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Entrepreneurs and the Renewal of Hope

By Robert Tribken
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People are worried. Confidence in the economy and the direction of society continues to drop in the face of new threats. Anxiety is natural as we move into an uncertain future.

But our ancestors survived threatening circumstances and created a better world, and so will we. Despite our problems, we can still contribute to the greater good and build better lives, each in our own way.

For those of us in business, this means working with courage and hope as we identify new opportunities and work to build a better future.

Hope and Optimism

Our faith and spirituality can play an essential role, but first let's examine the nature of hope and its close cousin, optimism.

We often use hope and optimism as synonyms; both involve a positive attitude and an expectation of favorable outcomes. Both justify and encourage moving forward despite setbacks and, in most situations, are more likely to lead to better health and positive results than do negative attitudes.

There are differences, however. I think of optimism as more of a disposition, representing a general expectation that things overall will work out. Hope, on the other hand, is usually thought of as more specific and involves a reasonable expectation of a particular positive outcome, such as "I hope to get the new job." This expectation is plausible even though the outcome is not inevitable.

Hope can be either active or passive. It can involve a positive outcome toward which we are working or something beyond our control for which we are waiting. This article focuses on active hope.

A high level of active hope is essential for innovation and entrepreneurship and helps us move forward toward a better future.

Active Hope

Psychologist C. R. Snyder provided a valuable framework. He interviewed high-hope individuals and found their hope consisted of three components: a desired future outcome, a belief that one has a realistic path to this outcome, and the will to follow it.¹ In other words, Snyder went beyond the expectation of a specific favorable outcome and added willpower and a path to get there as critical components.

Snyder's work provides an important insight: hope is more effective if we identify a path to the desired outcome and then follow it. His framework helps us move past debilitating passivity and reminds us of the powerful role purposeful action can play. Active hope does not guarantee success, but it does make it more likely.

Snyder's former students and collaborators, Jennifer Cheavens and David Feldman, have used his framework to develop "hope therapy." Cheavens and Feldman have found that even people not initially considered to be high-hope individuals can learn to set clear and often challenging goals and sub-goals, develop multiple pathways to reach these goals, anticipate and devise solutions for obstacles they encounter, and work towards them with persistence.² Hope can indeed be developed.

Hope In the Bible

At first glance, much of the hope in the Bible seems to be passive hope—people waiting for God to act.

In our English versions of the Bible, the word hope frequently refers to trusting in God and often involves waiting for God to do something. The Hebrew words most often translated into the English word hope meant to wait or to wait with expectation, and the New Testament Greek word most often translated as hope originally meant trust. This waiting and trusting often seemed to carry a connotation of passivity that we would not think of as active hope.

But this is not the whole story. If we look at the actual stories in the Bible, we see they are often full of active hope of a type that would fit Snyder's framework. There are many examples of Biblical characters who, often after being informed and inspired by God, pursue desired outcomes by following a clear path and exhibiting considerable willpower, courage, and persistence as they do so. For example:

- Early on, Abraham hears a call to a better life and a message that God will bless all peoples through him and his descendants, and so he and his people set off on a perilous journey through an unknown land, following the direction given by God.

1. C.R. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There From Here* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) pp. 15-23.

2. Jennifer S. Cheavens and David B. Feldman, *The Science and Application of Positive Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 375.

- Joseph anticipates famine in Egypt and goes to work building grain inventories during the fat years so that the people will have food to eat during the famine years.
- Moses returns to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and lead his people on a forty-year pilgrimage to the hoped-for Promised Land.
- Nehemiah leaves his comfortable life in Persia to return to Jerusalem and lead the rebuilding of the city and Temple.
- Esther takes the deliberate and dangerous path of lobbying the king to prevent the murder of countless Jews.
- Paul pursues the goal of reaching gentiles with the message of Jesus by following a dangerous path that takes him across the Mediterranean; in the process, he demonstrates extraordinary courage and resilience.

There are many other examples throughout the Bible, most notably the courageous mission of Jesus and his journey to the cross.

In these examples, hope provides the basis for action. The hero in each story believed God was with them, but they still acted with agency and willpower and were not sitting back and waiting for God to fix things for them. With God's help, they identified a pathway to the desired end and acted with will and persistence as they followed it.

We can do likewise, and our world will be better as a result.

Spirituality and Active Hope Today

Developing the skills identified by Snyder, Cheavens, and Feldman will help us develop and act with more hope and can be essential for our success. But I wonder if there might be something else at work, perhaps of a spiritual nature.

There seem to be times when we feel empowered or inspired by something deeper than or beyond our ordinary experience. Some might say that God or his Holy Spirit is working in us or through us, but however we think of it, this mysterious feeling of inspiration can be a profound source of motivation, especially if we channel it through the components of active hope.

Theological grounding can help cultivate this feeling of inspiration. Theology, by its nature, turns our attention toward the mystery of God and helps us develop a sense of coherence and existential purpose that is essential for hope in the face of setbacks. It can also help us reflect on our purpose and values and think seriously about the desired outcomes to which we are willing to commit ourselves. It can inspire us by reminding us of the bigger picture.

We can also study biblical exemplars like those mentioned above and reflect on how they faced their challenges; there are lessons in these stories that can help us face our own challenges.

Most important, at least to my way of thinking, are spiritual practices like prayer, some forms of meditation, worship, and reflection. These help us turn our attention toward God and can be a source of strength and wisdom and help us move forward with a deeper sense of purpose.

Active hope can be a powerful force as we move into the future, especially if it is spiritually grounded. It will be essential for the entrepreneurial renewal our society needs.

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