

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize: Grief and Hope in a Climate Weary World.

ABSTRACT:

Climate change optimism is a relatively new field of exploration in the conversation around the climate crisis. This work examines scholarly disciplines of ecology, history, and personal interviews with well-known figures in the environmental community. This scholarship examines a holistic understanding of how societies cope with severe adversity. Under the threat of natural catastrophes, this literature provides confidence that there are more emotional responses beyond despair and inaction. These emotions deny both human and nature's potential for resilience, and that they are meaningful and worthy goals. At this critical juncture in the climate crisis, reimagining the future for what it can be is pushing beyond the political and social constraints. Radical hope is the essence of finding purpose and meaning in the struggle against our conditions to maintain a habitable planet.

The ray of light that shines across dismal and harsh waves of water best symbolizes radical hope. This work examines the benefits and promises of active hope for world citizens to meet a profoundly unfamiliar future brought by the climate crisis. In the expansion of survival toolkits, active hope for overcoming challenges to sustainability is almost a prerequisite. Active hope is the commitment to global restoration against all odds and balances the paralyzing effects of the climate crisis— as a reckoning with the darkness of the Anthropocene washes over many people with a wide range of climatic emotions.

Cognitive scientist Elin Kelsey notes that radical hope can persist with a complete understanding of the scope of the climate crisis, "not because we pretend complex issues do not

exist, but because we fully embrace the truth of the problematic situation" (p. 33). Even with significant events like the climate crisis, some hidden benefits and surprises linger. Most media coverage of the climate crisis downplay the powers of positive uncertainty and hope while emphasizing catastrophic uncertainty and fear. Hope benefits the human condition by recognizing the unseen opportunities that civilization can leverage now to battle the fossil fuel-based economy. Professor of climate psychology at the University of Washington, Jennifer Atkinson, draws a connection between uncertainty and hope in the podcast episode "Embracing Uncertainty" from *Facing It*. Significant research in the cognitive sciences substantiates the idea that we begin to grasp the previously unseen possibilities in uncertain times.

The belief that changing the status quo is harmful understates the real-life consequences of societies cut off from nature and buckling under the crushing weight of hyper-capitalism. Past events and traditions in human history demonstrate that living in harmony with nature provides a sense of connection, significance, and community. We are robbed of this distinctive connection in today's increasingly globalized economic and consumerist status quo. Most journalism often fails to consider the myriad of potential benefits of disrupting the political, economic, and comfort-driven status quo and transcending the fossil fuel economy. Global events that cause the greatest despair also bring the moments that bring the greatest strength, and crises surprisingly break down the insular and aloof barriers nested by the standard narrative. We are familiar with the vast reserves of humanity that are tapped in times of catastrophe, driving the collective to act on our better angels.

While future challenges are unavoidable, how they develop is primarily decided by the actions humankind makes now and by those fortunate enough to be spared from the world's growing climate hazards. Experts believe that the status quo will condemn living species to

endless misery is neither humane nor worthwhile. There is discomfort in rebelling against a cruel status quo, but none so severe as complacency while watching a world burn. We owe it to ourselves, all the children, and innocent beings, to make sacrifices now because we are worth it. Active hope is like the first step of picking up a single brick from the ruins after a city-leveling disaster despite the impossible odds stacked against rebuilding. Silent hope propels our courage to overcome obstacles even if it requires taking unorthodox approaches. Experiencing risk and failure and not being deterred builds resilience. Active hope is essential for crafting multiple pathways to achieving a goal. Living in the Anthropocene necessitates facing obstacles and the cognitive flexibility to deal with, and construct alternatives; practicing active hope fosters the mental elasticity for rebounding after a setback.

The social movements of the past decades, for example, the civil rights movement, demand reform, are explicit disturbances of the status quo. While active hope does not ensure comfort, it does encourage a growth mindset that keeps one from crumbling in the face of a severe situation. Radical hope requires risk-taking, confronting, and rejecting the forces that keep society immobilized while also seeking positive outcomes. Setbacks may startle and disturb, but they do not detract from the broader aim, nor do they render the cause for a more environmentally conscious world defunct. Despairing left uncontrolled often acts to trap individuals from otherwise acting to better their conditions. The standard political and economic narrative must not blind us from safeguarding the only planet capable of supporting human life and to the victories actively fighting against the ominous effects of uncontrolled emissions.

