

The Will to Hope

Hope is Real

I don't know what type of cancer attacks you or what stage you're in or how much hope you have but I know something that could change your life. You will learn a lot about how to cope with your illness, if you haven't already, but that's only knowledge to survive, to keep existing. What about the chance to thrive, to be the one who beats cancer and goes on to live a better than normal life? Or what about dying on your terms and with dignity?

Maybe you are thinking that you would be more than willing to get back any semblance of a normal life. The truth is, there is no "normal" from here on out. So, Let's do away with normal and go for extraordinary. Otherwise, it would be better not to bother with hope. If

you are willing to risk something, there is much to gain. As the Mad Hatter in Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland says, we have much more "muchness" than we think and we can defeat the Jabberwocky. But we must get beyond just coping with cancer.

I don't want to minimize the need for coping skills, how to deal with cancer and your treatment. Those skills are essential in your struggle. But who is teaching us about hoping skills? Dr. Groopman, cancer specialist, hematologist-oncologist and professor at Harvard Medical School, says that hope is real, real to heal. He went out on a limb as a professional scientist to make this claim because many doctors laugh, or even scoff at the idea of hope as good medicine.

Hope for the Body

Random House published Dr. Groopman's Anatomy of Hope in 2004 and J.J. Abrams, co-creator of the TV show Lost, plans to produce a series based on Dr. Groopman's book- stories of how people with cancer prevail with hope. Dr. Groopman makes a case

in his book that hope is real, sometimes the tipping point for whether someone defeats cancer. He says that hopeful people are healthier people and that, from his decades of experience with cancer patients, hope is the “very heart of healing.” Listen to this astounding claim by Dr. Groopman, “For all my patients, hope, true hope, has proved as important as any medication I might prescribe or any procedure I might perform.” Dr. Groopman’s book is filled with stories that illustrate how hope is essential to healing but he only hints at how people discover this hope. Another book is needed. That’s where I come in.

I know almost nothing about cancer but I have studied hope for over a decade. One of my closest college friends’ eight year old son has thyroid cancer, as does the older daughter of another friend, but other than what they have told me, I know very little about cancer. I’m learning, though, because I want to understand the reality of cancer. “Hope, unlike optimism, is rooted in unalloyed reality. Clear-eyed, hope gives us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them,”

Dr. Groopman teaches. Knowing how cancer works death in our bodies gives us great insight into how hope resurrects life.

I want you to know how real hope is. Hope is a game changer. In some cases it is the difference between those who live and those who die and it is definitely the difference between those who thrive and those who barely survive. President Teddy Roosevelt said, “It’s not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man in the arena whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who have never known neither victory nor defeat.” It’s time to find your muchness!

Hope for the Mind

Hope is not only the power to heal your body, it is the inspiration to engage your mind. This section is kind of “heady” but I want to convince you how real hope is. “Belief, expectation, and desire activate brain circuits that cause the release of endorphins and enkephalins, mimicking the effects of morphine,” Dr. Groopman proves. Hope doesn’t just act to minimize pain, it can rewire brain circuitry to send new messages to the body, a way to say that it’s time to heal-up. The body is sending pain messages to the brain and if the brain agrees with the body, by negatively interpreting pain, there will eventually be screeching feedback, like between a microphone and a monitor. “Messages of pain, potently amplify our feelings of fear, anxiety, and despair. The stirrings of recovery in our tissues help generate the feeling of hope. At that moment clinical treatments can have their most profound impact on our psychology. With each increment in improvement, the body sends more signals that inform the brain of a return to health,” Dr. Groopman explains.

He goes on to tell how to break the cycle of pain: “It can be broken by the first spark of hope. Hope sets off a chain reaction. Hope tempers pain, and as we sense less pain, that feeling of hope expands, which further reduces pain. Patients who are hopeful, largely because of their religious faith and their trust in the physician, have a more rapid return to health and a higher rate of survival.” If there is hope, then the mind can convince your body that your cancer is going into remission. Simply put, hope increases your odds of being cured.

One of the greatest discoveries of the brain offers us tremendous hope. Neuroscientist and Nobel Prize winner Dr. Eric Kandel of Columbia University discovered that “our brains are not set in their structure by the genes we inherit, but are continuously molded during the course of our lives.” “We are not prisoners to our DNA,” Dr. Groopman emphasizes. That means that anyone can learn to hope.

