

Fostering Hope in A Divided World On the Politics of Belonging

Abstract

Moderated by Dr. Christopher Adams, Rector of St. Paul's College, University of Manitoba, three panelists Dr. Sami Helewa, SJ (President, Campion College, University of Regina), Ms. Tanya Brothers, JD (Vice-Chair, St. Paul's College Foundation Inc.), and Ms. Joanne Seiff (Author and Educator), raise the problem of belonging and share their personal stories of what it means to belong in a polarizing and divided world. While acknowledging that today's political environment is far from ideal and not a source of much hope, they courageously act *as if* there is the possibility of hope. Hope for what? For claiming their voice and rightful place in our divided world. They refuse to accept that their belonging cannot be a reality. Tanya Brothers' selection of Dr. Martin Luther Kings' quote captures the imagination and hope of all panelists:

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.



Picture, from left to right: Dr. Niigaan Sinclair, Tanya Brothers (JD), Dr. Stanley Amaladas, Ms. Joanne Seiff (MA, M. Ed.), Dr. Christopher Adams, Dr Sami Halewa SJ.

My Hope in Politics: Personal Reflection

Dr. Sami Helewa, SJ
Campion College at the University of Regina.

Hope in politics intrigued me for several weeks. Hope seems relatable to politics, though it may be hard to discover it at the onset of things through news coverage. When we hope, we anticipate for something to happen and that makes hope political. There is also a subjective side to hope that yearns for a positive outcome. Naturally, no one hopes for the worse, even in politics that correspond to signs of the time. Hope, in its intrinsic nature, is good.

Regarding politics, I have a similar understanding: Politics is good in as far it can bring about the greater good, and to never be satisfied with the status quo, all for the sake of a just existence. I regard civic politics as an idea born of a desire for proper governance, a force pushing social progress, a capacity large enough to ensure human rights of all citizens, to offer border protection, and to promote fair trade for social stability. Like hope, politics is intrinsically good. Hope and politics are two sides of the same coin – we thrive by hope and just politics.

Subjective Hope

At a personal level, my early life was quite different than my life today. I was born stateless, and I belonged to no country with a future to reckon with. I had a culture, a family, and lived in a geography that forced me into a cultural history of dispossession. I had no birth certificate or had any rights granted to a citizen in the first twenty-five years of my life. Even, later, as a Canadian citizen, I always stood on foreign ground, and my feet never touched the land of my ancestors. I have experiences in two camps: a stateless experience and an experience of citizenship. They stand in contrast to each other, and each has a different level of hope, either through religious faith or by the promise of a sound democracy. A stateless person hopes for stability, while a citizen hopes for flourishing. As such, the business of hope brings about the two themes of personal belonging and personal becoming. To say that I “belong” and/or I “flourish” is a testimony of a fulfilled hope. My question hence: Are today’s politics, carriers of hope for belonging and for flourishing?

I did not choose to be of a Palestinian heritage, or to be stateless, but I chose to be a Jesuit in response to a grace-filled calling. I chose consecrated poverty, chastity, and

obedience for my life of service for others. Jesuits search for God in all things which is politically spiritual. Spirituality, as Dr. Blair Stonechild recently reminded me in a conversation, is “the highest level of politics.” There is a hierarchy in the heavenly realm, with higher authority like the Divine Supreme Being, the angels, and the good spirits versus the lesser good spirits. In religions, there are founders of religious movements, prophets, priests, heretics, and orthodox theologians – all of whom belong to an order of organized politics within religions.

Equally true, in response to being stateless, I chose to be an immigrant because I am obliged from statelessness to be interested in the “foreign other.” My Christian faith formed my humanity to relate to the unknown God as a potential providence, to love the Lord as a companion, and to consequently serve the neighbour. My faith led me to study Islam as means of deeper understanding of the foreign other. Meanwhile, the Parable of the Good Samaritan constantly inspires me in its application where the love of neighbour could not escape, and necessarily so, the politics of Judaism at the time of Jesus between Jews of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritan branch of the Jewish community. Spirituality and politics since ancient time are relatable, not just in heavenly realm but earthly as well;

they are relatable by hope, even though in our modern times, we have a workable separation of politics from religions.

