2016 in Pittsburgh with the video of the last gardener of Aleppo, caring for the beauty of roses in the midst of the ugliness and harshness of the Syrian war. The full video of the address (including this last video) can be viewed on <https://vimeo.com/197973165>.

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