

SUSTAINING HOPE IN AN UNJUST WORLD



HOW TO KEEP GOING WHEN YOU WANT TO GIVE UP

Timothy Charles Murphy

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Prologue

It was a cancer diagnosis that made me to come to grips with the fact that things do not always turn out all right. In spite of such potential failure, I also learned how we can keep the faith in the midst of seemingly insurmountable struggles for a better world.

I was 19, depressed, with no appetite, and in constant pain. For the previous six months, my health had been declining slowly. First, it was the chronic back pain. The doctors said I had pulled a muscle, so I did stretches, took pain pills, and waited in vain for some improvement. Then, I became nauseous when eating. Instead of my previous voluminous appetite, I felt stuffed after half a sandwich. Months went by. The perpetual pain wore on my psyche.

Finally, after talking repeatedly with doctors who brushed my situation aside, a new doctor and I finally agreed: I had testicular cancer. Knowing what was wrong helped a lot. So did the surgery and later chemotherapy. But before that, something else happened: my pastor came over to my family's house. He asked me how I felt, whether I was struggling with God's role, and wondered what was on my mind and heart. With his encouragement, I told him I knew that this wasn't something that God had given me as a punishment, or a test, or for any other reason. Cancer happens. The only question was the following: what would I do in response to this situation?

During my stint with chemo treatments, I didn't dwell on the odds. But later my father told me that, statistically speaking, I had had only a 50/50 shot at surviving what was an advanced stage of cancer. While my family and I focused on getting through months of treatment, I understood that there was no guarantee that I would get better. God wasn't controlling this process, and, while some cancer patients improve, some don't. Fortunately, I did, and after the first surgery my nausea went away and I began regaining previously lost weight.

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However, this isn't a book about cancer. It's about how we can understand the Divine in our world—what God does, and what God doesn't do—and how we are to respond. I tell the story because this experience fundamentally shaped and shapes my views of the world. But instead of giving me only a sense of personal meaning amidst such tragedy, this experience gradually led me to a different conclusion—that, in spite of no proof that things will get better, we can sustain hope in an unjust world. In fact, being faithful to the dream of a just world is enough, even if we don't fully achieve it. Before becoming sick, and increasingly afterward, I was regularly outraged about social inequities—people being mistreated, violence against the weak, crushing poverty, etc. I wasn't much of an activist at the time, but my trajectory was a proto-radical one (by Western Kentucky standards, at least!), partly because I had experienced significant marginalization and bullying as a child in school.

Over the years, as I have become more engaged in issues of social justice, activism, public policy, and the role of faith for social transformation, I've found that my worldview frequently clashes with the prevailing assumptions of my religious and secular activist peers. Almost everyone combines their recognition of the *need* for a victory against oppression and evil with the guarantee of that victory, at least rhetorically. But here's the rub: we often lose. Movements falter. Evil triumphs.

Don't get me wrong: I am not arguing that we are guaranteed to lose. Nor am I against the idea of winning. I'm against the assumption that we are guaranteed to win. Of course, just as there is no guarantee that we—as individuals, a society, or a planet—will win and triumph, there is no guarantee we will lose. Some things may get better, like gender equity, while wealth disparities get worse. I freely admit that this is a hard pill to swallow. Various psychological studies have shown that if there is one thing people on the whole dislike, it's uncertainty. This is not the uncertainty of, "I don't have an opinion." It's more like scientific uncertainty. If we know something terrible is going to happen and there's nothing we can do about it, we can resign ourselves to that fate and move on. But *uncertainty* creates in most people a sense of paralysis. For myself, it was better to know that I had advanced cancer,

with the possibility of fatal consequences, than just to feel terrible and not know what was going on. We humans crave predictability, or at least some sense of knowledge and control.

In the midst of so much injustice, how can we continue to struggle for a better world, with all the effort that will be necessary for that possible future to have a fighting chance, if there are no guarantees? What if I told you that God doesn't guarantee our victory in the struggle for social justice? That God doesn't guarantee that we will win?

Instead of a promise that everything is going to be just as God intends, what if God's promise is *to be with us no matter what*? Could we then take these terrible problems we face and respond with steadfast compassion? Would that be enough? Could we keep up the struggle in the face of so much injustice and evil in our world? Could it be that the promise of God with us, come what may, is in fact enough? If so, we would have the beginnings of how to keep going when we want to give up.