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Book Review - Hope Without Optimism

Louise Bower-Hatchard
louise.bower@gmail.com

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BOOK REVIEW**Hope Without Optimism**

Terry Eagleton

Yale University Press, 2015, 147 pages, ISBN 978-0-300-24867-8,
£34.84 Hardback, £10.99 Paperback, £7.47 Kindle edition

Review by Louise Bower-Hatchard

Solution Focused Practitioner, Signs of Safety practice lead and senior manager in Children & Families Services based in Sheffield, UK.

As Solution Focused practitioners, we usually ask about our clients best hopes. Some reflection therefore on what hope is and how it differs from the general positivity that optimism is associated with seemed to me to be relevant and of interest.

The book seeks to look into the political, philosophical and theological implications of the concept of hope and clearly explain how hope is something very different to and separate from optimism. It does deliver on all of these - comparing and contrasting the concept of hope as described by different political thinkers, philosophers, Christianity and celebrated writers.

If you're an academic thinker, well versed in philosophy and enjoy dense analysis of different modes of thought then you may well enjoy the diverse references and viewpoints presented within this book. Be warned - this is not a light read! The pace of cross-referencing of different thinkers assumes knowledge of a wide variety of philosophical viewpoints - it is not aimed at the casual reader.

This book is written by a Professor of English Literature who has written over 50 books in fields including postmodernism, ideology, religion and politics (particularly Marxism). The preface opens with "As one for whom the proverbial glass is not only half empty but almost certain to contain some foul-tasting, potentially lethal liquid, I am not perhaps the most appropriate author to write about hope". The author comes across as incredibly knowledgeable and articulate with a dry sense of humour.

There are four sections - the first explaining "The Banality of Optimism". In this section, the point is made the optimism is a temperament rather than a virtue - some people are just naturally more optimistic than others "you are chained to your cheerfulness like a slave to his oar". The book goes on to suggest that optimism can lead to conservatism as it the lack of acknowledgement of despair can also mean a lack of motivation to make changes.

The second section compares and contrasts view of "What is Hope?". In this, the distinctions and inter-relatedness of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity are discussed, as well as the links with faith, love and desire. "To believe that something will happen is to expect it to, but to hope that it will is not necessarily to do so...Impossibility cancels hope but not desire". The concept of hope as being cruel and keeping us in our own human suffering is also examined - "If it is the most pestilent of the evils to emerge from Pandora's box, it is because it stops us putting an end to ourselves, and thus from putting an end to all the other evils that beset us (P44)". Also, the idea that hope can cause us misery is presented "Schopenhauer regards hope as the root of evil, disturbing one's tranquillity with false expectations (p87)". The concept also of the perpetually hopeful individual of living without fully enjoying the present is also presented, with their hope depriving that person of truly living each moment. "Hope is the crack in the present through which a future can be glimpsed, but it is also what hollows the human subject into nonbeing. It devalues each moment, laying it on the sacrificial altar of a future fulfilment that will never arrive (P44)".

The third section focuses on "The Philosopher of Hope" and is dedicated to a discussion of the thoughts of Ernst Bloch, a "great luminary of Western Marxism", who believed that "hope is in love with success rather than failure" (p. 107) with a tendency towards perfectionism. The views of Bloch are compared with other eminent thinkers and

philosophies of that era, with the author finding his ideas limited in terms of usefulness “those who invite us to hope unreasonably risk plunging us all into chronic disaffection” (p. 110).

The final section is titled “Hope Against Hope”, and it discusses the place of hope when situations seem hopeless, and that even when things are at their worst it is “in some perverse sense a source of hope, bringing as it does the assurance that one can sink no further”. The view is that the optimist, because they will not recognise the darkness of despair, cannot truly hope as hope springs from a place of recognition that the preferred future may not become a reality.

So how is this helpful for us as Solution Focused practitioners?

An understanding of what hope is explains to some extent why using the language of hope rather than desire get such useful responses from clients. When we invite our clients to articulate their best hopes, rather than asking about their wants, they are more likely to come up with an answer that is feasible to achieve. “Precisely because it anticipates rather than simply desires, hope must intend the possible, or at least what those in the grip of it regard as possible, which is not necessarily true of desire. (P48)”

“For there to be genuine hope, the future must be anchored in the present. It cannot simply irrupt into it from some metaphysical outer space. At the same time, the yeast-like powers at work in the present do so in a way that finally surpasses its limits, pointing to a condition beyond our current imaginings” (p. 38).

The miracle question, with its invitation to describe a future where the issue or problem no longer exists acts to create hope that things could possibly be different.

“The mere act of being able to imagine an alternative future may distance and relativise the present, loosening its grip upon us to the point where the future in question becomes more feasible” (p. 86).

There are also some views of hope that perhaps explain the enjoyment and fulfilment that a solution focused mindset brings to both practitioner and client - the regular discussion of hope bringing joy and provoking the imagination. “John Locke regards hope as the ‘pleasure in the mind’ we feel when anticipating some future source of enjoyment (p55)”.

The book, with its thorough discussion of the distinction between hope and optimism, perhaps explains in part why the focus on hope in the Solution Focused approach is quite so powerful.

The reviewer

Louise Bower-Hatchard is a Solution Focused Practitioner, Signs of Safety practice lead and senior manager in Children & Families Services based in Sheffield, UK.

Louise Bower-Hatchard

Email: louise.bower@gmail.com