Abandon (Nearly) All Hope

By SIMON CRITCHLEY

April 19, 2014, 2:30 pm

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

With Easter upon us, powerful narratives of rebirth and resurrection are in the air and on the breeze. However, winter’s stubborn reluctance to leave to make way for the pleasing and hopeful season leads me to think not of cherry blossoms and Easter Bunnies but of Prometheus, Nietzsche, Barack Obama and the very roots of hope. Is hope always such a wonderful thing? Is it not rather a form of moral cowardice that allows us to escape from reality and prolong human suffering?

Prometheus the Titan was punished by the Olympian Zeus by being chained to a rock in the Caucasus, quite possibly not that far from Crimea. Each day for eternity, an eagle pecked out his liver. Every night, the liver grew back. An unpleasant situation, I’m sure you would agree. His transgression was to have given human beings the gift of fire and, with that, the capacity for craft, technological inventiveness and what we are fond of calling civilization.

This is well known. Less well known is Prometheus’ second gift. In Aeschylus’ “Prometheus Bound,” the chained Titan is pitilessly interrogated by the chorus. They ask him whether he gave human beings anything else. Yes, he says, “I stopped mortals from foreseeing doom.” How did you do that, they ask? His response is revealing: “I sowed in them blind hopes.”
This is a very Greek thought. It stands resolutely opposed to Christianity, with its trinity of faith, love and hope. For St. Paul — Christianity’s true founder, it must be recalled — hope is both a moral attitude of steadfastness and a hope for what is laid up in heaven for us, namely salvation. This is why faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so absolutely fundamental to Christians. Christ died on the cross, but he was resurrected and lives eternally. Jesus is our hope, as Paul writes in the First Letter to Timothy, namely he is the basis for the faith that we too might live eternally. Heaven, as they say, is real.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul inadvertently confirms Prometheus’ gift of blind hope. He asserts that hope in what is seen is not hope at all, “For who hopes for what he sees?” On the contrary, we should “hope for what we do not see” and “wait for it with patience.”

Now, fast forward to us. When Barack Obama describes how he came to write his keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, the speech that instantly shot him to fame and laid the basis for his presidential campaign and indeed his presidency, he recalls a phrase that his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., used in a sermon: the audacity of hope. Obama says that this audacity is what “was the best of the American spirit,” namely “the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary.”

It is precisely this kind of hope that I think we should try to give up. It is not audacious, but mendacious. As the wise Napoleon said, “a leader is a dealer in hope” who governs by insisting on a bright outlook despite all evidence to the contrary. But what if we looked at matters differently? What if we expected more from political life than a four-yearly trade-in of our moral intelligence to one or other of the various hope dealers that appear on the political market to sell us some shiny new vehicle of salvation?

The problem here is with the way in which this audacious Promethean theological idea of hope has migrated into our national psyche to such an extent that it blinds us to the reality of the world that we inhabit and causes a sort of
sentimental complacency that actually prevents us from seeing things aright and protesting against this administration’s moral and political lapses and those of other administrations.

Against the inflated and finally hypocritical rhetoric of contemporary politics, I think it is instructive to look at things from another standpoint, an ancient and very Greek standpoint. Just as our stories shape us as citizens, their stories shaped them and might shape us too. So, let me tell you a little story, perhaps the most terrifying from antiquity.

In “The History of the Peloponnesian War,” Thucydides, the sober and unsentimental historian, describes a dialogue between the representatives of the island of Melos in the Aegean Sea, which was allied with Sparta, and some ambassadors from invading Athenian military forces. The ambassadors present the Melians with a very simple choice: Submit to us or be destroyed.

Rather than simply submit, the Melians wriggle. They express hope that the Spartans will come to rescue them. The Athenians calmly point out that it would be an extremely dangerous mission for the Spartans to undertake and highly unlikely to happen. Also, they add, rightly, “We are masters of the sea.” The Spartans had formidable land forces, but were no match for the Athenian navy.

The Melians plead that if they yield to the Athenians, then all hope will be lost. If they continue to hold out, then “we can still hope to stand tall.” The Athenians reply that it is indeed true that hope is a great comfort, but often a delusive one. They add that the Melians will learn what hope is when it fails them, “for hope is prodigal by nature.”

