

Hope – Chapel Address by Jo-Anne Kingstone

There's a four letter word I know that gets a lot of bad press in some quarters. It's a word we use a lot—maybe even misuse, I don't know—and so maybe that's what's caused it to be maligned by some as inconsequential, inarticulate, weak. It's a word we go to maybe when we haven't really prepared enough for our first period AP Calc test and we wonder if Mr. Cox will have forgotten; it's what we use when, by accident of course, we spill something on the new carpet, we scrub and scrub and get most of the stain out, we move the table over it so it is less obvious, but still wonder if our mum will notice and be angry; it's a word we rely on when there are no other words.

One day I was standing in the kitchen fitfarkling—that's a word I think I only hear in our house; I think it's a form of Kingstone— it means kind of massaging the counter top with a cloth, moving the papers and various counter top objects around to tidy them up, making a cup of tea, forgetting to drink the tea, cleaning random objects (I am sure many of you have witnessed this kitchen behavior—and it only happens in the kitchen—in your own home)—at any rate, there I was fitfarkling in the kitchen listening to CBC radio. The program was about the latest survey undertaken by the people who like to do comparisons, who like to find out what Canadians are like compared to people in other countries. I was surprised by the report of this most recent finding: Canadians swear a lot. In fact, at home, at work, with friends and with family, Canadians swear more than both Americans and the British. And let's get this straight, that's like being beaten by Brentwood and St. Michaels in the same day. I was so surprised that I decided to conduct my own survey, and the findings, at least at this preliminary phase, appear to be true. We, Canadians, rely on words that seem colourful, seem to convey a certain emphasis, seem to be strong and clear and to add meaning to what might be our otherwise ineffective vocabulary. Our defense when challenged is, "they're only words; they don't really mean anything." How untrue could that possibly be?

We invest meaning in words or reduce them to meaninglessness when it suits us. But let's be clear, the men and women at Harper's, Collins', Webster's and Oxford—the dictionary people—would be out of jobs if words were meant to have free-floating definitions of our own choosing. Make no mistake, language is important; words can define us and define our experience.

The four letter word I started with has a meaning. That meaning is strong. And particularly this week, it rings through our minds in ways both individual and collective. We know what it means to us, we know what it means to others and we know what it means to this community. That four letter word is hope.

When used as a noun, hope means "the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best." I suppose this definition inspires the cynical belief that hope is a passive experience of life; just sitting around having hope. Hope as a thing.

But the cynics don't ever really have it right, do they? Because, too often, they ignore the very basic human element which, in this case, is the need, deep within us, always for hope. Do you know the opposite of hope is despair? It is difficult to define despair without including the word hope in the definition. We can have hope without despair; we cannot have despair without hope. Hope is always somewhere a part of us.

The American poet Emily Dickenson defines "Hope [as] a thing with feathers that perches in the soul/ [that] sings a tune without the words/And never stops at all." And as if they were actually engaged in

conversation, Martin Luther King responds with "We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope." Bruce Cockburn, Canadian singer and songwriter, clarifies hope through images—"all the diamonds in this world... conjured up by wind and sunlight sparkling on the sea". He concludes with this thought: "dying trees still grow greener when you pray." That's hope.

Every year for some years while I was in a different city from my very good friend who lived with cancer, I would call her at the beginning of the Run for the Cure. Most of the time I was with people like you; students and friends who had come out early in the wind and rain of a Sunday morning to run. Without fail, she would answer and be overwhelmed by our love and our commitment; and she would feel our own hope transmitted across the miles.

Never underestimate the gift of giving hope to others. And while it is a dangerous game to give false hope, true and sincere gestures of hope are always possible.

There are times, and some of you here today will know this very well, when it is difficult to hear the song of that delicate bird that perches in your soul—times when it is difficult to find hope within yourself. When you are standing looking in the mirror asking yourself—How can I do this? How can I possibly do this?—and then a friend, or a son or a daughter, or a mum or a dad walks in and says, "Everything is going to be all right. I'm right here." That's a gift.

Never deny someone the gift of hope. Be generous.

I am not a particularly courageous person; I don't like to take risks, especially physical ones. Mr. Yates will attest to this fact because every year when he posts the very exciting photos taken of our students leaping through the air into the cold, raging currents of some river, I call him up and ask if the Search and Rescue program is really necessary for our students. Is it safe, I ask? But as a cancer survivor, I rely on hope every day—I live my life through it—and that hope gives me a certain courage.

Never mistake the search for hope as a weakness. It's a search for survival.

What we are doing this week—preparing for the arrival of the Tour de Rock, shaving our heads, raising money, running 5k for Terry Fox, organizing ourselves to participate in the Run for the Cure—is about believing that all of this will make a difference, trusting it will have an impact. It's about making gestures of hope. And if you are paying attention, you will hear and read stories proving that what you believed in and trusted in is true—as a result of what we are doing and what millions of others are doing, more people are alive. Hope is an action. Use your words wisely. And pay no attention to the cynics.