Status - Quo of a World of No-Peace

Today’s politics is far from ideal, and not a source of much hope. Why is that? Did politics lose its core value? In a way, and sadly perhaps it had lost its vision of its prime directive: that of the greater good for all. It is no wonder that democracy is under review for critical evaluation of its capacity to bring out the expected common good. Some events challenge us for reconsideration at hand with respect to the state of politics today.

Forced migration challenges us, and the narratives of migrants confront politics of exclusion at a time when societies are increasingly racially diverse. Diversity is a context-reference and daily reality of many nations. Canada is diverse because it is an immigrant country on Indigenous lands. The discourse on equity, which is very political and necessary to improve on social justice, has become integrated in policies of each institution and government. But there is also the challenge of inclusion that testifies against the deliberate discrimination of any kind. However, neither diversity nor equity nor inclusion would mean anything if the impact of their combination does not produce what hope points to: a sense of belonging.

My hope today helps me insist on searching for politics of belonging for all members of the human family. The future of democracy could thrive as it potentially depends on politics of belonging. Kim Samisolation: book *On Belonging* reminds us that belonging is a milieu where someone or people, in general sense, can express freely their opinions without being threatened by ideologies; her book starts dealing with threats against belonging such as loneliness and social isolation;¹ it is a milieu where people could become what they dream for themselves, despite all the challenges of life. Belonging is also a milieu for healing of wounds that we identify with in our social contexts of diversity.

But in contrast, we have wars: in Ukraine and Russia, Gaza, the West Bank and Israel, Lebanon, northern Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan, Southern Sudan, and in Haiti – to name a few. Sadly, some nations are involved, and they support these wars. Apart from the political wars, our environmental deterioration is causing many living species to permanently disappear from their habitats. Each of these war-types is an assault against belonging,

sometimes by willful exercise of imposed security supported by exclusion politics.

There is an emotional attachment to either experiences of exclusion or belonging (Yuval Davis, 2006).² At times of personal reflection, the emotional reasoning behind any experience for or against belonging could lead a debate from a personal point of view. I felt it when I had the privilege this summer to visit and tour several European countries as soon as I finished my work as President of Champion College at the University of Regina. Although I knew a few things about the diversity of European cultures from personal training and reading, I learned from such a trip more about three intricate histories: royalty, wars, and human aspirations for a better world. The military history shows what the two great wars of the twentieth Century tried to accomplish in terms of liberation, but one sad reality dawned on me during my trip: The Love of Neighbour remains hard political lessons. We need hope to obtain new insights of such events.

Nearby Future?

Today, my religious hope and civic aspirations lead me to aspire to fill the gap in

¹ Samuel, Kim. *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation*. New York: Abrams Press, 2022: 18-30.

² Yuval-Davis, Nira. (2006) Situating Contemporary Politics of Belonging, in *The Situated Politics of*

Belonging. Nira Yuval-Davis, Kalpana Kannabiran, and Ulrike Vieten (Eds. London: SAGE Studies in International Sociology 55, 2006: 2.

what I call “politics of belonging.” It is not a new subject of enquiry especially among scholars in the fields of sociology and political philosophy. What I find relevant to today’s state of international relations is that the ideal politics of belonging stands in sharp contrast to the effects of the politics of exclusion. Alongside with this contrast, politics of belonging could be a connection from the heart of a nation to the hearts of migrants at its border, by way of example – an alternative political perspective. Many citizens want the best for migrants because of their potential contributions; however, their governments do not risk compassion when needed most. I come back to migration because migrants keep growing in number due to politics of exclusion, military wars, and environmental deterioration, but migrants are carriers of hope that remind citizens of less-troubled countries that for which they also hope. Unfortunately, today’s politics in general have devolved to being an exercise in interpersonal criticism of other political colleagues or of diversity in political ideas.

