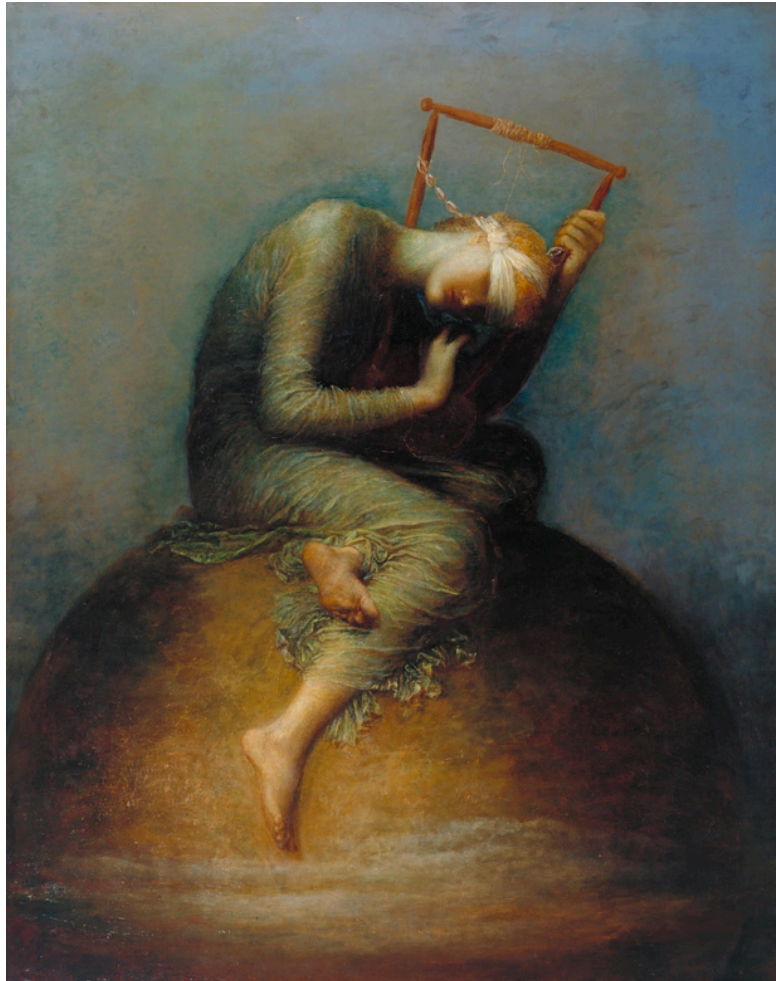




**JOIN OUR PATREON COMMUNITY FOR MORE EXCLUSIVE RESOURCES**



### **The Privilege of Hopelessness**

This painting, *Hope* by George Frederic Watts (1817-1904), was heavily criticized by GK Chesterton (a 20th century British [whitemalegod](#) minion) who said that it should have been titled "Despair." Perhaps Chesterton's privileged social location and mindset prevented him from seeing that an oppressed woman holding a broken harp was actually the ideal bearer of hope. In contrast to Chesterton, contemporary Black American liberation preacher, activist and scholar Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright described Watt's painting in a 1990 sermon on the subject of Hope:

"with her clothes in rags, her body scarred and bruised and bleeding, her harp all but destroyed and with only one string left, she had the audacity to make music and praise

God ... To take the one string you have left and to have the audacity to hope ... that's the real word God will have us hear from this passage and from Watt's painting."

This spring, as I've battled to connect to hope in the midst of this thoroughly hopeless American election year, continuing police brutality toward black bodies, increased hatred for our Muslim brothers and sisters, the public support for wildly oppressive comments from President Trump, the continuing crisis in Palestine-Israel, the rampant gentrification in my Oakland neighborhood and more, I've begun to think more deeply about why it is so hard for me, a person of who identifies with some privileged groups, to experience hope. According to conventional wisdom, it seems that privileged folks should be perched atop the hope ladder, generously doling out hope to the people below who don't have access to resources that can improve their lives. But I've found that in my own life (and in the lives of many people I know), it's far too easy to slink into hopelessness, and ultimately disengagement, as I turn to face the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to justice.

Surprisingly-but-not-so-surprisingly to me, the more I think about hopelessness and privilege, the more I'm convinced that hopelessness can be a marker of privilege and an enemy of hope.

