

HOPE, NOT OPTIMISM

June 10, 2012

In the wake of the Second World War a group of writers and producers mounted a theater production that challenged the racism that marked our society. *South Pacific* was set in the war years, and included many songs that have become part of the popular music canon. *Some Enchanted Evening*, *You Have to be Carefully Taught*, *Across a Crowded Room*, were on that list. And Mary Martin, in the persona of nurse Nellie Forbush sang with gusto, *A Cock-Eyed Optimist*, which reflected her attitude toward the outcome of the war.

When the skies are brighter canary yellow

I forget ev'ry cloud that I've seen.

So they call me a cock-eyed optimist

Immature and incurably green.

I've heard people rant and rave and bellow

That we're done and we might as well be dead,

But I'm only a cock-eyed optimist

And I can't get it into my head.

Nurse Nellie was optimistic about the war. However she was in love with a planter who was widowed, and his children were persons of color—in this case Polynesian. Nellie, who grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, a city that automatically assumed that white was right, and all people of color at least a little less so, could not see how she could embrace and love these children. Nellie's optimistic attitude that the war would turn out well, did not extend to believing that she could change her racial bias.

In truth, what she did was to work her way towards hope, but it took some time and growth on her part to get there.

And that's the thing with hope. It takes work. One needs a certain degree of optimism, but one can't just sit back and wait for the desired outcome. It takes some effort to grow toward hope, and more to fulfill that hope.

Members of this congregation are facing severe challenges, none more than 17 year old Emma Muldoon. We can now reasonably hope that Emma will recover fully from the lymphoma that grew so rapidly in her small body. Her doctor says that she has a 75 to

90% chance to recover with no relapse. And so we can hope and pray or otherwise express our confidence that she will return to us healthy again.

However, this did not happen automatically. A lot of people made the right decisions at the right time and are cooperating to make this happen. After all, it began with a stomach ache. I had a grandmother-in-law whose response to childhood aches and scrapes was, "Oh that will get better before you get married." And I confess that my own attitude with children was to wait and see. However, the people who loved Emma somehow knew or sensed that this was not just indigestion. They took her to the emergency room.

There the initial diagnosis was gastroenteritis. But that did not seem right to the adults who were caring for Emma. Then an E.R. doctor said, "Let's do some tests." They did so and found a mass in her abdomen. Then someone said, "Where can a young person receive the best possible care?" The decision was to send her to the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital in Grand Rapids. (Make a note of this name, parents. If your child is seriously ill, it is the best in the state.)

There, Emma is surrounded by color and cheerful people. She has good doctors and nurses. She gets to, she informed me gleefully, order her meals off the adult menu. She has a long road to recovery; her chemotherapy program will take eight months. She'll be home part of the time, but she'll also be hospitalized a lot of the time. You'll have many opportunities to send her e-mails or call, which she loves to receive. She'll be looking for pretty scarves and cute hats to take the place of her hair, which will disappear. And all of us can hold out hope for her full recovery.

So Emma, who is afflicted with an illness that makes us question the *why* of it all, with the help of many, including all of us, has a very good chance of living a long life, free of this illness.

One thing you might note about this scenario is that no one had to decide or act alone. Hope requires the support and actions of a community of people. It will require the actions of most of the people of the world to build a realistic hope that humankind will survive the long range effects of climate change.

For many years I have worried that the glorious blue marble floating in space that we know as Earth, and that is our planetary home, would not be able to survive the effects of the spectacular success of humankind. We are the most successful creature Earth has yet known. Not the most numerous, for there are several species of beetles and bacteria and wee small beings that far outnumber us. But for comfortable living for those at the top of the hierarchies, no species beats us.

The cost, however, may destroy us. And, as a species we show no more wisdom than a dung beetle in meeting this challenge. I no longer worry, however, whether the Earth will survive. I only worry whether humankind will survive.

I recently heard environmentalist Bill McKibben speak on National Public Radio. His topic was the effect of global warming on the oceans. The glaciers are melting, coral reefs are dying, plankton, the base of the food chain in our oceans, is becoming depleted. The conversation was most depressing. Then the interviewer asked him: *Is there hope? Will the oceans survive?*

McKibben answered, *Oh, yes. The oceans will survive. I just worry that they will no longer be friendly to humans.*

Will the planet be friendly to humankind in the not too distant future? What would our future look like if it is not? Is there hope that we can avoid this apocalypse? I believe that optimistically ignoring the situation, that assuming that somewhere there are scientists who can rescue us with a magic machine, is foolish. I think that if we are to maintain hope for a healthy home for humankind, we need to work to ensure that it is there.

