

This is what a humanist hopes for

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A few years ago I was a member of a London inter-religious group, composed mainly of Christians (both Roman Catholics and Protestants) some Bahai followers, a rabbi, several Unitarian/Universalists, and myself as a secular humanist. All members of our group seemed to be caring, compassionate and respectful of the differing views that emerged during our discussions. Over the course of our meetings, each of us was given an opportunity to express our personal ideas on a number of ethical questions. One of the common purposes shared by all of us was to avail ourselves of the opportunity to learn more about the religious thinking and the ideas and life-stance of other inter-religious group members.

On one occasion, I described some of the ways in which humanists arrive at ethical values. An Anglican priest turned to me and asked, "But what gives you hope?" Mostly when we talk about hope we are thinking about the future. Hope is often the expression we use to say what we would like to have happen as we look ahead in life. Hope describes the objectives we look forward to in our plans and ideas for the years that lie ahead. I thought it likely that my Anglican friend was thinking that if you can't look ahead to an afterlife, how can you remain cheerful and optimistic. He was probably thinking about the traditional Christian concepts of a heavenly eternal life.

Hope, like faith and belief, anticipate optimism, but they also convey some uncertainty. As we go through life, we soon learn that we cannot achieve all the desires that we hoped for, nor are we always able to maintain faith in all that we come to believe. But my Anglican friend asked me a sincere question and deserved a sincere answer. My response was as follows:

I hope that, when I die, I will be judged by those who knew me to have left this earth in at least as good a shape as I found it in my childhood. I hope that my wife and I have been able to pass this value along to our own children.

It is my hope that our governments and politicians within Canada may also share this same goal. This will be a much bigger hope than I can take responsibility for, because it will involve things that go far beyond what I can influence, except in small ways. That is, it will involve a healthy environment, good educational and health institutions, and a just and fair legal system. This hope includes media people who will regard freedom of the press with respect, and value

an ethical system that upholds truth, compassion and fairness – this despite whether these values are rooted in religious or non-religious principles.

I hope too, that Canadians will value democracy as a system that honours both the opinions and the needs of the rich and the poor, the wealthy and the homeless, the hungry and the well-fed. I am hopeful and optimistic that governments will develop systems enabling all those willing to work, to secure rewarding jobs producing respect, self-worth and dignity.

I hope that Canada will return to the days I remember as a younger person, when our country was valued throughout the world as a peace-keeping nation. When we travel we are, I hope, still regarded in foreign lands as friendly and welcome citizens from Canada. While I do not travel as much as I once did, I sense that, as Canadians, we are still warmly accepted in many parts of the world. As I age, and my everyday world becomes a little smaller, I value the friendships and warm greetings of neighbours and friends.

It is also my hope that governments, religions, and non-religious people also, will learn to relate to each other in peaceful and caring ways, similar to the inter-religious group members mentioned earlier. Finally, I hope that Canadians will continue to be proud of our country, and have just and fair reasons to be so. If we maintain our optimism about Canada, this may be one of the best incentives in making my hopes realized in the future.