

# HOPE

BY PHILIP ALVARÉ

**H**ope, v. hoped, hoping, hopes — intr.  
1. To wish for something with expectation of its fulfillment. 2. Archaic To have confidence; trust. —tr.

Ice breaking up on the Hudson River with its weird sounds, creaking, clicks and deep whale-like moans, reminds me of an orchestra tuning. Other times the ice is smashed along the banks as tides rise and fall, currents shifting directions. It looks like some war-torn debacle with its menacing shards of glass, giant chunks of what could be column fragments and broken pediments like the shambled remains of some lost civilization in an arctic wasteland. Water like stone.

I hope spring is close. It's not unrealistic to wish for spring, to hope for it, to expect it will arrive as it does, and has, every year for as long as I can remember. There are hints of it everywhere — life emerging like the still-unfurled fetlock-tuft of snowdrops tucked into the protected south-facing corner of an old stone wall. But winter in the Hudson Valley can be a long, seemingly endless string of gray days, dreary, monotonous drifting toward a bleak and distant vanishing point. Some days the sun barely makes it out, sits low on the horizon like a dull old coin, and has all the brilliance of a tarnished mirror before vanishing into the night.

But bright, late winter days are like a revelation that seems to part the dingy scrim, and signal the end of one season and the beginning of the next. When the Catskill Mountain range is lit in sharp relief, all violet-blue and snow-filled crevasses, blurs of jagged spruce, and pine



trees and junipers shagged with ice, we know spring will come soon. There's hope. Have hope. Trust it will come, change will occur; fragrant earth, birdsong, the turgid thrust of tulips from the ground. Soon apple blossoms.

There are days, actually, when it doesn't seem there's much to be hopeful about. The war's still raging in Iraq, and the current administration continues its saber-rattling and rhetoric about international policies the rest of the world sees as insufferable. The dollar has so little value on the world market that every time I go to New York City, a world city, I feel like a foreigner from some provincial hinterland using a currency so devalued as to be laughable.

But hope springs eternal. The presidential elections are just months away. Change is inevitable. Let's hope this new cycle brings a fresh wind, and positive renewal to the spirit of our times.

One early spring day in recent memory, I was clomping around the pond at Hudson's Olana State Historic Site (landscape design by Robert Law Olmstead, who also did Central Park), and I took the path that diverged to the left into the lower wood. By now the prelude to spring had begun. The Schoenberg sounds of ice breaking up on the Hudson River had given way to a tone poem rising from the rich, black, March mud, swamp land where a galaxy of peepers constellated, and echoed each other. Their swirling song is Earth's oldest ballad. No one voice was distinct from the others, each in concert with them all, oscillating in a helical symphony, in one voice. As I listened to that primal orchestration, the cold monochromatic memories of winter melted away

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into a symphony of colors; willow green, sky blue, narcissus yellow. The moment was poised at the edge of a transition, the brink of transformation, rebirth and renewal. Hope.

Spring's official debut isn't until March 21st, and it's not for nothing that traditional dates for celebrations of Easter and Passover (although Passover is late this year on April 19th), coincide with the equinox and season's change. Of course Easter commemorates the Christian story about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, while Passover reiterates the Jewish story about the exodus from Egypt and enslavement to freedom and the promised land. They both give hope to the idea of change, transition and improvement. Like the seasonal transition or passage from winter to spring, both Easter and Passover rituals recall ideas, and echo similar transitions, from death to life and enslavement to freedom — darkness to light. Both rituals are loaded with transformation symbolism: the bitter herbs, salt, unleavened bread, and egg of the seder; and the fire and water of the Easter liturgy, as well as Easter eggs and paschal lambs. Rebirth.

But it's not just Judaism and Christianity that recognize a season of transition and the promise or hope for rebirth, renewal, and freedom. Although lunar calendars and ritual cycles differ, the Buddhist celebration of "Hungry Ghost," Muslim ritual observations from Ramadan through Eid Al-Fitr, and the Hindu festival of Diwali are all rites

of passage that commemorate life's transitions with hopes for renewal. Almost all religious ideologies have rituals, customs, and symbols that address the big topics of transition from life to death to life, darkness to light, winter to spring, deprivation to plenty, and the hope for eternal rebirth, renewal, and freedom from this mortal coil.

The Egyptian god of the afterlife, Osiris, is sometimes depicted as a winged scarab hovering over a spirit or Ka portal (a blind door-like aperture found in tombs), on the threshold or transition from life to death, or afterlife. Of course the Egyptians regarded death, or the afterlife, as the big payoff — a far better place than what we suffer on this dusty plane below (and not all that far afield from the Christian notions of heaven and eternal life). The scarab or "dung beetle" has the singular distinction to roll balls of dung across the desert. To the Egyptians it symbolized regeneration and spontaneous life. They equated the scarab with the sun, life itself, birth, and the renewal that seemed to emerge from this substance — dung — as prima materia.

But out of all the ideas and images, stories and symbols about spring and the hope for renewal, my favorite is the painting "La Primavera" (Spring) by the Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli. The painting vibrates with a lusty pagan message about spring, beauty, love, regeneration and renewal. It's brimming with Renaissance classical iconography too esoteric to get into here, but well worth delving



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covered in cascades of flowers that issue from her mouth in an overwhelming display of beauty, bounty and color.

In the poem “De Rerum Natura,” Latin writer Lucretius celebrated Springtime, Venus and Flora in a single scene. The passage also contains other figures in Botticelli’s “La Primavera,” and is probably one of the main sources for the painting:

Springtime when Venus comes /And Venus’ boy, the winged har-  
binger Cupid, steps on before /Then borne on Zephyr’s footprints,  
Mother Flora /Sprinkles the ways before them, filleth all /With colors  
and with extraordinary fragrances.

HOPE! ❖

into. The life-size depiction of nearly naked gods with Venus, goddess of love, upstage center, and Mercury, the winged messenger who flits in and out between mortals and gods — life and death — suggests an abundance of love and life and renewal. Cupid aims his arrow at one of the Three Graces, while Zephyr (god of wind) pushes himself in pursuit of the nymph Chloris. Next to her, Flora, goddess of spring, is



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