### **Privilege distances us from Divine Hope**

My Rwandan friends who live, worship and make peace in Kigali regularly tell me that we Westerners are the impoverished ones. "We pray for you all," they say. "When you have so many material things, you can't really know what it means to truly turn to God for all that you need: the power to forgive, food to feed your children, healing from the trauma of genocide, stability in the midst of an unstable society, or hope to keep fighting HIV."

My friends are right. My privilege – my access to power, influence and agency due to my social location -- often clogs the pipeline between me and the Divine, reducing my ability to receive the always present, always powerful flow of hope, wisdom, and empowerment. When faced with a tragic injustice, I have the option of turning toward other things that will bring me temporary solace: Netflix and Jelly Belly binges effectively numb my pain; and a victory (of the bargain variety) at Nordstrom Rack goes a surprisingly long way towards boosting my (false) sense of power.

But even when privileged folks resist the urge to disengage, and instead join the fight for justice, we often engage in strategies that deplete us of hope. We often fail to heed St. Audre Lorde's warning that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

We privileged folks often put our faith in our arsenal of "master's tools": the strong critical thinking skills we acquired at our fancy liberal arts college, the professional networks of attorneys, business leaders, pastors and community leaders that we have on speed dial, and the relative ease with which we can raise money and awareness for a good cause. These efforts might be fueled by good intentions, but they often lead us

to focus on the finite weapons of privilege, rather than the infinite well of hope that is only found in Divine Source, whatever that may look like each individual. The master's tools lure our eyes and hearts and busy bodies toward the finite resources of our world rather than the infinite power, wisdom, hope and freedom that we can encounter if we simply stop and turn our eyes, hearts and bodies toward the Divine in ourselves, our communities, and the world around us.

### **Privilege distances us from the reality of systemic pain and tragedy**

"Despair is a luxury of the bourgeoisie." – overheard in a Palestinian refugee camp  
Ironically, it is often the people who are the most distant from systemic injustice who are the most paralyzed by hopelessness. Often times, the privileged person's distance from systemic injustice leads to what social psychologists call a collapse of compassion. When we encounter a tragedy that involves lots of people (as is often the case in justice issues), we are motivated to regulate our emotions, distancing ourselves from the immense pain that we would experience if we paid close attention to each individual story within the tragedy.[1]

As Joseph Stalin once said, "One death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic." When we witness injustice in an up-close-and-personal way – like if we're personally oppressed or we're in close relationship with a person who experiences oppression – we tend to open the floodgates of compassion toward the one or few individuals with whom we have a personal connection. But when we witness an injustice from a distance, and this injustice affects masses of people (e.g., police brutality towards Black people, the oppression of the Palestinians, etc.) we are easily overwhelmed by the sheer numbers. Rather than fortifying our compassion in response to such need, our compassion collapses and we disengage into hopelessness.

After conducting research on this collapse of compassion, social psychologists Daryl Cameron and Keith Payne concluded that "large-scale tragedies in which the most victims are in need of help will ironically be the least likely to motivate helping."

But when we are intimately connected to systemic pain and tragedy, either personally or through close relationships, we are often able to respond with compassion and hope. When visiting the Holocaust Memorial in Boston, I read the following inscription by a survivor named Geerda Weissman Klein:

"Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present it to me that night on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend."

Imagine a world in which the bearer of hope is a little girl who is so systematically oppressed that she has no logical reason to believe that she will even live to the end of the day. Nevertheless, she defiantly cares for her one treasure because she is hopeful that she will be able to give it to her friend at the end of the day.

I don't wish to sanctify people who experience oppression in ways that I do not. Nor do I wish to communicate that oppression and suffering are "gifts." Rather, I wish to

acknowledge that one possible way to "check my privilege" is to notice how quickly hopelessness springs up within me and *how* I respond to it. Without judgment or shame, I can notice if hopelessness is my go-to response to injustice, and if my experience of hopelessness leads me to numb out or pick up the master's tools. By noticing, I can bring some equanimity to my experience of hopelessness which empowers me to choose how I want to honor my experience of hopelessness and apply healing energy to it.

*When do you experience hopelessness?*

*How do you typically respond to hopelessness?*

*What are some ways to connect to Divine Hope?*

*What are the tools of liberation that will actually help us dismantle the master's house?*

\*\*\*For what may appear to be an entirely different take on this topic, I encourage you to read Miguel de la Torre's outstanding book *Embracing Hopelessness*.\*\*\*