With consummate clarity and no small cruelty, the Athenians urge the Melians not to turn to Promethean blind hopes when they are forced to give up their sensible ones. Reasonable hopes can soon become unreasonable. “Do not be like ordinary people,” they add, “who could use human means to save themselves but turn to blind hopes when they are forced to give up their sensible ones – to divination, oracles and other such things that destroy men by giving
them hope.”

At this point, the Athenians withdraw and leave the Melians to consider their position. As usually happens in political negotiations, the Melians decide to stick to exactly the same position that they had adopted before the debate. They explain that “we will trust in the fortune of the Gods.” In a final statement, the Athenians conclude that “You have staked everything on your trust in hope ... and you will be ruined in everything.”

After laying siege to the Melian city and some military skirmishes back and forth, the Athenians lose patience with the Melians and Thucydides reports with breathtaking understatement, “They killed all the men of military age and made slaves of the women and children.”

* * *

Thucydides offers no moral commentary on the Melian Dialogue. He does not tell us how to react, but instead impartially presents us with a real situation. The dialogue is an argument from power about the nature of power. This is why Nietzsche, in his polemics against Christianity and liberalism, loved Thucydides. This is also why I love Nietzsche. Should one reproach Thucydides for describing the negotiations between the Athenians and the Melians without immediately moralizing the story and telling us how we should think? Not at all, Nietzsche insists. What we witness in the Melian Dialogue is the true character of Greek realism.

Elected regimes can become authoritarian, democracies can become corrupted, and invading armies usually behave abominably. What we need in the face of what Nietzsche calls “a strict, hard factuality,” is not hope, but “courage in the face of reality.”

For Nietzsche, the alternative to Thucydides is Plato. With his usual lack of moderation, Nietzsche declares that Platonism is cowardice in the face of reality because it constructs fictional metaphysical ideals like justice, virtue and the good. Nietzsche sees Platonism as a flight from the difficulty of reality into a
vapid moralistic idealism. Furthermore, he adds, we have been stuck with versions of moral idealism ever since Plato, notably in Christianity, with its hope in salvation, and modern liberalism, with its trust in God and its insistence on hope’s audacity contrary to all evidence.

Where does this leave us? Rather than see Thucydides as an apologist for authoritarianism, I see him as a deep but disappointed democrat with a cleareyed view of democracy’s limitations, particularly when Athens voted to engage in misplaced military adventures like the disastrous expedition to Sicily that led to Sparta’s final victory over Athens in the Peloponnesian Wars. Thucydides would have doubtless had a similar view of the United States’s military expeditions to countries like Afghanistan and Iraq on the basis of metaphysical abstractions like enduring freedom or infinite justice. But he would have thought it was even worse for democracies to speak out of both sides of their mouths, offering vigorous verbal support for invaded or embattled peoples and talking endlessly of freedom and hope while doing precisely nothing.

When democracy goes astray, as it always will, the remedy should not be some idealistic belief in hope’s audacity, which ends up sounding either cynical or dogmatic or both. The remedy, in my view, is a skeptical realism, deeply informed by history. Such realism has an abiding commitment to reason and the need for negotiation and persuasion, but also an acute awareness of reason’s limitations in the face of violence and belligerence. As Thucydides realized long before the 2004 Democratic National Convention, it is not difficult to make beautiful speeches in politics, but they very often do little to change people’s minds and effect palpable improvement in social arrangements.

Thinking without hope might sound rather bleak, but it needn’t be so. I see it rather as embracing an affirmative, even cheerful, realism. Nietzsche admired Epictetus, the former slave turned philosophy teacher, for living without hope. “Yes,” Nietzsche said, “he can smile.” We can, too.

You can have all kinds of reasonable hopes, it seems to me, the kind of modest, pragmatic and indeed deliberately fuzzy conception of social hope
expressed by an anti-Platonist philosopher like Richard Rorty. But unless those hopes are realistic we will end up in a blindly hopeful (and therefore hopeless) idealism. Prodigal hope invites despair only when we see it fail. In giving up the former, we might also avoid the latter. This is not an easy task, I know. But we should try. Nietzsche writes, “Hope is the evil of evils because it prolongs man’s torment.” Often, by clinging to hope, we make the suffering worse.

Simon Critchley is Hans Jonas professor of philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York and the author of several books, including “The Ethics of Deconstruction,” “Stay, Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine” (with Jamieson Webster) and the forthcoming “Bowie.” He is the moderator of this series.

A version of this article appears in print on 04/20/2014, on page SR8 of the National edition with the headline: Abandon (Nearly) All Hope.