This is a very large *we* of which I speak. It will require the majority of humans to work together. That means we would need to give up the notion that we are separate, that we can withdraw into gated communities and hire guards for the gates. It would require us to pay attention to the island nations who are already losing their land to the rising waters. It would require us to pay attention to the growing desertification of large areas of the world. It would require us to work together in ways that we have never done. But if our species is to, not just survive, but live into its great potential, we must do so.

Curiously, I find hope that we can yet do this in small things. I find it in community gardens and the growth of recycling programs. I find it in small cities that work to enact fair employment practices. I find it when the NAACP endorses gay marriage! I find it in co-ops and organic bakeries. I find it in the organic Farmer's Market named Sweetwater located in Muskegon. When people work together for the good of others and the planet, there is hope.

I must confess that the next illustration I will call to your attention is also the one for which it is most difficult for me to muster hope. This is the War on Women, now being waged fiercely in our state of Michigan. The package of bills now being rammed through the Republican controlled state legislature, and already approved by a house panel, will have dire consequences for women's reproductive health if approved by both houses and signed by the governor.

The bill would ban all abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy. Most fetal anomalies only become apparent at 20 weeks. It sets standards for any clinic that provides abortions that are equivalent to hospitals. Even clinics that only provide medication abortions would be required to have a surgery operating room. A Planned Parenthood representative said that they would have to close two of their facilities.

Dr. Timothy Johnson testified before the panel that the bill would interfere with doctor/patient relationships and objected that it had no exceptions for rape and/or the health of the mother.

Abortion is one of those push button topics. It has become so politicized that there is almost no way the two sides can talk to each other. As it is framed by the religious and now political right it sounds like they think women decide to get an abortion on a whim. *Ho, hum, it's a boring day, and I think I just may wait until later to have a baby. Guess I'll go down and have an abortion today.* And she marches her eight month pregnant body down to the nearest clinic.

It's not like that folks. It's just not like that. A friend helped me find language I find helpful. No one wants to have an abortion. No one gets pregnant so she can have that experience. However, criminalizing all abortions ignores the lived reality of women.

Some pregnancies are the result of rape. Some teen-age girls become pregnant through ignorance. Some women have health problems; some fetuses have severe anomalies.

The refusal to grant women full autonomy is part of the larger War on Women now being waged by the religious and political right. When I see the disrespect inflicted on women in the halls of Congress as well as our own state legislature I despair.

Testimony regarding the bill was cut off following that of a Right to Life representative. No other viewpoint was heard. When I read of the Pope's letter to American Catholic nuns, *and* his charge to the Bishops to investigate them because they are spending too much time caring for the poor and homeless, I despair. When I hear a presidential candidate refuse to endorse the Lily Ledbetter law, I despair. It's hard to find hope.

And then something happens. A group of younger, energetic women join a progressive political group, AND volunteer for jobs. They say they can't just sit by and watch everything we've worked for go down the tubes. They want to help elect more women to office. Some of them have worked on campaigns before. They know it takes hard work, calling people, walking with candidates, raising money. And they want to do it, for us, for our daughters, for our granddaughters. Writers with a national audience shine a spotlight on Michigan and the bill now making its way rapidly through the legislature. Others now know that a major battle of the War on Women is happening right here, right now. We will receive help.

The party in power in Michigan has total control. They will succeed in ramming it through. I question whether the governor has the political integrity to veto that political hot potato.

However, they will discover how very angry most women are in November. And, my now hopeful heart tells me, that the men who love them will be angry also.

I am now able to remember that Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us that the arc of justice bends toward freedom. For too long we relied on that optimistic judgment, and failed to guard our freedoms. We failed to work to include all those who are oppressed in our care. Now we must work and work hard to make sure that all women and children and men are safe and free.

Nellie Forbush learned to love the Polynesian children of the man she loved. There were twists and turns in the plot, some danger, some sadness, but Nellie grew her heart and mind. *I'm a Cockeyed Optimist* concludes with these words:

I hear the human race
Is fallin' on its face
And hasn't very far to go,
But ev'ry whippoorwill
Is sellin' me a bill,
And tellin' me it just ain't so.

I could say life is just a bowl of Jello
And appear more intelligent and smart,
But I'm stuck like a dope
With a thing called hope,
And I can't get it out of my heart!
Not this heart.

Let us all work to be *stuck like a dope/With a thing called hope*.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed Be and Amen.