Hope for the Soul

The mind-body connection is important for healing but there is another area almost completely untouched by doctors, yet essential for hope to grow—the soul. The soul asks questions like, “Why me? What did I do to deserve this cancer? Why do we suffer?” How you answer these questions will greatly impact your hope level and, conversely, your experience with hope will influence how you answer these questions. It is a conversation your soul has with your mind and body.

I distinguish between soul and mind because, even though you are thinking about these questions, it is your soul that really needs to know the answer. It’s different than asking a question like, “What is two plus two?” which carries little emotion with it. The soul includes emotion, and if you consider yourself a spiritual or religious person, the soul can transcend the physical world. As the great mathematician Blaise Pascal said, “Love has reasons that reason knows not.” You might have realized that when people are in love,

they often act irrationally. I once drove 6 hours to spend only two hours with my girlfriend, but it was worth it to my soul. Sometimes humans do things and want things that are not logical, that do not make sense to the rational brain.

The soul searches intently to make sense of life, even the rather unexplainable happenings, and hope serves to interpret reality. Without hope, people interpret suffering as pointless and an obstacle to what they want. Without hope, people interpret cancer as a punishment from God or bad Karma. Hope offers fresh perspective that gives meaning to our suffering.

Most people cannot accept cold science because it does not touch their soul. Lab results are explanations that rarely suffice. Just telling someone their infection is overpowering their white blood cells doesn’t cut it. This diagnosis only answers the question “how” someone is dying, not “why” they are dying. Who cares about this physical reality? We want to know the deeper “why” of why we are dying. The answer lies in a story.

Hope is like the genre of storytelling. Some people like sci-fi, others comedy, others drama or action. Few people want a horror story when it comes to their personal lives, though. What is the story you are telling yourself about your life? What role did you play up until you got cancer? Were you the soccer-mom, the beach bum, the genius, the company man, the poser, the whiner, the clown or the partier? Your role and your worldview determine how you interpret suffering. If you have hope, your story has a happy ending. That doesn't necessarily mean your character doesn't die, it just means that when you die, it wasn't for nothing. Watch the movie Stranger than Fiction. When death is unavoidable, hope still gives us dignity and allows us to leave a legacy. There is a best way to die and hope makes that possible. There is also a best way to live, and hope teaches us how.

Hope is Powerful

The National Cancer Institute defines cancer as a term for a disease in which abnormal cells divide

without control and can invade nearby tissue. HowStuffWorks says that cancer occurs when "cells divide too rapidly. It can also occur when cells 'forget' how to die." That's it! That doesn't sound so evil. The bottom-line is that people with cancer are trying to grow-up too fast. That was a poor attempt maybe at humor, depending on how you're feeling today, but my point is important. How we define things and the perspective we choose creates our world. As one Jedi-Knight said to another, "Your focus determines your reality." So, let me illustrate hope so we know what we have to fight with.

In the movie Men in Black, Will Smith's character (Jay) gets a "noisy cricket" gun to fight bad aliens (like cancer). It's tiny and it looks like a toy. When Tommy Lee Jones' character (Kay) whips out a gigantic laser shotgun called the Series 4 De-atomizer, Jay says, "Now that's what I'm talking about." Then Kay gives him the noisy cricket. Jay complains, "I feel like I'm gonna break this damn thing." Later, when it comes time to use their weapons, Jay pulls the trigger of the "noisy cricket" gun and he is blown backwards 25 feet

and crashes through a car windshield. So, you might feel like Jay did initially when I talk about hope as a weapon to fight cancer, but let me tell you, if you pull the trigger, hope's got a kick to it. You'll feel the power, I promise.

What is Hope?

Simile: Hope is like a mixed drink. The glass is transparent, either half-empty or half-full, depending on your worldview. The ingredients include *possibility*, *pathways*, *control* and *competency*, with a twist of *desire*. Let's make up a name for this drink. We'll call it Pandora's Passion. You might recall the Greek myth about Pandora and her box filled with all kinds of terror.

After Prometheus' theft of the secret of fire, Zeus ordered Hephaestus to create the woman Pandora as part of the punishment for mankind. Pandora was given many seductive gifts from Aphrodite, Hermes, Charites, and Horae (according to Works and Days). For fear of additional reprisals, Prometheus warned his brother Epimetheus not to accept any gifts from Zeus, but Epimetheus did not listen, and married Pandora.

