

# *Inconspicuous Hope by Cindy Brandt*

*“Whenever I’m approached by an evangelist—by a Christian missionary—I know I’m up against someone so obsessed and narrowly focused that it will do me absolutely no good to try and explain or share my own value system. I never want to be rude to them, of course, but never have any idea how to respond to their attempts to convert me; in short order, I inevitably find myself simply feeling embarrassed—first for them, and then for us both. I’m always grateful when such encounters conclude.”—K.C., Fresno*



A few years ago, John Shore collected comments from Craigslist sites all over America asking *What Non-Christians Want Christians To Hear*. The results are cringe-worthy. As a progressive Christian, I consider myself part of a movement to try to revamp the brand of Christianity, defining ourselves as **love over hate, inclusion over wall-building, listening instead of preaching**.

As a faith blogger, tracking these larger trends of religion, getting a feel for the cultural

pulse is at least fascinating to me, and at most helps me to find the role I play in shaping public conversations about faith. As a Christian and a human being, I realize that my scathing criticisms against Christian institutions that systematically harm those within it, is not much more than throwing tiny white eggs against a large brick wall. *Telling atheist friends that no, my Christian faith is about love, feels weak against evidence of Christians spewing hate in the public arena.* For every sensible, compassionate, subversive Christian article I post onto my facebook wall, a host of rhetorical blog posts reaffirming the status quo are shared and retweeted multiple times more. All of this makes me want to immediately run and soak in a swearsy bubble bath.

loudly and harshly against institutional injustices that malign, marginalize, and oppress the vulnerable. **Brutally tear down rhetoric that takes up harmful residence in the tender souls of children and youth.** Keep pointing an accusing finger at the ideologies that threaten our common good. Keep flinging those eggs with as much strength as we can muster against the brick wall, even if just to watch them shatter into fragile white bits without making even so much as a dent, because revolutions can’t happen without brokenness.

**But...reserve gentleness and patience for the individuals inside the system.** I remember Jesus preaching without abandon against the evils of greed but extending friendship to the wealthy tax collector,

*This is how we make important changes—barely, poorly, slowly.*

*—Anne Lamott*

Systems are not built overnight. For an empire to gain the kind of power that warrants its formidable status takes years, generations even, building up a loyal following with impenetrable defensive teaching, institutions, and resources steadily feeding the masses. To change the minds of people who have been taught one thing for several generations is going to take more than one facebook comment. I am reminded of what Anne Lamott says about making important changes—*barely, poorly, slowly.*

This is how not to despair in the laborious work of subverting systems. Thrust all of our angry energies against it. Speak up

Zacchaeus. Jesus’ message was so revolutionary as to upset his contemporary Roman empire, and yet he had great love for a Roman soldier, compassionately healing the centurion’s servant.

This is not to say we must give abundant grace to oppressors. No, I believe we must always side with the vulnerable. *This is to say that we can’t make any progress in changing a system if we forget that systems are made up of individual human beings.* The “masses” can form a terrifying machine, but the persons who make up the masses each contain dynamic personalities, history and stories. And while yes, some perpetuate the poison of a corrupt system, there remains the potential for

every divine image bearer to reflect the goodness of a good God.

**People change, even when systems don't.**

When we learn to zero in on individuals, our focus shifts from macro-level progress to spotting small pockets of hope.

I do despair, sometimes, that the reputation of Christianity is irreparably damaged, but my hope is kindled when I encounter *Christians from all along the theological spectrum who are speaking and doing beautiful things.*

Even in the darkest periods of human history, there arise individual heroes—there are Oskar Schindlers in Nazi Germany, and Malala Yousafzais in Taliban-controlled Pakistan.

Isn't it hopeful that in every horrific tragedy there are *always helpers to be found?*

I believe our best hope for sustaining a work of *barely, poorly and slowly* changing the world for the better is to counteract cynicism against the system with the enduring hope of every individual light.

This, after all, is the Christian story. That the dramatic reversal of human history comes not through an upheaval of the powerful systems but through unlikely individual characters we encounter in the biblical narrative.

Miracles will come through the ordinary. Heroes come in small sizes. Hope will be inconspicuous.

*Pay attention, lest we lose heart.* □

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## *The Rose by Eden Jersak*

I recently had surgery to remove half my thyroid and two growing lumps. When I went in to see the surgeon, I heard some news I hadn't expected.

The good news is that I do not have cancer! The pathology report had taken unusually long—the reason for this was changes to the rules about what constitutes "cancer." In his words, I "dodged a bullet." The sobering truth is that three years ago, I would have been diagnosed with cancer and given aggressive treatment. For now, doctors will monitor my blood-work and my remaining thyroid functions, keeping watch with regular ultrasounds.

With my husband Brad out of town, I planned to go to the appointment on my own, but my friend Lorie graciously offered to accompany me.

I had honestly not expected to hear just how close a call this was, so having a friend by my side was much appreciated. After the appointment, we headed to the coffee shop to sip a nice hot "cuppa," and to enjoy a bit of sun on our faces.

I called Brad with the news and waited for Lorie to bring our drinks to the patio. I was enjoying the warmth of the sun and the view of Mount Baker.

Lorie and I were talking over my results and sipping our drinks when I felt a presence come up from my right.

I looked up to see a homeless man. He was holding a white rose wrapped in a black cloth. He looked at me and said, "I feel like I'm supposed to give you this right now."

I looked over at Lorie and then back to this presence and had no words. He laid the rose down on the railing beside me, and repeated, "I'm supposed to give this to you; it's freshly picked."



I took the flower and laid it on the table. As he walked away, he never turned back, and then disappeared into the parking lot. We were both left speechless for a few moments, and then the tears came.

I have been very aware of God with me in this journey, but that morning's more vivid demonstration of how close he is has me moved to tears again.

I'm so grateful for all the prayers, thoughts, acts of kindness and love I've received. My prayer is that you will be aware of God's presence with you today. I pray that you will be open to receiving God's presence in whatever shape or form it might take, and that you might even be willing to demonstrate God's presence to someone else.

*My God's name is Emmanuel, and he is with me.* □

*Eden Jersak is the author of Rivers from Eden: 40 Days of Intimate Conversation with God.*