I take consolation in the fact that hope and politics are good in themselves. As a starting point, I continue to hope that no political philosophy should parochially promote harmful ideologies of the “foreign other.” I trust that rulers who pursue the common good

could do so even for the welfare of their political opponents: this is what I envision politics of belonging to accomplish. We can exclusively belong to specific cultures, but we all belong to one planet that suffers from effects of exclusion and exploitation. We need to ascend to an imagined world of belonging which we hope to experience in our local contexts, otherwise we have false hope in politics and in ourselves.

Jewish Hope: Work that Aims to Repair the World

Ms. Joanne Seiff, (M.A., Religious Studies,
M.Ed., English Education)

I’m Joanne Seiff. I am a dual citizen (Canadian/US). I moved to Canada in 2009, but polarizing politics aren’t new to me. 20 years ago, we lived in a Kentucky college town - my husband’s a professor. I was a lonely, feminist, Jewish writer who kept my last name when I married. I wrote articles and books in my home office. I voted! I called my representatives! And nothing worked! My candidates never got in!

But being ‘a citizen’ is actually a new thing historically for Jewish people in the diaspora, a product of the Enlightenment. Women got the vote even later. Getting the opportunity to vote is a privilege. As a dual citizen, I now vote in two countries for

candidates who often don't win! This is also how I see Jewish hope. We live in a fractured world. According to one mystical Jewish tradition inspired by Rabbi Luria in the 16th century, the world was once like a beautiful pot, a vessel, but it broke into many pieces.

Everyone has one of those pieces inside, it's our soul. It's our job to put together the pot again. We call this "Tikkun Olam"- Fixing the world. Every day, we wake up and say Modeh Ani- a prayer where we thank G-d for returning our souls and getting up in the morning to make the world a better place. We're human partners with G-d in the act of ongoing creation. This doesn't just happen. It takes work.

I grew up in Virginia and often felt isolated. I was often one of only 2 or 3 Jewish kids in my class at school. It was up to me to explain Judaism. Although I've lived in a lot of places, when I moved to Kentucky, the first thing people asked was where we went to church. They invited us to their church. They'd never met a Jewish person before. This awkward moment doesn't get easier, but I continue to try.

Many Jews have felt hopeless in the face of rising hate since October 7, 2023. Our place as Canadian citizens feel precarious. Antisemitic activity has increased rapidly in Canada, with many politicians only acting to

condemn it after it occurs. In this context, when I mentioned this panel, some Jewish friends said – "I wouldn't have it in me to do that right now." So, how can we keep finding hope?

For me, it isn't just about waking up but finding gratitude and wonder. I take a walk every morning with my dog. I see woodpeckers, deer, fox or hawks. It's offering greetings and small kindness to neighbours when I can. Yes, I'm devastated when I read the news. I see misinformation proliferate through both social media and traditional media outlets. I hear directly from those affected by war in Israel, and witness antisemitism in my neighbourhood. The next step is to act. I report the crimes. I often have to explain antisemitism to the police while making the report. More generally, I write articles about human rights issues like literacy and homelessness. I contact government officials. I speak out.

Finding hope isn't just about me or a personal world view. That said, one can use a personal vantage point to spur on hope for others in the community. An example: I'm a mom of twins. During the 2024-2025 school year, my grade 8 twins won several awards at divisional science fair. I was proud! My kids asked good, intellectually curious questions and worked hard. These are Jewish values.

Fixing the world means fixing real problems and doing good science and discovery. Jewish scientists have made a big contribution to research, including creating vaccines that have saved many lives. My twins' research contributes to that tradition, as they focused on protecting human hearing and reducing harmful noise exposure.