Pandora had been given a large jar and instructed by Zeus to keep it closed, but she had also been given the gift of curiosity, and ultimately opened it. When she opened it, all of the evils of mankind escaped from the jar, although Pandora was quick enough to close it again before the last element escaped. She held onto hope.

We read that Pandora kept hope in the box but why did Zeus put it there? Many really intelligent people have debated whether hope was another evil monster given to prey on humanity or whether it was a gift of mercy so humans could withstand all the other terrible things, and maybe even overcome them.

Having studied hope and having lived every adult experience with hope in mind, I can say that hope is mostly a powerful *good*. I will define hope from that perspective. Before I do that, let me tell you how some famous people have defined hope.

Hope is:

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|--------------------------|---------------------|
| a waking dream | -Aristotle |
| risky imagination | -Walter Brueggemann |
| passion for the possible | -Soren Kierkegaard |

From a darker perspective hope is:

a foolish counselor -Plato

a curse upon humanity -Euripides

a human foible that only served to stretch out
suffering -Sophocles

I define hope as the *orientation and action towards the most meaningful future.*

Why do we hope?

The answer to this question is pretty simple:

Pain or gain. We hope because we want something. Suffering is pain that we want to go away. Pleasure is gain that we want to experience. Hope is the action towards ending the pain or grabbing the gain. Hope, however, is not the same thing as desire. I'll get to that later. You want to be cured from cancer. That is not hope. That is an unfinished sentence. Why do you want to be cured? Keep asking yourself why after your answer until you get to the core reason(s) of why you must defeat your disease. Then you have only

scratched the surface of hope.

How do we hope?

Hope is orientation and action towards the most meaningful future. I bet that when you first heard the news that you had cancer, you became disoriented. All of a sudden everything changed. Cancer became the filter for how you answered every question. Cancer defined your life, at least initially, until you thought through the five questions in our mixed drink- Pandora's Passion.

Question #1- "What do I want?" (twist of desire)

Question #2- "What is possible for me?"

Question #3- "What is the *path to recovery*?"

Question #4- "Who is competent to help me?"

Question #5- "What can I control?"

Now, there is a lot more involved in answering those questions than it appears. You might still be

answering them, even months into your treatment. It all happened so fast and now you're in this fight. You just went out swinging and praying you would land a punch. It's time to learn how to fight, not just how to cope, but time to learn how to hope. Let's build your hope muscles and develop hope habits.

The journey to discovering the power of hope happens step by step. There are three legs on the trail. One- *identification*. Two- *Imagination*. Three- *Intropsection*. Finally, you'll peek through some branches, push them aside and wind up at the scenic lookout with a view that will astonish you.

When Dr. Groopman struggled for 19 years with severe and debilitating back pain he sought a guide for the trail. "I needed an external voice, strong and determined, to guide me," Dr. Groopman said. I bring this up because you might answer the 5 questions alone and end up dangling over a cliff, disillusioned and in despair. Hope happens in community, not by yourself. I recommend you find an "external voice," perhaps a cancer coach or someone who has discovered the real power of hope who can help you

answer the 5 questions accurately.

Interestingly, you can actually answer most of the questions negatively and still come out with hope. I love in the movie Star Wars when C-3PO tells Han Solo, "Sir, the possibility of successfully navigating an asteroid field is approximately 3,720 to 1." Han shouts back at him, "Never tell me the odds." C-3PO persists and Han yells, "Shut him up or shut him down." You might have 1 chance in 3,720 of beating your cancer, and with little else to go on than your belief that God will heal you and *that*, mixed with agreement actions, could be enough to put your cancer in remission. That faith is part of the "possibility" ingredient. If your doctor is competent but has maxed-out all he has, and if you feel like you have no control, but you still believe in miracles, that might just be enough.

Identification, Imagination, and Introspection

The word hope is poorly defined by the literal translation of "wait." It is how we wait that makes the

difference. One interpretation of the the original Greek word means to hang-on, the kind of “waiting” we would do if while on a roller-coaster the arm bar suddenly lifted up. Have you seen a cat cling to a person when threatened with a bath? Hanging-on is a kind of suspension unlike waiting in line to use the bathroom. Hope is an action-waiting.



