

## **On the Future of Hope**

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**Abstract:** The concept of hope is rich in context, and working with it from different angles can enhance inner resources. Framing hope as a process offers tools for sustainability educators: subjective exploration, empathy development, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

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The poet Shelley, in the final stanza of his visionary work, *Prometheus Unbound*, wrote of hope and of actions to overcome defeat: "To suffer woes which hope thinks infinite... To hope, till hope creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates." Hope, in these lines, contains endurance and the transcendence of the failure of hope.

Perhaps we should be precautionary about hope, as it can be merely the idea of a future that has not yet occurred. Attaching a mental concept to the future can diminish or confuse the present moment and complicate the possibilities for both peace of mind and appropriate action, particularly if our hope is a rose-colored escape from the world. There's a Buddhist adage that "hope and fear chase each other's tails." Jensen (2011) has been skeptical about hope, arguing that "hope is what keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing the destruction of the Earth." This author has reasoned that the "false hope that suddenly somehow the system may inexplicably change" is a form of avoidance, and that "when we realize the degree of agency we actually do have, we no longer have to 'hope' at all."

On the other hand, some leaders speak of the necessity of hope as a form of energy to carry us into the future. Havel (1993) wrote that hope "gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now." Careful not to make hope a turning away from reality, he asserted that "hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism...but the certainty that something makes sense." Havel also grounded hope in agency, stating that it is "an ability to work for something to succeed."

Those of us who teach sustainability and who attempt to stay informed about environmental and social degradation are probably well aware of the mental dance of hoping and despairing over the state of the world. Likewise, those who begin to delve into pressing global issues can take a sudden step onto this emotional dance floor, grappling with denial, anger, fear, and despair. This information can overwhelm; think of students whose hopeful futures begin to look more fragile. How can we harness the energy of hope while acknowledging its limits? Is there a way of hoping that helps us to face an uncertain future with clarity and agency while avoiding escapism and ennui?

Macy and Johnstone (2012) have developed an effective approach to environmental education that they term "active hope" (p. 2), based on the "despair and empowerment work" (p. 66) that they've initiated for decades to hundreds of thousands of participants. This process of several stages aims to transform difficult emotions about the condition of the world, redefining hope from a state to a verb. The first step is simply acknowledging gratitude for our lives, for the beautiful world still in existence, and for all of those people and beings who support us. Gratitude builds our "psychological buoyancy" (p. 43) and "shifts our focus from what's missing to what's there" (p. 48), giving courage to face uncomfortable information, inspiring connection with others, and recovering the self-esteem that consumer culture degrades. We can wake up "to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act" (p. 35).

The next stage of active hope builds upon an insight of ecopsychology: because human life is a subset of a troubled biosphere, people can repress but not avoid the feelings associated with this systemic unraveling. "Our pain for the world arises out of our interexistence with all life" (p. 76), declare Macy and Johnstone. The denial of this connection is the problem, because there is a mental toll for keeping negative feelings repressed. This step, "honoring our pain for the world" (p. 57), normalizes difficult feelings, "making space . . . to allow what's under the surface to be expressed" (p. 73). Learning to confront and better manage this range of emotions can help to unblock stagnant psychological energy and channel it into positive responses. This treatment of grief echoes Prechtel (2015), who states that, "without grief the world would cease to renew itself. . . to truly and freely grieve as an entire people can revive an entire culture just as much as it can bring back to life an individual" (p. 3). The remaining steps in the process of active hope involve "seeing with new eyes" (p. 83), which is reframing and refining our notions of self, community, power, and time to create a "new view of what is possible" (p. 30); and "going forth" (p. 161), or brainstorming and embarking on new intentions and actions.

Environmental educators could use these ideas productively in designing courses. One principle might be to encourage students' subjective exploration of sustainability topics. For instance, in addition to applying critical thinking to a scientific aspect of climate change, students could also investigate, with short assignments or group dialogues, their own stories of how climate change has impacted them, or perform exercises to help them identify how they feel or how they've constructed narratives about this issue. Working with feelings might also help students to determine their interests and passions, another step toward agency. Cultivating emotional intelligence in classrooms has other dividends; research in learning cognition suggests that the emotional experience of students in classrooms affects their success (Meyer & Turner, 2006).

Another principle could be encouraging students to take multiple perspectives on sustainability issues and grounding these perspectives in empathy for others' experiences. One economics instructor argues for the "reanimation of the classroom into a space in which the learning community of teachers and learners can creatively and collaboratively engage as participants within the systems we are exploring" (Dawson, 2015). In addition to cognitive analysis of economics issues, this instructor asks students to consider poverty, inequality, or sweatshop labor, for example, from the perspectives of people suffering from the issue, of people perpetuating or benefiting from the problem, and of other species. This teacher claims that "empathic caring" can "take students deeper and make them more powerful as agents in the world" and that "empathic identification long outlives all recall of the more theoretical and empirical material."

Lappé's (2011) *Ecomind* guides readers through an analysis and deconstruction of the outmoded ideas, assumptions, narratives, and power dynamics that maintain an undesirable status quo, concluding that, "we have to ask ourselves whether the ideas we inherit and absorb through our cultures serve us. We can only have honest, effective hope if the frame through which we see is an accurate representation of how the world works" (p. 173). The application of critical thinking and theory to important issues would be another useful aspect of sustainability education, helping us see and evaluate new ways of moving forward.

Writing about the challenges humanity could face from climate disruption, Klein (2015) notes that "hope in the face of an existential crisis that is still technically preventable is not just a matter of cold calculation. It's also a question of ethics." Klein (2014), in her epochal book *This Changes Everything*, does not flinch when looking at the harrowing biophysical outcomes that we may bring about, but she situates this great risk as an opportunity for societies and economies to make wholesale new commitments and transformations. Hope becomes the impetus to individual and collective action, to enhanced civic engagement. This could be another useful principle when connecting hope to sustainability education: facilitating a shift in self-identity from consumer to citizen, from the passive acceptance of problems to active consideration and advocacy of solutions.

Sustainability asks us to consider the span of time that moves from a deep history barely conceivable into a longer future populated by distant relatives. When we view ourselves within this flow of time, perhaps our sense of responsibility can expand. Between the ancestors and the future, only we now have the agency to act. Hope, as well, projects our thoughts in these directions, as we remember achievements and dream of new ones. Sustainability advocates can be hopeful that both traditional and innovative pedagogy can play important roles in the transition to a life-enhancing culture.

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