

test and activism. Unwilling to accept the bleak, almost apocalyptic worldview of many of her progressive counterparts, Solnit celebrates the hope and optimism that recent episodes reveal. She points to the resurrection of indigenous causes represented by Zapatismo, the WTO protests in Seattle and Cancun, and the worldwide protests against the US-led war in Iraq, and other smaller, more marginal protests. Solnit argues persuasively that engaged, thoughtful dissent is far healthier today than many believe. Activists, who operate by nature on the fringes of hierarchies of economy and power, often fail to recognize the power of activity that seems inconsequential. Her goal, in essence, is to throw out the crippling assumptions with which many activists proceed."

—*Publishers Weekly*

Hope in the Dark

Untold Histories,
Wild Possibilities

Third Edition

with a new foreword and afterword

Rebecca Solnit



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Foreword to the Third Edition (2015)

Grounds for Hope

Your opponents would love you to believe that it's hopeless, that you have no power, that there's no reason to act, that you can't win. Hope is a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away. And though hope can be an act of defiance, defiance isn't enough reason to hope. But there are good reasons.

I wrote this book in 2003 and early 2004 to make the case for hope. The text that follows is in some ways of its moment—it was written against the tremendous despair at the height of the Bush administration's powers and the outset of the war in Iraq. That moment passed long ago, but despair, defeatism, cynicism, and the amnesia and assumptions from which they often arise have not dispersed, even as the most wildly, unimaginably magnificent things came to pass. There is a lot of evidence for the defense.

Coming back to the text more than a dozen tumultuous years later, I believe its premises hold up. Progressive, populist, and grassroots constituencies have had many victories. Popular power has continued to be a profound force for change. And the changes we've undergone, both wonderful and terrible, are astonishing. The world of 2003 has been swept away. Its damage lingers, but its arrangements and many of its ideologies have given way to new ones—and, more than that, to a sea change in who we are and how we imagine ourselves, the world, and so many things in it.

This is an extraordinary time full of vital, transformative movements that could not be foreseen. It's also a nightmarish time. Full engagement requires the ability to perceive both. The twenty-first century has seen the rise of hideous economic inequality, perhaps due to amnesia both of the working people who countenance declines in wages, working conditions, and social services, and the elites who forgot that they conceded to some of these things in the hope of avoiding revolution. The rise of Silicon Valley as a global power center has eliminated and automated countless jobs, enhancing economic inequality; it has produced new elites and monstrous corporations from Amazon, with its attack on publishing, authors, and working conditions, to Google, which is attempting to build a global information monopoly in myriad arenas and in the process amassing terrifying powers, including the power that comes with sophisticated profiles of most computer users. The major tech companies have created and deployed surveillance capacities that the Kremlin and FBI at the height of the Cold War could not have dreamed of—in collaboration with the government that should be regulating them. The attack on civil liberties, including the right to privacy, continues long after its Global War on Terror justifications have faded away.

Worse than these is the arrival of climate change, faster, harder, and more devastating than scientists anticipated.

Hope doesn't mean denying these realities. It means facing them and addressing them by remembering what else the twenty-first century has brought, including the movements, heroes, and shifts in consciousness that address these things now. Among them: Occupy Wall Street; Black Lives Matter; Idle No More; the Dreamers addressing the Dream Act and immigration rights; Edward Snowden, Laura Poitras, Glenn Greenwald, and the movement for corporate and government transparency; the push for marriage equality; a resurgent feminist movement; economic justice movements addressing (and in many cases raising) minimum wage and fighting debt peonage and the student-loan racket; and a dynamic climate and climate justice movement—and the intersections between them all. This has

been a truly remarkable decade for movement-building, social change, and deep, profound shifts in ideas, perspective, and frameworks for broad parts of the population (and, of course, backlashes against all those things).

