

FROM A FAITH PERSPECTIVE

In these troubling times, we are the hope

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Special to the Bucks County Courier Times

How little peace on Earth there is as I write this. The Middle East seems bent upon reducing itself to rubble, and both Russia and Ukraine grieve their horrific loss of life and treasure to war. At home the veneer of holiday cheer masks deep psychological and spiritual wounds that fester and fuel both vengeful and righteous anger. Resentments, economic divisions, and clashing cultures divide communities and families. It seems that our nation is headed to no place good any time soon, and worldwide, many fear the loss of basic freedoms. A recent cover of the *New Yorker* showed Lady Liberty walking a tightrope — an image that echoes my feeling that we live in perilous times.

It's easy to abandon hope and be cynical. The nights are long and dark. The media showcases our lack of compassion. Thuggish partisans harass and jeer those they oppose. Incivility, hate, distrust, fear, and occasional violence mar our public gatherings. We become

wary of strangers and cautious in our conversation lest we inadvertently trigger an outburst of rage.

In such dark times, hope is the source of transformative light. Hope is generative and life-giving. Cynicism is the opposite — it leads to despair and deeper gloom. In the northern hemisphere, the great religions celebrate light dispelling darkness at the winter solstice. Christmas, Hanukkah, Diwali, and Kwanzaa all involve festive displays of light. *Light* is a physical thing, a reality that the human eye can detect. It's incompatible with darkness. Light dispels gloom. The transformative quality of light is so basic that it is deeply embedded in our language. We speak of enlightenment, of knowledge that illuminates and clarifies, of people who are luminaries. Saints are depicted in art as radiant, the artist paints them with halos of light about their faces.

Hope is a metaphysical construct, a concept, a word to describe something we experience spiritually. Just as physical light dispels darkness, hope dispels despair. In a pitch-dark room, a single

candle gives us the light we need to move freely. The faintest glimmer of hope energizes us, creates an opening, reveals possibility, and enables action.

Quakers remind each other to “mind the Light,” meaning that we should cultivate that of God within ourselves and seek it in our neighbors. When we aspire to some good outcome for a person, we say we “hold them in the Light,” by which we express our faith in the goodness of divinity. We cultivate our hope for deliverance, even as darkness threatens to overwhelm us. The way forward opens.

Gift-giving is another way we make hope real in this season. My daughter organized a Secret Santa gift exchange among our far-flung family members. Secret Santas are a metaphor for spiritual grace; we receive something not because we earned it or are worthy of the gift but for no reason other than our being willing to give and being open to receive.

I have a friend who places cash in an envelope with a simple note and hands it off to a random stranger — usually

someone who looks like they need more hope. The note says something like, “Thanks for all you do” or “You are loved just for who you are.” Imagine being that harried working mom or a rushed busboy in a busy restaurant and getting such a gift from a stranger. It's not a tip, or something earned. Her random kindness opens an unexpected possibility, it's a blessing, a moment of grace.

In these dark days, nobody is coming to rescue you or me from the darkness surrounding us. Here on Earth, it's up to us, *each of us*. You and I are the proxy for Divine grace, and we must embody Divinity. Together, when we support one another, we radiate the hope the world needs. Let it be said of us, “See how they love one another.”

Merry Christmas (my personal celebration of the Light), and Happy Holiday to you as you honor your personal tradition. *MIND THE LIGHT!*

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