

Beyond the Chaos of Despair: Exploring the Art of Living in Difficult Times

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In Delaware there are amazingly creative people, artists in that creative spiritually charged enterprise of making meaning out of chaos — working through despair, resistance, and hope to some new place. The most creative among us are those who struggle with what life brings and find hope, beauty and meaning. They practice compassionate living. They are artists in living. These are the wise ones. In my 50 years in Delaware I have learned so much from them.

These past few years have for me been filled with times of despair. Resistance to this despair addresses its source and either overcomes or moves beyond it. If we have no hope, resistance can exhaust and dehumanize us. If there is hope, we remain energized. Some of our hopes are fantasies, and those hopes are dashed. Other hopes are grounded in the Holy and remain. But very often our hopes are dashed; we become filled again with despair and the cycle begins afresh. It has been a difficult time for many of us.

I've worked at trying to use a traditional art form, specifically printmaking, as a way of expressing something of what I have learned from the "artists of living" in my life about despair and its costs. This work has evolved into a three-year project concerning the spiritual world of despair, resistance, and hope. I have come to believe that, if grounded in compassion or love, the places we find ourselves emotionally become the basis for transformation and renewal.

My work began in 2020 by making prints from woodblocks and linocuts that expressed both my despair and resistance concerning Covid, social issues in the world, and theological possibilities for hope. I produced a two volume "Book of Numbers," that had the number "1" printed for each person who died of Covid between January and All Saints Day 2020 in the United States and worldwide. These books were acquired by the Delaware Art Museum.

In 2022 I became more deliberate in writing aphorisms that connected prints exploring the relationship between resistance and hope. These are short statements meant to jog the reader to look at the image that accompanies them and explore the ideas represented. The aphorisms were "thought experiments" that replaced the preacher's desire to preach and the writer's desire to explain. I produced a limited edition 'art object' book (eight copies), "Resistance and Hope."

In 2023 I started work on a series of drawings and prints transformed into cyanotypes (a form of photographic reproduction) again with aphorisms, looking at the relationship between despair and hope. From my book, "Despair & Hope" the following:

This mess of art related stuff — prints, drawings, objects, books, all somehow concerned an ongoing spiritual exploration of the relations between and among the feelings of despair, resistance, and hope. Most of the work was deliberately connected to working out these issues.

I came to realize that something was needed to lift us out of this dead-end repeat of despair, resistance, and hope. That “something” is known to those who live creatively, but it is not talked about very directly. It involves what Christians have called, “Holy Wisdom.”

I am now working towards joining images and aphorisms that link despair, resistance, and hope, to compassion. I have come to view these emotions as time related, and thus with the tyranny that time has over us. Compassion draws us into the present moment, the place where we can act for transformation.

I was asked this year to make a print to give to the Education for Ministry class at St. Peter’s, Lewes, for their graduation. I suggested that I make a new image, one of Holy Wisdom. This is what I made:

This is sometimes called “Christ the Wisdom of God.” But often the form of the Christ is feminine, remembering that Sophia (Wisdom) is feminine. So here she/ he is, and behind her are the three stars, one above her, for the Father, one at her eyes and lips, being for the Son, and one at the heart for the Holy Spirit. But in her hands, she holds a tetrahedron, and she holds it in front of her stomach, indicating that wisdom brings compassion. (Echoes of the phrase, “bowels of compassion.”)

I see this as the first attempt to move to a “four-part harmony” in which despair, resistance, hope, and compassion, combine to bring a sense of completeness to the spiritual search, for which art is a part. The tetrahedron, with its four faces, is a symbol of that idea.

In September, 2023, I finished my latest art object/ book, a limited edition (eight) series of 14 plates, each with a small dry point etching and aphorism. They are bound in an accordion book style, vertically, printed on heavy watercolor papers. They fold to a small book 2.5 x 7.5 inches.

The progression of images and plates in this series suggests that despair, resistance, and hope can lead us to endless repetition of failed attempts to overcome despair, or can lead us beyond the tyranny of time, to the present, in which transformation is possible.

If we live in the present with our spiritual struggles, there is an opening for compassion. And compassion frees us from despair’s rule in our lives.

The close of that series is this plate:

There is more to explore. More art to be made, more attention to be given to the “artists of living” who inform my attempts to open the gate to compassion. There is more to come.