The Uses of Uncertainty

Hope in the Dark began as an essay that I published online about six weeks after the United States launched its war on Iraq. It immediately went, as they say, viral—it was widely circulated by email, picked up by a mainstream newspaper and many news websites, pirated by some alternative newspapers, even printed out and distributed by hand by someone who liked it. It was my first adventure in online publishing, as well as in speaking directly to the inner life of the politics of the moment, to the emotions and perceptions that underlie our political positions and engagements. Amazed by the ravenous appetite for another way of telling who and where we were, I decided to write this slender book. It has had an interesting life in several languages, and it's a pleasure to revise it with this introduction and a few new chapters at the end, notes, and handsome redesign. Updating the book would have meant writing an entirely new book, so we chose to reissue the 2005 second edition with this additional material instead.

After the book was published, I spent years on the road talking about hope and activism, the historical record and the possibilities, and my arguments grew, perhaps, more polished or more precise or at least more case-hardened. Here's another traverse across that landscape.

It's important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction. The hope I'm interested in is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act. It's also not a sunny everything-is-getting-better narrative, though it may be a counter to the everything-is-getting-worse narrative. You could call it an account of complexities

and uncertainties, with openings. "Critical thinking without hope is cynicism, but hope without critical thinking is naivete," the Bulgarian writer Maria Popova recently remarked. And Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, early on described the movement's mission as to "Provide hope and inspiration for collective action to build collective power to achieve collective transformation, rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams." It's a statement that acknowledges that grief and hope can coexist.

The tremendous human rights achievements—not only in gaining rights but in redefining race, gender, sexuality, embodiment, spirituality, and the idea of the good life—of the past half century have flowed during a time of unprecedented ecological destruction and the rise of innovative new means of exploitation. And the rise of new forms of resistance, including resistance enabled by an elegant understanding of that ecology and new ways for people to communicate and organize, and new and exhilarating alliances across distance and difference.

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.

There are major movements that failed to achieve their goals; there are also comparatively small gestures that mushroomed into successful revolutions. The self-immolation of impoverished, police-harassed pro-

duce-seller Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010, in Tunisia was the spark that lit a revolution in his country and then across northern Africa and other parts of the Arab world in 2011. And though the civil war in Syria and the counterrevolutions after Egypt's extraordinary uprising might be what most remember, Tunisia's "jasmine revolution" toppled a dictator and led to peaceful elections in that country in 2014. Whatever else the Arab Spring was, it's an extraordinary example of how unpredictable change is and how potent popular power can be. And five years on, it's too soon to draw conclusions about what it all meant.

You can tell the genesis story of the Arab Spring other ways. The quiet organizing going on in the shadows beforehand matters. So does the comic book about Martin Luther King and civil disobedience that was translated into Arabic and widely distributed in Egypt shortly before the Arab Spring. You can tell of King's civil disobedience tactics being inspired by Gandhi's tactics, and Gandhi's inspired by Tolstoy and the radical acts of noncooperation and sabotage of British women suffragists. So the threads of ideas weave around the world and through the decades and centuries. There's another lineage for the Arab Spring in hip-hop, the African American music that's become a global medium for dissent and outrage; Tunisian hip-hop artist El Général was, along with Bouazizi, an instigator of the uprising, and other musicians played roles in articulating the outrage and inspiring the crowds.

Mushroomed: after a rain mushrooms appear on the surface of the earth as if from nowhere. Many do so from a sometimes vast underground fungus that remains invisible and largely unknown. What we call mushrooms mycologists call the fruiting body of the larger, less visible fungus. Uprisings and revolutions are often considered to be spontaneous, but less visible long-term organizing and groundwork—or underground work—often laid the foundation. Changes in ideas and values also result from work done by writers, scholars, public intellectuals, social activists, and participants in social media. It seems insignificant or peripheral until very different outcomes emerge from

transformed assumptions about who and what matters, who should be heard and believed, who has rights.