For thousands of years, Jews have fled when we've been expelled. We were forced out of the land of Israel (twice), from Spain and Portugal (and their New World colonies) during the Inquisition, as well as from England, Germany and many other European countries. There were multiple expulsions in the 20th century, including from much of North Africa and the Middle East. A good education and an agile mind can travel. This helps us contribute wherever we go. This academic success brings joy, too. Our community felt proud when my kids were interviewed on the CBC and were on the national news. Yes, this middle school achievement's a small thing, but we can all take a moment to feel pride when we see the next generation succeed.

We participated at our congregation before October 7, but we've leaned in. We attend and volunteer more. Jewish tradition isn't just Torah, the five Books of Moses. We also rely on Oral Torah, the Talmud --

thousands of years of rabbinic wisdom. This ancient quote from Pirke Avot, *Sayings of our Fathers*, attributed to Rabbi Tarfon applies: "It's not up to us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it." We must keep up this work. We hope things will improve.

Jews are a small, diverse, ethno-religious minority. We're 1% of the Canadian population and 0.2% of the world population, about 15 million people in the world. Half that population lives in Israel - For many in Canada, Israelis are relatives and friends. We're an ethno-religious group, a tribe, and we're connected. For generations, our allies, friends, and neighbours - upright individuals - helped us survive. When I am asked to explain about Jewish holidays, concepts or invite someone to my Sabbath dinner table, and it feels safe to do so, I always do.

Connections matter. Hope comes from building bridges and relationships...supporting those in need: Yazidis, the Vancouver Filipino community's recent loss of life at a street festival, & the 2025 Manitoba fire evacuees. My tradition teaches us to keep trying. Hope is work, rooted in action rather than belief. Educating, speaking out, creating connections, fighting against hate and making positive change takes

work, but this hopeful work also ‘repairs the world.’

Remembering My History, Claiming My Agency and My Place

Ms. Tanya Brothers JD
Province of Manitoba

The American author Toni Morrison said, “If you are really alert, then you see the life that exists beyond the life that is on top.” Not knowing our collective history erases the past and detaches us from the possibility of learning from it. Knowing our own history allows us to see how the stories before ours fit into what we know of that time. My family history on its face is about oppression and resilience, but it is also so much more than that. Their lived history of aspiration and black joy has become part of my everyday approach to the world, and it makes me believe in the possibility of hope in a polarized time.

The United States was polarized in 1907, particularly the Oklahoma Territory, which became a state that year. The first bill passed in the new state legislature restricted African Americans to separate schools, and separate seating on streetcars. The Anti-Black newspaper editorials and the lynching, burning and beating of Black citizens which had occurred before statehood continued and

became common occurrences. Politicians won seats by promising to introduce segregation into all aspects of public life, and African Americans were denied participation in the elections.

There were once fifty “all Black towns” in Oklahoma, many of which were built by people who were just one generation from slavery and would have understood that being owned denied their humanity and possibly the human need for a sense of belonging. My ancestors were from one of these towns, Clearview, a place where the inhabitants had community, agency and safety.

The segregation laws were challenged in courts, and protests were organized, but ultimately people who could, voted with their feet and left Oklahoma. By 1907, what was known as the “Black Trek” had begun. On March 21, 1911, a group of 200 African Americans arrived at the Emerson border station in southern Manitoba, and asked permission to continue to Amber Valley, an all-Black town they formed in Northern Alberta. As an indication of their desire for a better circumstance and as an act of hope, in that group were my mother’s people: Samuel Carothers, his wife Buelah and their children, which included my great grandfather Maceo.

Canadian immigration policy at the time was focused on attracting farmers to settle the

Prairies. When this group arrived at Emerson, they were not considered ideal candidates due to the fear borne of racism - that Black people would take over Canada. As a result, they were required to pass strict tests proving that their health, finances, and literacy knowledge met certain criteria, all in an effort to limit the numbers allowed to enter. Despite being given a difficult time at the border by the Canadian officials, all requirements were met, and no one was turned back.

