

# Hope

[Editors' Note: *This speech was presented at the November 2013 Workshop of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents, Boston, Massachusetts.*]

I Googled “hope” the other day. I found a special hope formula for 70% off, a Hope TV Channel, a Hope Finance Program, Bob Hope, an official Hope website, and Wikipedia really went to town on hope, talking about the history of it, how to measure it, recognize it . . .

There are millions of “hopes” to click on.

I’m not sure what that will do for a kid who’s close to the kind of despair that’s a game changer, or a kid who’s being abused at home or somewhere else, or a young reader who has a colossally dark secret that’s crushing her, or a boy who feels close to doing something dangerous because he’s got so much anger inside, or a regular kid who feels confused and wants to try to understand a little bit of what you do with a conflicted heart.

It’s so easy to toss hope around like a beach ball. “Wheee! Here it comes!” And it just so happens that last week when I started working on this speech, we had a tsunami of complications hit our family. It was, in a few of those places, quite easy to not feel too hopeful about much good coming out of these things. In the midst of that, I sat down to work on these remarks, and as I did, I remembered an image that has so captivated me—and I think it’s a true visual of how I try to breathe hope into my characters’ lives. And into my own life as well.

In Asian pottery, there is a method called “golden seams,” specially created by craftsmen to mend cracked ceramics. Instead of trying to match the color

of the pot to make the crack less visible, they flaunt the flaw by repairing it with lacquer mixed with powdered, flecked gold. It dries bold and shiny; the cracks fill in with gold. Brokenness made beautiful and more valuable.

That’s what I hope to do—use gold paint around the broken parts. Humor certainly is a way to help life go down easier. In my novel, *Almost Home*, a girl loses her home—she’s there when the sheriff comes. How can lightness come in the midst of that? Her mother is a southern belle wannabe who insists that her daughter always write the perfect thank you note. And Sugar Mae Cole is a poet, and she writes about wanting a home that won’t go away with people who really think she’s something.

In *Close to Famous*, a girl who simply can’t read decides to give it one more try. In *Hope Was Here*, a girl wants to live with hope so much she changes her name to Hope, as if to say to the world, “Call me what I want to become.” Seeds of hope planted in a story. A touch of gold paint to illuminate the cracks and make them beautiful.

Who are these kids we adult writers dare to create, as we limp back into our pasts and dust off the boxes we’ve put away?

Where do they hide their wounds?

What’s their biggest strength?

What’s the thing about themselves they just can’t see?

What are the rules they live by?

How are those rules challenged?

How do they find their voices in this very broken world?

What do they long to see made better? Ah, that’s

the door to their hope. Right there.

Now, how do they get on the road? How do they put shoe leather to their dreams? How do they learn to talk the talk a little, step outside their comfort zone, and go for it?

Here's the lovely thing about hope: it's really quite selfless; it's happy to take a back seat in lots of situations. It partners in all kinds of moments and doesn't take the glory.

Take courage—you don't step out and do something brave without a hope that it could be better.

Or truth—you don't speak the truth without hoping someone will get it.

And my heart goes out to Hope Yancey of *Hope Was Here*, this courageous girl who wears her name like a flag. Sometimes that flag crashes to the ground, but she's willing to have it be her identity—that's how she wants to live.

We need to show kids what living with hope looks like, how it hides in all kinds of places, how it's not really meant for exceedingly happy times. Hope is built for the open sea with the sharks and the wind that's about to knock over your boat. Let's not relegate it to a Hallmark card with kittens wearing sunhats. Let's take this thing out on the open road and see what it can do. And if we're teaching a book, let's look for the hope and point it out and ask kids, "Where do you see it? Where is hope in the building blocks of courage, sensitivity, and friendship?"

Hope is in the soil. You dig in a garden in the spring, and there are the earthworms dancing; they're preparing the earth. Man, it's a good thing! That's what hope does; it's there underneath when we don't even think about it, waiting for us to discover it, waiting to make our lives richer and better, waiting to reach out a hand to a kid who is more broken than we could ever know.

Years ago, I spoke in Youngstown, Ohio. A girl came up to me; she took my hand and started to cry. "Mrs. Bauer, I just need to tell you. I read your book . . ." She couldn't finish. I was getting ready to speak to a group about humor in my novels, and now this girl was overcome by tears.

"Honey, tell me."

"I think I read it 50 times. I had leukemia. I read it every time I had chemotherapy. Mrs. Bauer, I don't have leukemia anymore."

Now I'm crying, and the humor crowd is coming in.

But, that was okay.

Hope is a glorious mess of inconsistencies. It shows up places it has no right to be: at gravesites and horrific accidents—how dare that thing come? And yet it does, sitting down on the couch with sorrow and pain and depression and lost love and terminal illness and anger and so much, so much. We ignore it at our peril! And here's what we tell the kids—here's what we show them in our stories. Hope isn't a feather; it's an anchor. It's not a butterfly; it's a 900-pound gorilla that's come to throw its weight around. It's the golden seams glistening off the paintbrush of a gifted artist outlining the cracks and the brokenness and saying, "Look how it can be put back together—more beautiful, more unique—shining out bold and true."

So, we can say to trouble when it turns out the light: "Go ahead. Give it your best shot. Guess what? I glow in the dark, and I am beautiful!"

Hope is a game changer.

May our eyes be open in new ways to the young people we teach and mentor. And may we hold this hope out to them so they can see ahead to a better day.

*In her 12 novels, Joan Bauer explores difficult issues with humor and hope. A New York Times bestselling author, speaker, and songwriter, Joan has won numerous awards for her books, among them the Newbery Honor Medal, the American Library Association's Schneider Family Book Award, two Christopher Awards, the LA Times Book Prize, the Chicago Tribune Young Adult Literary Prize, and the Golden Kite Award of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Joan has been a frequent guest on both local and national radio. Through the State Department's professional speakers program, she has visited both Kazakhstan and Croatia, where she spoke with students, writers, educators, and children at risk about her life and her novels. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband, computer scientist Evan Bauer, and their intrepid wheaten terrier, Max. Her new novel, Tell Me, is about a girl of humor, hutzpah, and hope.*

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