Ideas at first considered outrageous or ridiculous or extreme gradually become what people think they've always believed. How the transformation happened is rarely remembered, in part because it's compromising: it recalls the mainstream when the mainstream was, say, rabidly homophobic or racist in a way it no longer is; and it recalls that power comes from the shadows and the margins, that our hope is in the dark around the edges, not the limelight of center stage. Our hope and often our power.

The Stories We Tell

Changing the story isn't enough in itself, but it has often been foundational to real changes. Making an injury visible and public is often the first step in remedying it, and political change often follows culture, as what was long tolerated is seen to be intolerable, or what was overlooked becomes obvious. Which means that every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.

A victory doesn't mean that everything is now going to be nice forever and we can therefore all go lounge around until the end of time. Some activists are afraid that if we acknowledge victory, people will give up the struggle. I've long been more afraid that people will give up and go home or never get started in the first place if they think no victory is possible or fail to recognize the victories already achieved. Marriage equality is not the end of homophobia, but it's something to celebrate. A victory is a milestone on the road, evidence that sometimes we win, and encouragement to keep going, not to stop. Or it should be.

My own inquiry into the grounds for hope has received two great reinforcements since I wrote *Hope in the Dark*. One came from the recognition of how powerful are the altruistic, idealistic forces already at work in the world. Most of us would say, if asked, that we live in a capitalist

society, but vast amounts of how we live our everyday lives—our interactions with and commitments to family lives, friendships, avocations, membership in social, spiritual, and political organizations—are in essence noncapitalist or even anticapitalist, full of things we do for free, out of love, and on principle.

In a way, capitalism is an ongoing disaster anticapitalism alleviates, like a mother cleaning up after her child's messes (or, to extend the analogy, sometimes disciplining that child to clean up after itself, through legislation or protest, or preventing some of the messes in the first place, and it might be worth adding that noncapitalist ways of doing things are much older than free-market economic arrangements). Activists often speak as though the solutions we need have not yet been launched or invented, as though we are starting from scratch, when often the real goal is to amplify the power and reach of existing alternatives. What we dream of is already present in the world.

The second reinforcement came out of my investigation of how human beings respond to major urban disasters, from the devastating earthquakes in San Francisco (in 1906) and Mexico City (in 1985) to the Blitz in London to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The assumption behind much disaster response by the authorities—and the logic of bombing civilians—is that civilization is a brittle façade, and behind it lies our true nature as monstrous, selfish, chaotic, and violent or as timid, fragile, and helpless. In fact, in most disasters most people are calm, resourceful, altruistic, and creative. And civilian bombing campaigns generally fail to break the will of the people, making them a waste as well as a crime against humanity.

What startled me about the response to disaster was not the virtue, since virtue is often the result of diligence and dutifulness, but the passionate joy that shined out from accounts by people who had barely survived. These people who had lost everything, who were living in rubble or ruins, had found agency, meaning, community, immediacy in their work together with other survivors. The century of testimo-

ny I drew from for my 2009 book *A Paradise Built in Hell* suggested how much we want lives of meaningful engagement, of membership in civil society, and how much societal effort goes into withering us away from these fullest, most powerful selves. But people return to those selves, those ways of self-organizing, as if by instinct when the situation demands it. Thus a disaster is a lot like a revolution when it comes to disruption and improvisation, to new roles and an unnerving or exhilarating sense that now anything is possible.

This was a revolutionary vision of human nature and a revelation that we can pursue our ideals not out of diligence but because when they are realized there's joy, and joy is itself an insurrectionary force against the dreariness and dullness and isolation of everyday life. My own research was, I realized by its end, a small part of an enormous project going on among many disciplines—psychology, economics, neurobiology, sociology, anthropology, political science—to redefine human nature as something more communal, cooperative, and compassionate. This rescue of our reputations from the social darwinists and the Hobbesians is important, not to feel positive about ourselves but to recognize the radical possibilities that can be built on an alternative view of human nature.