Identification

The first *action* is identification. On this leg of the trail you have to identify what you want. You need to also identify with someone who got what you want. The Heavy-Weight Champion Boxer George Foreman said, “Life is three things: knowing what you want, how much it costs, and paying it.” Talking to someone who already paid the price and got what they wanted, will help you succeed. Dr. Groopman says, “Our sense of hope or despair is reinforced by direct contact with someone who has either prevailed or perished.” You have a new enemy- cancer. Now it’s time to get a new identity strong enough to battle that giant. It is important to envision your future “self” being, doing, or

having what you want because your present “self” will try to catch up to that vision and make it a reality.



Imagination

The second action is imagination. On this leg of the trail you answer the question, “Is it *possible* to play with my daughter in the ocean again?” “Is it possible to finish the book I was writing?” The question is not, “Is it possible for me to be cured?” That is desire, not hope. Hope “never relinquishes a vision of the future,” Dr. Groopman teaches. Being cured of cancer is an idea, not an image. Riding your bike with your spouse along the beach on the boardwalk is an image, the action of your imagination. Images are more powerful than ideas. Hope explores the potential of what is possible.

The other question you have to answer is, “What is the *path* to recovery?” What is the prognosis, not just from your doctor either. Do you have to undergo radiation treatment, chemotherapy, or surgery? Do you have to take time off work for a year? How will you stay beautiful to yourself and strong even when you feel your weakest and most unattractive?

Your path will lead to death before you experience the resurrection. Every drug or treatment is designed to kill your cells. You must embrace this death to find your life. This is your path.



Introspection

Are you in control? By definition cancer is cell growth out-of-control. So, what can you *control* since you cannot physically manipulate the rate of cells splitting? You can choose your attitude. You can choose experimental drugs. You can choose which doctor to listen to. You can even choose how to die, if it comes down to that. You have more choices than you think. Even if you feel totally out of control, there are others that you might trust who can bring the situation back under control. Maybe you believe God is in control, or your doctor, or the medicine. Put your finger on it. Who or what can control this unruly, obnoxious disease?

Are you *competent*? Maybe, if you are a doctor or you studied cancer because someone else you know had the illness before. Most likely you're not competent

to determine your own recovery plan. Then you have to ask, who is competent? Read Dr. Groopman's books, *Anatomy of Hope* and *How Doctors Think*. Don't settle for average. It's work, but find medical staff you trust. Find people who will fight as hard as you and believe as much as you.

In the movie *For Love of the Game*, starring Kevin Costner as Billy Chapel, competency is in question. Billy Chapel, pitcher for the Detroit Tigers, injures his throwing hand on an electric saw while cutting wood in his barn. His road to recovery is long. One day his trainer slips and says, "*If you get better...*" Billy Chapel catches him and yells, "You said 'if'. You get your mind right. You get it right or you don't come around me." The people who fight with you have to get their minds right too; they have to learn how to hope too.

What should we hope for?

Those who like Plato view hope as a foolish counselor might be hoping for the wrong thing. Hope is

not a magic formula; if you answer all the questions the right way you get whatever you want. There is a price to pay for what we want and sometimes that price means sacrificing a lot of other things we want. We have to set priorities. Some may choose to die quietly, to enjoy the little quality of life they have left instead of rolling the dice and risking big with a seemingly barbaric surgery and aggressive treatment plan. This is a courageous choice. At the other extreme, even if you're hoping for the impossible, it's worth going out giving all you have. Your friends and family will say of you that you never surrendered. Your fight will inspire many to live richer lives and to be more grateful for the time they have on earth.

Let's come back to the images of how you will live life or how you will die, images that must be artistically painted. You can hope for whatever you want as long as the price can be paid. One secret, though- Hope does not exist without a promise. Doctors make promises. Drugs make promises and they even promise side-effects. Some hold on to the promises of God, the Bible, or the words from other

religious texts. Lab results are "promising." More than anything, almost, is the living promise of talking with someone who had your type of cancer and hearing how they battled and overcame. That is a projection of yourself in the future. You exist in the future.

The future is as real as the past or the present. There is a constant that travels with us throughout our past, our present, and our future that allows us to recognize them all as real and not figments of our imagination. For most of us these constants are relationships. Dr. Groopman recounts the hope of a dying woman, "Barbara's hope was real and undying. In her case, it reflected the fact that she had found purpose and created meaning in her life through relationships with her loved ones, and with her God." You can hope to find meaning in life or in death by the relationships you keep.

Can you see yourself some years from now holding your grandchild? Is that worth fighting for? Can you see yourself forgiving your father, asking to be forgiven and dying with peace knowing that you did what mattered most?

