

Hope ... in a Hopeless World?

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Abstract: Writing an essay about hope in these times feels like an indulgence of privilege. Still, with full awareness of the implications, I want to insist that we not lose hope, that we make it meaningful, and that we go so far as to make its cultivation a central focus of our lives and work. This essay is intended to serve as a calling card for like-minded inquirers to reach out across time and space, to find ourselves and one another in the engaged optimism of meaningful work in the world, and as an acknowledgment of appreciation for all of those who do so.

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Hope ... in a Hopeless World?

Writing an essay about hope in these times feels like an indulgence of privilege. How can I wax optimistically about the state of things to come while the habitat rapidly destabilizes and billions live trapped in a gravity well of despair and destitution? Under such conditions, hope would be at best a palliative and at worst a hardhearted slap in the face—reflecting both the luxury of detachment and the sanctimony of paternalism all at once. Fixating on hope threatens to obfuscate injustice, obscure the harsh realities of degradation, and muddy the waters in which most of the world's inhabitants swim.

Still, even against all of this and with full awareness of the implications, I want to insist that we not lose hope, that we make it meaningful, and that we go so far as to make its cultivation a central focus of our lives and work. At the core of this effort is the basic recognition that our existence matters and that our place in the fabric of existence has meaning. *Hope* operationalized in this way is a direct rebuke to fatalism, nihilism, inevitability, and eschatology. It is the refusal to abdicate responsibility for ourselves and others, for the future, for all of creation—it is, in short, a radical reclaiming of power despite forces of suppression. Embracing hope in the face of impracticability is not quixotic but in fact starkly realistic.

An analogous scenario often arises in connection with the concept of *peace*. Hardly anyone (at least publicly) is against peace as a desirable aim of human affairs, but the sociopolitical landscape remains dominated by a “realist” conception of power in Machiavellian terms: as a zero-sum contest, dependent upon punitive measures and the exercise of force, and properly conceived in strategic hyperrational frames. In this lexicon, peace is often viewed as dangerous, weak, appeasing, impractical, ineffective, irrational, irresponsible, capitulating, childish, idealistic. Adherence to peace is the province of dreamers and poets, not responsible powerholders. The people may desire peace, but those in charge of managing things on behalf of the people exercise power paternalistically in order to protect the people from themselves. If there is peace to be found, it will come through the application of superior force.

This *realpolitik* perspective dominates both domestic and foreign affairs alike. At home, social problems are met not with empathetic reforms but with oppressive enforcement; crimes are punished harshly without attention to underlying structural conditions, and civil unrest becomes cause for a crackdown. Implicit in all of these patterns is a sense that actually addressing legitimate grievances would be a sign of weakness, and that giving desperate people even a glimmer of hope would only serve to further embolden them (a) to make demands on society, and (b) to continue agitating until they are treated as equals in all respects. In this view, if we give the impoverished an inch they'll take a mile—and since they can't manage themselves, it would be cruel to give them the illusion of optimism that their claims will be heard and that they have the power to make decisions about the conditions of their collective existence.

Internationally, the pattern looks much the same. We define terrorism as fear-inducing acts of violence with a political purpose, but we pay almost no attention to what that purpose might actually be. We condemn the acts and the actors without inquiring as to the root causes or giving any credence to underlying grievances, opting instead for policies based on superior violence that

only serve to further exacerbate the sociopolitical and environmental drivers of terrorism in the first place. Embedded in such processes is a narrative (sometimes openly stated, other times implied) that “the other” is less-than-human, incapable of rational thought, evil incarnate, inherently violent, and culturally deficient in their lack of capacity to understand anything other than devastating force. Those asserting a desire for peace in such conditions are merely giving “aid and comfort” to a ruthless enemy—and are thus traitorous.

Somehow, despite overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary, all of this passes as “realistic” and remains relatively unquestioned in the dominant discourse. And year after year, the war(s) drag on and the terrorists change acronyms while ostensibly growing the base of their operations. The carceral state continues expanding as “crime” proliferates, enforcement grows more militarized, and societal divides harden. All the while, the gap in wealth and income continues to widen, the planet continues to rapidly warm, and the historical baggage of racism continues to find expression in contemporary practices. Perpetual warfare, pervasive impoverishment, mass incarceration, rampant extinctions—this is the domain of realism. The end result of such a course is *annihilation*, obviously, as foretold in foundational mythology, and infused with a revelatory sensibility in which the apocalypse is actually our ascension.

So realism is subjugation, obliteration ... and any countervailing thoughts of peace or hope be damned.

In this light, a radical reclaiming of hope is not merely a stopgap or a nice idea, but can be viewed as a matter of survival. To have hope is to project forward, to invest in intergenerational justice, to strive for sustainability. Hope is a process of unlearning the inevitability of a culture of death, and instead embracing an open-ended public pedagogy that devolves upon the abundance of life. To be hopeful is to be empowered to act, to imagine that another world is possible, and to take steps toward making it so. Hope may indeed be unrealistic—and that is a good thing in a world where realism means accepting the hegemony of war, violence, oppression, injustice, exploitation, despoliation, and ultimately, eradication.