Naïve hope is passive and powerless and means nothing without action. Active hope is not the delusion that a single deed can save the world but with the belief that any action, no matter how small, matters in times of peace or strife. Historians like Howard Zinn warn against

the assumptions that radical change occurs in a single cataclysmic moment. Instead, Zinn claims that promising patterns of change follow steady successions of disparate victories leading to a more decent society. Similarly, the former Czech President and former political prisoner Vaclav Havel mentions that history does not occur elsewhere. "It is here, and we all contribute to its making" (88). Individuals with active hope are not inert ghosts and impersonal observers to their surroundings and events in the grand scheme, but active agents carving history, as Havel reminds. A fairer society is constantly hampered by maladies of all kinds, which require an active collective mass to sustain and oversee institutions. Havel's definition of active hope is that striving for positive results is worthwhile even in chaotic conditions.

Despair can paralyze solution-driven thinking, and many active forces work to treat the ecological realities as a non-emergency despite the multitude of solutions available. Circumventing climate solutions suggests a willingness to accept the worst consequences in exchange for continuing a lifestyle that wreaks havoc on the planet. This evasive response is especially true when future generations' enjoyment of biodiversity is already diminishing, preserving any remaining species or landscapes matters tremendously. Because small islands like Tuvalu, Micronesia, and Hawaii face dangerous sea-level rises, we have a moral obligation to reverse the worst impact of climate change and undertake frivolous sacrifices if it means ensuring the longevity of natural ecospheres. Inaction trivializes these losses and increases the likelihood of unintentionally adopting a position that dismisses the need to protect human support systems, a position also held by toxic corporate interests.

The technical and political capacity to transition society away from the fossil fuel economy remains viable but requires an activated collective effort to demand change. The lingering permanence of the status quo is a deliberate attempt to entrap people in despair and

inaction. The irony of Western superpowers' massive global influence is that their populace feels the least empowered and capable. We must not overlook the cost of making minor modifications now compared to the rewards of disrupting the current system. Passive hope and global inaction only function to deny nature's potential for resilience, thereby dismissing any long-term benefits as unimportant or unworthy - this requires careful consideration. Individuals may reject the pressure and attitudes incompatible with a livable environment that enables the primary objective of financial forces', which is planned obsolescence.

The resilience of non-human life in the face of to persist in the face of profoundly negligent human action is astonishing and should be drowned out by doom, gloom, or any influences gnawing at the prospects of a habitable planet. Messages sowing doubt towards any significant change only serve to distract and deter the pursuit of a habitable earth. The formerly uninhabitable locations of the Marshall Islands and Chernobyl demonstrate regenerative capacity following a nuclear calamity. This natural rebirth represents our interconnectedness with nature and the fact that we are not alone in our quest for a sustainable planet. Large heroic measures are not needed to contribute to the process of change; a million small deeds can impact the world (Zinn, 2004). Nature's perseverance can encourage individuals to recognize our agency with the same tenacity that these small organisms do in the face of perilous ecological transformation. As despairing as the ecological situation appears, our joint efforts to revive nearby natural areas are far from powerless.

Throughout history, the powerful have been defeated by the powerless, regardless of the hurdles they face. Zinn believes in the perseverance of justice, especially when faced with seemingly invincible military and bureaucratic organizations. Civilizations are far from flawless, and still essential adaptive ability is needed through firm policy, research, technology, creativity.

We can not know how far the significance of our actions will travel, but they do actively inspire a hopeful mindset. We act in the hope of a better world, even if we never see it. Zinn notes, "No cold calculation of the balance of power needs deter people who are persuaded that their cause is just." Thousands of people who, despite all evidence of terrible things happening everywhere, are open to unconventional ideas. "They are not aware of each other's existence, and they persist anyways with the desperate patience of Sisyphus endlessly pushing that boulder up the mountain (Zinn)." We must not understate our species' historic ability to affect significant change on the global scale, as well as our strength. With plastic pollution ravaging the oceans, we can clean the oceans by millions of small acts like Boyan Slat's tool of collecting plastic waste in the oceans, an example of active hope in full force.