Even if your hope is undying, you still might not know if you are going to live or die. One of Dr. Groopman's colleagues, Dr. George Griffin, was dying of cancer. George faced the facts that he would probably die, but he took a hope-action just in case. Dr. Groopman recounts about George, "He never had a moment of denial or delusion. When he returned home from the hospital, during the last days of Fall, he assumed he would soon die. He and Eunha were avid gardeners, and he asked her to go to the nursery and purchase daffodil bulbs. Weak as he was, George planted them himself. The daffodils would bloom the coming spring." George shared with Dr. Groopman, "I told myself: Maybe I'll get to see them flower, but likely I won't. Then they will be for my grave." Hope embraces the likelihood of death, but holds out for the possibility of life.

George's cancer was advanced and extremely lethal. Many others, including Dr. Groopman, gave up hope but George risked everything and took every drastic measure to counter the advances of his illness. It appeared reckless and vain, like a refusal to accept

reality, but George fought even when he had lost all hope. He is alive today, 20 years later and still counting.

George visited cancer patients often to inspire hope. Dr. Groopman concludes, "His survival showed them that there is an inherent uncertainty in the behavior of even the worst diseases." Hope wanders the land of uncertainty and leads people to wonderful places. Hope thrives on uncertainty, for who hopes for what they already have? Who hopes for what is already predetermined? There is no passion, no power when everything is already figured out. The mystery allows for the miracle. Hope for miracles! In many fields of science, what was once thought impossible is now routine and quite effective to squash cancer before it becomes lethal. It's o.k. to be hopeful. Enjoy it.

Hope and Hopeful

Once you have **identified** what you want and identified yourself with those who fought to get what they wanted, you have finished the first part of the trail.

By **imagining** the possibilities and the pathways to getting what you want, you turn the corner in the second part of the trail. Through **introspection** you figure out how much control you have and how competent everyone is to help you. You have finished the third leg of the journey. Depending on how you answered the 5 questions, you'll either arrive at the scenic view, hopeful and powerful, or you'll realize that you're lost. If you are lost, you need a hope-guide and someone who can help you tap into the powerful emotion of hopefulness.

Hope is orientation and action towards the most meaningful future. Hopefulness is the passion and joy we feel when we sense ourselves getting closer to what we want. Sometimes you will feel like crap and be negative all day but still able to take hope-actions forward. It's like climbing a mountain.

When I climbed Cayambe, an 18,000 ft. snow-capped volcano in Ecuador, I learned a lot about hope. I trained by climbing 26 other mountains over a 3 month period. Finally, I arrived at base-camp on a cold cloudy night. Doubtful that the conditions would permit us to

climb I went to bed praying for my shot at the summit.

At midnight we set out into the clear darkness and breathed the crisp air. I felt strong and determined. Six hours later, just before sunrise, my fingers and toes were noticeably numb. I feared frostbite. At one point the steepness of the slope caught me gently as I fell into the snow exhausted. The air gets thin up that high, making it hard to breathe, and my strength failed me, but my guide kept telling me we were almost there. I would have surrendered if I was alone. My guide's voice, 25 feet in front of me, lifted me back onto my crampons and I took another step forward. The sunshine behind the mountain cast a shadow that covered the towns below but filled my soul with light, with hope of success. We shimmied up through a little hole dug out by previous climbers and we stood at the top of the world. (Cayambe is physically closer to the sun than Mt. Everest because it is on the equator.)

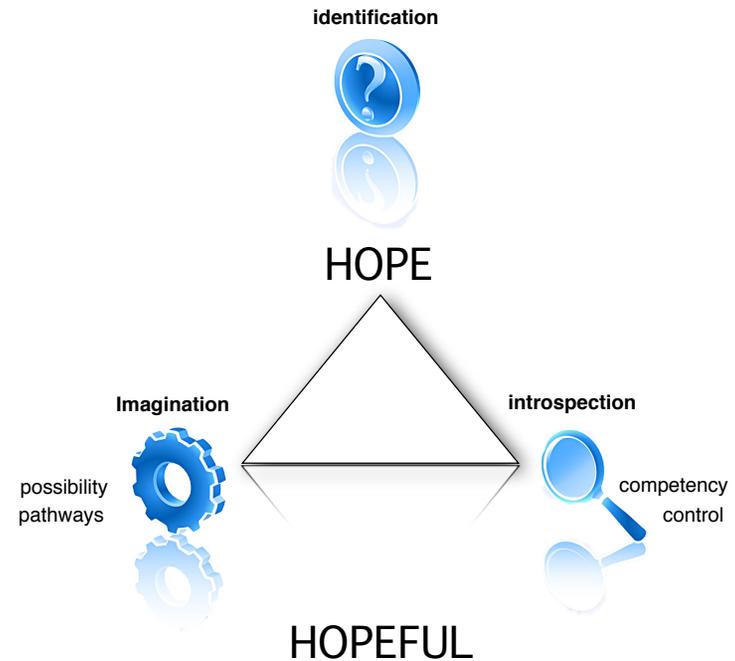
Not a cloud in the sky, I could see five other snow-capped volcanoes that speckled the landscape. Breathtaking. I have never seen anything that