Things became more difficult as they approached and then arrived in Edmonton. Petitions had been circulated, and editorials appeared in the local papers, none of which were welcoming to the African American settlers. In response to agitation from Alberta and other political motivations, on August 12, 1911, the government of Wilfred Laurier drafted and approved an Order in Council which would have prohibited any “Negro immigrants” from coming to Canada for one year because “...the Negro race...is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada.” It never became law but it, and the other actions of the government, illustrate why R. Bruce Shepard, author of *Deemed Unsuitable: Blacks from Oklahoma*, describes these racist acts in Canada as a “campaign of diplomatic racism”, in that the power of the

Government was used to limit African American immigration.

In the settlement of Amber Valley, the settlers survived the weather, the poor farming conditions, and the hostile neighbors. They not only survived, but they also thrived. They left what they had known and were open to the possibility of something better - they created community in Canada. It is perhaps not a stretch to think that there might have been valuable assistance from Indigenous peoples whose very land they had settled on.

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was a union of Black railway porters that served a significant role in ending employment-discrimination. It was the first trade union in Canada organized by and for Black men and serves as another example of how African American immigrants created belonging and community. Along with seeking better wages and working conditions for union members, the Brotherhood also pressured federal and provincial governments to create legislation prohibiting discrimination in employment and housing. My grandfather Douglas Carothers, from Amber Valley, was a sleeping car porter.

As a multi-generational Canadian, there are many aspects of my history that resonate with this theme of hope and belonging. Along with the various threads of my history, this is

one half of my maternal story. My paternal history is one of the Black Loyalists, enslaved people of African descent who fought with the Loyalists in the American Revolution. After the war, the Black Loyalists who had been promised freedom and land by the Crown were transported from New York to Nova Scotia. The “Book of Negroes”, a remarkable document produced in 1783 by the British, lists 3000 names of these formerly enslaved people. The Brothers name is in the “Book of Negroes” and documents the families’ continuous presence in Nova Scotia and Canada for over 220 years.

I know where I am from and who my people have been all my life. The fact that on both sides of my family I have deep Canadian roots is meaningful to me. I know it is a story that is not unique to me; many of you will have stories of discrimination and challenges in your own family histories.

There are lessons to be learned from knowing and understanding one’s family history. I have shared that it was a history of oppression and resilience, but also aspiration and Black joy. They had to “dream while wide awake”. Alert to the danger and limited life available to them, they had to actively envision what they wanted instead of what they did not have and set out to create it. As an adult, and a mother, I can now see the

choices they made as an act of hope, for themselves and their families, and ultimately for me. They hoped for a better life and worked towards it through building ways of belonging on Canadian soil, and in the fabric of Canadian life.

How did they do it? With courage, my ancestors fostered community in each other and sustained that hope as they created a new reality. They seeded hope in the community and beyond by showing what was possible. In 1915, men from Amber Valley formed a baseball team that was renowned for its skill. While due to racism the Amber Valley, First Nation and Metis teams played exclusively against each other (and reportedly traded baseball skills for instruction in northern survival), the greater population of the region was aware of the team. Through their actions and interaction with others they showed that they were not to be ‘feared’ and were in fact more like them than not.

They had faith and tolerance. The settlers of Amber Valley belonged to a variety of different Christian denominations, some congregations held services in the school while others held Sunday school and services in private homes. In 1915, Shiloh Baptist Church was formed in Edmonton Alberta by former residents of Amber Valley. It was necessary to create a place of worship, as they

were not welcomed in other churches. The church exists to this day as a legacy to their faith and is one of the largest Black churches in Western Canada.

I don't always know how to feel about the past. Pride in my ancestors' survival, their creativity, their many contributions to community and society... and yet a profound sadness at the many limitations to their lives that were the result of this time in our collective history. They persevered, they were resilient, they celebrated each other and their many achievements and sadly but not unexpectedly, their experience of living in a time and place when society would not

acknowledge them as equals was a hardship that ripples through the generations that follow them. Despite this "cost" of their Hope, my ancestors have given us the great gift of knowing that there is no way forward but to act on what we hope for. I leave you with the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

My family and I belong to this country, and this country belongs to us.