Hope drives towards a goal to bring society to a better future because it is a conviction that the possibility of achieving better results matters. Even in the face of adversity, the purpose of justices perseverance does not falter, and no effort is wasted in the pursuit of a better society. Every bird washed after an oil spill is a single act of breathing life into the many hopeless situations marine species are submerged into. Although no oil spill can be undone, there is meaning when communities work together to restore what they can manage actively. As cited in Kretz, Thompson suggests that "a significant part of human-environmental excellence in the Anthropocene will involve character traits disposing individuals to act well at all times as agents both casually and morally responsible for the conditions of all life on earth" (2010, 55). Apathy toward environmental issues depletes one's vitality as well as the vitality of other species.

From the pitfalls of naive optimism and fatalism, hope encourages a realistic outlook on the future. Whereas optimists are inclined to persevere, the hope scholar Adam Kadlec notes that pessimists are less inclined to bounce back from adversity. All issues involve forces that obstruct

progress outright, but inaction resulting from despair fortifies the obstruction to progress, and that subverts greater justice. We do not have to be superheroic - simply acting as a piece of a giant puzzle in nature and, with humility and patience, we can move mountains. Active participation in our politics, lifestyles, and behaviors streamlines the path toward change. Elin Kelsey reminds us not to mischaracterize hope as entirely cheerfulness or happy endings; it can even be challenging in many ways. "There is the extreme difficulty of not giving up on something we love. On the other hand, trying to move in a positive direction amid a terrible situation takes fortitude... Hope is more challenging than despair and cynicism" (p. 34-35). Hope will not guarantee triumph over every adversity, but all is not lost if we do not succeed in every endeavor.

The gravity between despair and optimism causes behavioral dissonance. Hopelessness may handicap action, and in the process, we acquiesce to a premature death while sabotaging nature. To counteract these crushing impacts of despair, hope goes with adversity and helps reimagine strategies for sustainability. While there have been numerous failures on the environmental front, we should also be aware of the advances. On May 26th, 2021, the first judgment against the oil firm, Royal Dutch Shell, bound the company to comply with the Paris climate Agreements and meet the emission standards. This decision has far-reaching implications to end the fossil fuel era. The ambition to succeed in any endeavor is not without its challenges.

Biodiversity in Nature includes frequent extinction and the spontaneous reintroduction of life. In despair, we fail to appreciate the enormity and complexities of natural resilience because most media coverage paints the climate crisis with sweeping narratives. No sweeping narratives can accurately capture the full scale of life on earth. Bridging our world from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism empowers agentic thinking and a long-term vision of the future while keeping

mindful of the need to act in the present. "Feelings that enable us to move toward the world as we wish it to be. Acceptance of what is, is not the same as fatalism about what comes next" (Zinn, 2004). Active hope supports preparedness for navigating difficult times and realizing the necessity of conserving what remains in nature. Species once thought of as extinct surprisingly reappear like Ecuador's Galapagos tortoise and bounce-back of bald eagle populations in urban areas. This resurgence is from the conservation efforts and the outlawing of DDT, "Recognizing animals and plants as active agents challenges the tacit assumption of human exceptionalism" (Kelsey, p. 34). Nature constantly works with us to create a survivable planet.

Comfort is a killer; when we get rid of it, we find out who we are. Recognizing uncertainty shows that time is of the essence; it is time to put the electric pedal to the metal and act with haste and speeds humankind is not used to. For so long, the world has remained idling, so acting at warp speed means immersing ourselves in discomfort. Although the perpetuation of any toxic system relies on people remaining inert, powerful outcomes are possible when we upset this dynamic, which Kadlec describes as a "courageous response to an uncertain future" (Kadlec, P. 342). The discomforts and inconveniences of the future will be infinitely more obtuse and painful if we are not willing to shift gears to endure today's mild discomfort. Humankind must deliberately fight cognitive limitations that distort the severity of the crisis compounded by inaction and weigh these discomforts accordingly. The essence of climate impacts is elusive and intimidating, but that does not diminish the urgency or threat to our livelihoods. When commercial interests take advantage of Cambodia's financial difficulties and weak law enforcement by illegally logging, locals respond by deploying forest patrols to monitor and safeguard their forests, demonstrating Kadlec's bold visions of radical hope.