compared to the beauty I beheld that day. Since then, every problem seems like an average hill in comparison with that mountain. Greater suffering gives us greater perspective.

Suffering puts life into perspective and enables us to find meaning and purpose. For me, climbing Cayambe was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. For my guide, who climbs volcanoes for a living, it was a walk in the park, but he still enjoyed the beauty. He had no doubts that he would summit because he had done it dozens of times before. I, on the other hand, needed hope. I experienced the powerful emotions connected to hopefulness all the way up the volcano until I sensed frostbite and fatigue overwhelming me. It was then that my guide helped me summon the will to hope which kept me moving forward.

I was hopeful for the first six hours of the climb and time passed sweetly as dawn drew near. That's the way to climb. The last thirty minutes seemed like gravity had doubled its force and time had frozen. How did I get to the top? Step by step is the secret.

Whether under the influence of hopefulness, or just trudging along with hope, the right orientation and the courage to take action will get you there.



Get me to the top!

Please allow me to be your hope coach, your “external voice”, your trail guide, for a few minutes. Take the hope-actions of identification, imagination, and

introspection. Drink Pandora's Passion and answer the 5 questions with someone, whether with your priest, a family member, your significant other, or a friend. If you watch the movies I recommend in the back of this book, you will be inspired and find clues about hope. You can also email me if you would like. And finally, follow my hope to-do list, step by step.

1. Make a list of promises people make to you and you want to make to others in this season of your life. You will find out which ones are worth hanging-on to.
2. Voice your pain. Cry out to God or your family or in a journal to communicate honestly about your cancer. Hope is birthed out of your pain. There is tremendous energy that comes from anger and being fed-up with life "as-is".
3. Imagine life "as-if". Litter your walls with images of what you want. Remember when you were a kid and you had to make collages by cutting out pictures in magazines? Do something similar. Put your photo and pictures of people you love

on the collage. Take one picture every day and focus on it. See yourself there, "as-if" you would one day do that, have that, be that.

4. Surround yourself with teammates. Learn to hope together. You can't do this alone. You need people to pray, people to wait in hospital rooms with you, people to send you flowers, people to talk to, people to cry with, people who make you laugh, people who fight with you.
5. Take RISKS. Whether you risk forgiving someone or trusting someone again or you risk taking a drug with bad side-effects, the risk will strengthen your hope. Don't be reckless but take steps of faith, where the outcome is unseen.
6. Watch, read, and listen to stories of people who prevailed in the face of great opposition. Identify with one or two of the millions who have gone before you. Live Strong. Write your story or have it written as it unfolds to give to your family and friends or to keep for yourself.

7. Do all the steps all over again. Hope is a rolling snow ball that gets bigger and bigger.

Contact me: rob@a2zhope.com

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Summon the will to hope. I'll see you tomorrow.

Groopman, J. (2004). Anatomy of Hope. New York: Random House

Movies that will inspire you and teach you how to hope:

Terminal- (Tom Hanks & Catherine Zeta Jones)

Shawshank Redemption- (Morgan Freeman)

Stranger than Fiction- (Will Ferrel)

50 First Dates (Adam Sandler & Drew Barrymore)

The Notebook (Ryan Gosling & Rachel McAdams)

The Truman Show (Jim Carrey)

The Count of MonteCristo (James Caviezel)

The Ultimate Gift (Abigail Breslin)

The Family Man (Nicholas Cage & Téa Leoni)

Braveheart (Mel Gibson)

Moulin Rouge (Nicole Kidman & Ewan McGregor)

Goal (Leonardo Guerra)

Amazing Grace (Ioan Gruffudd)