The fruits of these inquiries made me more hopeful. But it's important to emphasize that hope is only a beginning; it's not a substitute for action, only a basis for it. "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced," said James Baldwin. Hope gets you there; work gets you through. "The future belongs to those who prepare for it today," said Malcolm X. And there is a long history of that work, the work to change the world, a long history of methods, heroes, visionaries, heroines, victories—and, of course, failures. But the victories matter, and remembering them matters too. "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope," said Martin Luther King Jr.

The Branches Are Hope; the Roots Are Memory

"Memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair," the theologian Walter Brueggeman noted. It's an extraordinary statement, one that reminds us that though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past. We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope.

Amnesia leads to despair in many ways. The status quo would like you to believe it is immutable, inevitable, and invulnerable, and lack of memory of a dynamically changing world reinforces this view. In other words, when you don't know how much things have changed, you don't see that they are changing or that they can change. Those who think that way don't remember raids on gay bars when being queer was illegal or rivers that caught fire when unregulated pollution peaked in the 1960s or that there were, worldwide, 70 percent more seabirds a few decades ago and, before the economic shifts of the Reagan Revolution, very, very few homeless people in the United States. Thus, they don't recognize the forces of change at work.

One of the essential aspects of depression is the sense that you will always be mired in this misery, that nothing can or will change. It's what makes suicide so seductive as the only visible exit from the prison of the present. There's a public equivalent to private depression, a sense that the nation or the society rather than the individual is stuck. Things don't always change for the better, but they change, and we can play a role in that change if we act. Which is where hope comes in, and memory, the collective memory we call history.

The other affliction amnesia brings is a lack of examples of positive change, of popular power, evidence that we can do it and have done it. George Orwell wrote, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." Controlling the past begins by knowing it; the stories we tell about who we were and what we did shape what we can and will do. Despair is also often premature: it's a form of impatience as well as of certainty.

My favorite comment about political change comes from Zhou En-Lai, a high-ranking member of Chairman Mao's government. Asked, in the early 1970s, about his opinion of the French Revolution, he answered, "Too soon to tell." Some argue that he was talking about the insurrections of 1968, not the monarchy-toppling of 1789, but even then it demonstrates a generous and expansive perspective. To retain a sense that even four years later the verdict isn't in is to live with more open-minded uncertainty than most people now can tolerate.

News cycles tend to suggest that change happens in small, sudden bursts or not at all. As I write, the military men who probably murdered Chilean singer and political activist Victor Jara in 1973 are being charged. More than forty years have gone by; some stories take far longer than that to finish. The struggle to get women the vote took nearly three-quarters of a century. For a time people liked to announce that feminism had failed, as though the project of overturning millennia of social arrangements should achieve its final victories in a few decades, or as though it had stopped. Feminism is just starting, and its manifestations matter in rural Himalayan villages, not just first-world cities. Susan Griffin, a great writer in the present who was also an important part of 1970s feminism, recently remarked, "I've seen enough change in my lifetime to know that despair is not only self-defeating, it is unrealistic."

Other changes result in victories and are then forgotten. For decades, radicals were preoccupied with East Timor, brutally occupied by Indonesia from 1975 to 2002; the liberated country is no longer news. It won its liberty because of valiant struggle from within, but also be-

cause of dedicated groups on the outside who pressured and shamed the governments supporting the Indonesian regime. We could learn quite a lot from the remarkable display of power and solidarity and East Timor's eventual victory, but the whole struggle seems forgotten.

For decades, Peabody Western Coal Corporation mined coal on the Hopi/Navajo land at Black Mesa in ways that contaminated the air and drained vast amounts of water from the region. The fight against Black Mesa was a totemic struggle for indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice; in 2005, the mines were shut down, and the issue disappeared from the conversation. It was also a case of tenacious activism from within and good allies from without, prolonged lawsuits, and perseverance.

We need litanies or recitations or monuments to these victories, so that they are landmarks in everyone's mind. More broadly, shifts in, say, the status of women are easily overlooked by people who don't remember that, a few decades ago, reproductive rights were not yet a concept, and there was no recourse for exclusion, discrimination, workplace sexual harassment, most forms of rape, and other crimes against women the legal system did not recognize or even countenanced. None of the changes were inevitable, either—people fought for them and won them.