Even as I write this, I’m almost convinced by the syllogism: hopelessness equals death, hope equals life. Indeed, I’ve spent a large part of my personal and professional adult life working this side of the street. I was once asked in an interview how I would describe my job, and I answered: “a shameless purveyor of hope.” In 2007 I wrote an op-ed piece for the local newspaper highlighting signs of hope locally, nationally, and internationally, and advocated a perspective aimed at reclaiming power by transforming crises into opportunities. Following this, I was invited to speak in a variety of settings on these topics, including at a local congregation where I emphasized the basic premise that is in evidence here today:

While it remains obscured in the popular consciousness, there’s ample evidence for the proposition that we are in a time of opportunity in which there are myriad ‘signs of hope’—not ‘false hope’ but real moments where people are making a difference. From community organizing and local food production, to micro-lending and grassroots disaster relief, people around the world are beginning to manifest a new paradigm of

engagement and solidarity that defies the ‘power elite’ and points toward a global community based on the values of peace, justice, and sustainability.

Subsequent to this, I wrote a spate of essays and articles with titles such as “[The Day the Earth Stood Up](#)” and “[What to Do When Peace Breaks Out](#)” for national publications. In response to a growing perception that what has passed for “news” is almost wholly about “bad news,” I started a project called *New Clear Vision* to highlight positive news and constructive perspectives rather than simply deepening the well of despair by focusing on problems and crises without any indication about what might be done. In 2015, my book *Peace Ecology* was published, further clarifying this framework in which challenges are viewed as opportunities, and seeking to construct a tenable vision of peace and sustainability in the face of mounting crises unfolding in our midst. And all along, I have advocated *justice* and *peace* as tangible concepts rather than amorphous ideals, suggesting in theory and practice alike that we can pursue these aims in due diligence, with history on our side, and along “[the arc of the moral universe](#)” as a guidepost.

At the risk of turning this brief editorial into a confessional, let me say that my belief in the basic tenability of these constructions is not so much wavering as evolving. I remain convinced that cultivating and sustaining authentic hope as a galvanizing premise and ultimate goal is sound, and that a world without hope is not only undesirable but potentially dangerous. People without hope can rapaciously destroy the biosphere without a second thought, since it’s all going to hell in a handbasket anyway. People without hope can decimate others with casual invocations of “collateral damage” as their ideological justification. People without hope can use and abuse, check out and log on, consume and waste without hesitation. Losing our sense of hope is a capitulation of our responsibility and an abdication of our power to tyrants.

So this diatribe is neither a lamentation nor a retreat. It is, rather, an attempt to reclaim hope as an operative principle without degenerating into saccharine invocations or misguided naiveté in the process. Hope is logical and aspirational all at once, serving as the connective tissue between deep engagement with what *is* and the articulation of a vision for what could *be*. It does not discharge our obligation to straightforwardly confront injustice and degradation, but instead draws us toward it in a spirit of transformation and commitment. It does not shroud us in privileged detachment nor promote “pie in the sky” to those manifesting a stoic acceptance of unjust and unsustainable conditions, but rather insists that we work diligently to remediate such circumstances with assurances that the work matters and that the struggle will not be in vain. Hope connects us to one another, to the balance of creation, to the future...

This is my mantra for self-renewal and collective engagement. I do not take any of this on faith alone, opting instead to hold all of it in a state of creative tension and to problematize it at every turn. In this sense, it is possible to suspend one’s disbelief without necessarily becoming an unquestioning believer in the process. I simply choose to believe that justice and peace are possible but not that they are inevitable, and in this manner I find a space in which to operate and a compelling reason to do so. For what it’s worth, having an opportunity to clarify and share this perspective in this forum has served as a much-needed personal reminder and a point of reconnection to that which has sustained my own trajectory over the years. It’s surprising how

fragile such notions can be, and how potent the dominant culture is at taking them from us through equal parts temptation and intimidation. With this, I seek to renew my resistance.

In conclusion, and with gratitude for your consideration of this thread, I simply want to affirm the utility of taking on a project such as this, one that strives to move *hope* to the center of the discourse. The perspectives offered here will no doubt reflect their own struggles and celebrations, indicating the dualistic nature of embracing hope in a world that at times seems increasingly hopeless. Rather than casting this in terms of “cognitive dissonance” we can view such efforts as a collective attempt to promote an ethos of “collaborative integration” in which our work together ameliorates the burdens of individuated despair and opens a space for equal parts critical intervention and constructive articulation. My profound longing—indeed, my essential *hope*—is that this will serve as a calling card for like-minded inquirers to reach out across time and space, to find ourselves and one another in the engaged optimism of meaningful work in the world, and as an acknowledgment of appreciation for all of those who do so.

Glossary entry: **hope** /hōp/ *noun* 1. the act of planting a seed, raising a child, teaching another, or starting a long-term project; 2. an acute desire for a world characterized by the rejection of inevitability; 3. the refusal to accept present conditions as permanent and a willingness to radically transform them; 4. an attempt to overcome alienation through action in concert with others to manifest a new vision.

