

Risking Hope

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Hope.

Hope is what we need today.

I'm not talking about foolish hope, a hope that doesn't face facts.

I'm not talking about passive hope, a hope that sits on its hands
and waits for a miracle.

No, we need an active hope
that looks around and sees the world clearly,
good and bad,

joys and struggles,
and says, I am not giving up.

I believe in the future.

I believe there is a way forward
and we are going to find it.

That's the kind of hope we need today.

We need it in our families,

we need it in our church community,

we sure need it in our cities and our country and our world.

But it's a strange thing—

when we need hope the most

may be exactly when it's hardest to find.

1. Desolation

Picture a small room in 16th-century Paris.

In the room is a desk,

and at the desk sits a man in a dark robe.

This is Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits,
and spiritual counselor to countless people

seeking to live lives of goodness and purpose.
Over the years he notices many ups and downs
in his own spiritual life and the lives of those he counsels.
Sometimes they feel so connected
to spirit and goodness and divine presence.
They are grounded and peaceful and hopeful.
Other times they feel completely cut off and alone and hopeless.
And Ignatius comes to realize, this is how life is!
We all go back and forth
between what he calls *desolation*—
when we feel lonely and in despair—
and *consolation*—
when we feel blessed and energized and hopeful.
This is how it is for anybody on a spiritual journey.
Highs and lows, it's just how it is.

In our reading today,
Margaret Silf takes what Ignatius discovered
about desolation and consolation
and puts it in a language we can understand today.
First I want to remind you of her symptoms of desolation.
She says desolation makes us turn in on ourselves.
It makes us feel we're alone and isolated and unsupported.
In desolation, we get caught in a spiral of negative feelings.
We feel worse and worse and can't figure out how to feel better.
We feel cut off from community.
We feel like giving up on things that used to be important to us.
In desolation, negative thoughts take over
and dominate our perceptions.
We lose our sense of vision and hope for the future.
Our energy drains away,
leaving us exhausted and in despair.¹

This is not a fun place to be.

¹ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Loyola Press, 2007), pp. 84–85.

But it is a very *normal* place.
Everybody goes through times of desolation.
Sometimes they last for just a little while.
Think of Alexander and his *really bad* day.
We all have moments when everything looks miserable.
We see everything through a filter of doom and gloom and negativity.
It feels like nothing's working,
nothing's going right,
we're stalled out and we don't know what to do.
This is not fun, but it is very normal.
It's just the downside of a cycle that everybody goes through.

So, if desolation is where you are right now, don't worry too much.
It's not your fault.
It doesn't mean you're weak.
It doesn't mean you're sick.
It doesn't mean you've been abandoned.
Desolation is just a place everyone has to visit now and then.
It's just part of being human.
Don't worry too much and expect *it will change*.

Because desolation is only half the story.

2. *Consolation*

The other half is consolation.
Again I want to remind you
of what Ignatius and Margaret Silf say about consolation.
In consolation, we are focused outside and beyond ourselves.
We care about other people's joys and their sorrows.
We feel connected to the human community.
Even in sorrow and frustration,
we still feel connected to spirit, to ourselves, to one another.
In consolation, we feel inspired.
We have energy.

We think creatively.

We have a sense of vision—we know where we want to go and we feel hopeful we can get there.

We feel led by something within us that is good and true.



Take a look at the picture on your order of service.

This little puppy was born without any front legs.

She couldn't run around like other dogs.

But see what happened:

A guy who makes medical orthotics heard about her.

He built her a harness with two little plastic legs hooked up to model airplane wheels.

And now she can scoot around just fine.

This guy has promised to build her a bigger model when she gets bigger, too.²

That's what *consolation* looks like—

inspiration, creativity, energy, compassion.

By the way, this little puppy's name is Hope.

² See "Pictured: The puppy born without front legs who's now using model aeroplane wheels to get around," *Daily Mail Reporter*, June 23, 2008, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1028681/Pictured-The-puppy-born-legs-uses-toy-wheels-around.html>.

3. *Where are we now? How do we get un-stuck?*

So, in this cycle of desolation and consolation,
where are we?