It is unsettling not to know how profound planetary transformation in our future will affect us. Recognizing the severity of the ecological situation is vital, but so is making room for current opportunities to be identified and used. Hope persists through challenges and compels action to warrant and reject current standards for higher ones. "It is not about announcing the way things ought to be, but, instead, imagining what things could be. It is thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing it as not enough" (Duggan & Muñoz 2009). The filmmaker Brett Story advances the idea that societal change is preceded by imagination. Imagination is in doubt when individuals will not fathom societal improvements or change, and nature is not static. "people have this idea about the world as if the state of things is irreversible and that nothing we do can ever change anything. And that's anti-historical. At the minimum, the world's most unfair and unjust aspects must be challenged" (Story, 2020). Story continues that if we cannot imagine the future or ourselves in it, then we will not "fight or build anything other than what we have right now" (2020). Thus, doubting our abilities to act dissolves our imaginations; we erase an alternative to the toxic system that limits humanity's potential and the circumstances of other living organisms on the planet. The belief in a lack of agency results from being unable to react or desire better outcomes; humankind will fail when we believe our actions are meaningless and without consequence.

No one knows precisely how the climate crisis will unfold; we have climate models of previous planetary conditions that inform environmental policies. The abundance of doomsday scenarios in the media obscure the magnitude of uncertainty that dwarfs many climate adaptation models. According to environmental policymakers, "the uncertainty associated with [climate] predictions is multifaceted and complex...the IPCC's calibrated expressions of confidence draw attention to the inherent uncertainty in climate models, which by definition are only

approximations of reality, offering an incomplete representation of the full complexity of the earth's systems" (Ensor & Berger, p. 9). Predicting long-term planetary changes with precision is difficult in these volatile times and cannot provide the same level of certainty as weather forecasting. Effective environmental policies are founded on previous atmospheric models and on situations we engage with or ignore. The ambiguity and nuance of many climate-related risks provide crucial spaces of uncertainty and the appreciation of acting now. This sliver of justifiable hope gives solid ground for continued action to dispel the weariness caused by the scale of this issue. "Uncertainty, meaning there is more than one plausible future can be asserted...to the exact impact on temperature" (Ensor & Berger, p. 9).

Scientists and academics agree that the greatest threat to humanity is inaction and that this critical juncture represents the best opportunity to break free from the suffocating rigidity of despair. Climate projections demand adaptive capacity that is flexible and all-encompassing. Hopelessness denies the truth that individuals can act on available opportunities to disrupt the status quo. In the context of the ecological collapse, some utility results from invoking optimism that is preferable to nothing and trusting that efforts towards reconstruction serve the greater good. Hope theory scholar C.R Snyder suggests that hopefulness denotes openness and acceptance to painful experiences. "High hope people produce more strategies and find benefits for dealing with ongoing stressors, and are less likely to use avoidance" (p. 73).

Conversely, believing in a lack of progress towards meaningful goals diminishes our well-being. "High hope" people expect things to be difficult, and they expect they will be able to rise above the challenges (Kadlec). Our destinies are not immutable in the climate crisis when there are identifiable alternatives within reach. Environmental ethicist Lisa Kretz notes that a crisis is not an excuse to abandon morality; thus, a hopeless disposition makes a despairing

person more easily lured into maladaptive behaviors. According to Nolt (as cited in Kretz, 2011), "hopelessness is a profound threat at times like these. There is a moral duty to prevent and relieve suffering individually and collectively to uphold hope because hopelessness is a form of suffering that is called despair... which makes us unable to help others" (Nolt, 2010). Kadlec also notes that "In times of hardship, hope is conceptualized as a resource that helps provide individuals a means of coping with seemingly uncontrollable circumstances" (p. 342). Unlike low-hope individuals, high-hope individuals are less likely to interpret obstacles to a goal pursuit as stressful. Snyder's Hope theory describes a psychological model of well-being that includes goal setting, emotional regulation, and enduring stressors (Snyder, 73). Environmental policy contributors Alice C. Hill and Leonardo Martinez-Diaz emphasize that "Health care providers, policymakers, and researchers must pay more attention to the nexus between climate change and mental health, especially in cultures that still stigmatize mental illness."

The Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire warns against the programmed and overwhelming hopelessness that creates paralysis and encourages fatalism. Freire's sense of hopelessness is the kind that makes taking action less enticing and contributes to the silence on topics like the climate disaster. Zinn (2004) notes that "pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it reproduces itself by crippling our willingness to act." Despite individual actions seeming insignificant, collectively, conversing, uniting, and acting can create substantial change that matters on a larger scale. For example, documenting the consequences of the widely used chemical DDT in the 50s was a deeply unpopular task. Nevertheless, the author of *The Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson, believed that her actions mattered and that progress was possible. Consequently, by going against the standard narrative, Carson shifted the dynamic and the collective conscience towards an environmental crisis during a time of justifiable despair which

is key to active hope. Every bit of progress matters and is in jeopardy the day we believe small actions are inconsequential and stand by uninspired as we watch ecosystems collapse. "To play, to act is to create at least a possibility of changing the world" (Zinn, 2004). Refusing passive acceptance begins resembling staring down despair and destruction and maneuvering in unexpected directions to counter the colossal nature of this threat.

Radical hope is not a gimmick to get us out of dealing with the climate catastrophe; instead, it is an openness and direct immersion in totality in a way that seeks justice. If we reject the standard narrative of the status quo internally but outwardly surrender, it creates hopelessness. "There is a tendency to think that what we see in the present moment will continue" (Zinn, 2004). Malicious powers may gaslight world citizens to denounce the protection of the ecosphere, but this is only temporary. As Norman Finkelstein said, "to keep your eyes on the prize and hold on...The prize is not a theoretical fad, not to be intellectually provocative, it's not holier than thou radical posturing, the prize is much more hum-drum, prosaic, by comparison, holding on means being ready for sacrifice and the long haul." Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense (Havel, p.88). As Kelsey points out, hoping will not shield us from feeling horrified by the magnitude of any atrocities. However, hoping will free us from being caught between the tugs of justice and injustice produced by waves of hopelessness.

Radical hope is what Alan Thompson describes as character dispositions that commit to resisting surrender in cases of justifiable despair (2010). Lisa Kretz develops Alan Thompson's understanding of this dimension of radical hope, "It is the idea that an inadequate grasp of the good should not lead one to believe it is not to be hoped for" (2010, p. 49). Hoping radically may tolerate pain while working to achieve better outcomes. Progress is not linear, and taking wins

and losses in our stride matters significantly for the future. This dimension of hope runs with Eleanor Goldfield's expressions of optimism which echoes Rebecca Solnit's interpretations of hope as the "smashing of doors down with an ax." Goldfield mentioned, "it's a jagged kind of hope that is dangerous, it may involve resisting the pressures that might seem impossible to break," The weight of this scale is daunting, but radical hope compels a step forward and trusts that our efforts work to advance something greater than what we have presently see and know.

My discussion with "The Hard Road of hope" director, Eleanor Goldfield, describes her philosophy where "in fighting for liberation, it liberates oneself; in willing my freedom, I have to will the freedom of others; Fighting these fights doesn't mean I don't despair. We see dark shit on the front lines and the most beautiful moments that humans are capable of. Those moments reinforce my belief in the beautiful things people are capable of". Goldfield's recognition of the possibilities to create change within her purview and persevere without being weighed down by life's many obstructive forces is the essence of radical hope. Zinn emphasizes that radical hope is to live as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around (2004). The world will not be rid of every illness, but that should not discourage the spreading of paradise, rescuing endangered species, and restoring habitats. "Hope is a risk. However, if the point is to change the world, we must risk hope to counter a climate of hopelessness that immobilizes us both on the level of thought and transformative behaviors." (Duggan & Muñoz 2009). There is justified despair about extinctions and degraded ecosystems, yet minimizing negative impacts by current actions constitutes justifiable hope, which differentiates the object of our hope and our despair (Kretz, 2011). To live in the future is to keep our eyes on the prize and know that there will be periods of despair, optimism, and uncertainty but persist with action. These times call for radical hope and behaviors deemed radical by today's standard narrative.

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