Where are we as individuals,
as a congregation,
as a nation?

I'm concerned because it seems to me our whole country
has been stuck in desolation for quite a while now.

I hear the news about the protests in Wisconsin,
the governor trying to cripple the public employees' unions,
and whatever you think about whether unions are good or bad,
what worries me is the palpable bitterness and negativity
in our public dialogue.

All around the country public employees are getting vilified.

Public school teachers, of all people, and so many others
are accused of being greedy,

accused of not wanting to make the "necessary sacrifices"
for "these hard times"—you all know the script.

I believe this is a sign of national desolation.

As a people, we are cut off. We lack empathy for one another.

We are so pessimistic about our future.

I'm not saying we have no problems as a society.

I'm not saying everything would be fine
if we all just put on rose-colored glasses.

Obviously that's not true.

But what I worry about is the *tone* of our public conversations,
the bitterness, the hatred,
the sarcasm and downright meanness in our public life together.

Now, I don't want to *blame* anybody for this.

I'm not interested in pointing fingers.

I don't want to get into whose fault it is or isn't
because fault is irrelevant to the *really* interesting question,

which is, how do we get out of this?

When we are stuck in desolation, what do we *do* to get un-stuck?

Ignatius and Margaret Silf tell us three things can help.

Start by reaching out for help.

Reach out to your source of strength, however you name it.

Reach out to the light within you,

to God, spirit, truth: whatever name speaks most deeply to you.

Reach out to a friend or a loved one.

Reach out to someone or something you trust

and tell them how you feel.

Ask for help.

Ask for what you need.

Trust that help will come.

Dare to hope,

dare to trust that you will not always feel like this.

Second, when you are really stuck,

remember what consolation feels like.

Remember a time when you felt blessed and energized

and filled with purpose.

Go back to it in your imagination.

Conjure it up. What did it feel like?

Try to recreate that in your body.

Can your shoulders relax?

Can you sit up a little straighter?

Is there a smile on your face?

Maybe some tears, too,

because tears can come from tenderness and joy.

Remember this time of consolation.

Trust that you will feel this way again.

And third, when you are feeling stuck,

see if you can focus on someone else who needs your help.

One day I was in a bad mood,

all day long I'd been brooding on various problems,
and I ran into a friend.
I asked her, "How are you, how's your family,"
you know, to be polite,
and she told me,
actually, she was feeling sad about her parents getting older.
She told me they were thinking about nursing homes
and feeling all the sadness of losing their independence.
And she was so open and present in that moment,
I just felt my spirit soften.
In that one simple moment, I felt my heart lift out of desolation
and come to rest in consolation.
I remembered, yeah, this is how life is.
We're all of us here in this sad and beautiful and wonderful soup
where everybody has troubles of some kind,
and people we love get old and die,
and we miss them,
and how can we be anything but tender to one another?
There, for me, was consolation.

Friends, in your own times of desolation,
and we all have them,
please don't give in to despair.
Reach out for help.
Remember what consolation feels like.
Turn your heart to someone else in need.
And when consolation returns, dare to embrace it.
Trust that place of hope and vision and energy.

Finally, let me pass on one last piece of advice
from Ignatius and Margaret Silf:
they warn us, *do not* make major decisions
when you are in a time of desolation.
Don't even try.
If at all possible, wait.

Do not go back on decisions you've made in a time of consolation.

Because desolation tells us hope is a delusion
and vision is nonsense.

Desolation tells us nothing matters.

But desolation does not last forever.

And when consolation returns,

we remember what we used to know:

that hope is essential,

our vision can change our lives and change the world,

and what we do matters.

This is the time to chart your course,

when you believe in your power

and your energy and hope carry you forward.

Don't give up.

Believe in the future.

Believe there is a way forward

and we are going to find it.

Is it risky?

Yes, absolutely!

You better believe it.

But here we are, living and breathing,

blessed with this moment,

this chance to live our lives in beauty and purpose,

to proclaim our vision,

to make a difference,

to sing and rejoice

and gladly give our lives to the best we know.

This moment, this chance.

Use it well.

So may it be.

Amen.