People adjust without assessing the changes. As of 2014, Iowa gets 28 percent of its electricity from wind alone, not because someone in that conservative state declared death to all fossil fuel corporations or overthrew anyone or anything, but because it was a sensible and affordable option. Denmark, in the summer of 2015, achieved 140 percent of its electricity needs through wind generation (and sold the surplus to neighboring countries). Scotland has achieved renewable energy generation of 50 percent and set a goal of 100 percent by 2020. Thirty percent more solar was installed in 2014 than the year before in the United States, and renewables are becoming more affordable worldwide—in some places they are already cheaper than fossil-fueled

energy. These incremental changes have happened quietly, and many people don't know they have begun, let alone exploded.

If there is one thing we can draw from where we are now and where we were then, it is that the unimaginable is ordinary, that the way forward is almost never a straight line you can glance down but a convoluted path of surprises, gifts, and afflictions you prepare for by accepting your blind spots as well as your intuitions. Howard Zinn wrote in 1988, in what now seems like a lost world before so many political upheavals and technological changes arrived, "As this century draws to a close, a century packed with history, what leaps out from that history is its utter unpredictability." He was, back then, wondering at the distance we'd traveled from when the Democratic National Party Convention refused to seat Blacks from Mississippi to when Jesse Jackson ran (a largely symbolic campaign) for president at a time most people thought they would never live to see a Black family occupy the White House. In that essay, "The Optimism of Uncertainty," Zinn continues,

The struggle for justice should never be abandoned because of the apparent overwhelming power of those who have the guns and the money and who seem invisible in their determination to hold onto it. That apparent power has, again and again, proved vulnerable to moral fervor, determination, unity, organization, sacrifice, wit, ingenuity, courage, patience—whether by blacks in Alabama and South Africa, peasants in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Vietnam, or workers and intellectuals in Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union itself.

People Have the Power

Social, cultural, or political change does not work in predictable ways or on predictable schedules. The month before the Berlin Wall fell, almost no one anticipated that the Soviet Bloc was going to disintegrate all

of a sudden (thanks to many factors, including the tremendous power of civil society, nonviolent direct action, and hopeful organizing going back to the 1970s), any more than anyone, even the participants, foresaw the impact that the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street or a host of other great uprisings would have. We don't know what is going to happen, or how, or when, and that very uncertainty is the space of hope.

Those who doubt that these moments matter should note how terrified the authorities and elites are when they erupt. That fear signifies their recognition that popular power is real enough to overturn regimes and rewrite the social contract. And it often has. Sometimes your enemies know what your friends can't believe. Those who dismiss these moments because of their imperfections, limitations, or incompleteness need to look harder at what joy and hope shine out of them and what real changes have emerged because of them, even if not always in the most obvious or recognizable ways.

And everything is flawed, if you want to look at it that way. The analogy that has helped me most is this: in Hurricane Katrina, hundreds of boat-owners rescued people—single moms, toddlers, grandfathers—stranded in attics, on roofs, in flooded housing projects, hospitals, and school buildings. None of them said, *I can't rescue everyone, therefore it's futile; therefore my efforts are flawed and worthless*, though that's often what people say about more abstract issues in which, nevertheless, lives, places, cultures, species, rights are at stake. They went out there in fishing boats and rowboats and pirogues and all kinds of small craft, some driving from as far as Texas and eluding the authorities to get in, others refugees themselves working within the city. There was bumper-to-bumper boat-trailer traffic—the celebrated Cajun Navy—going toward the city the day after the levees broke. None of those people said, *I can't rescue them all*. All of them said, *I can rescue someone, and that's work so meaningful and important I will risk my life and defy the authorities to do it*. And they did. Of course, working for systemic change also matters—the kind of change that might prevent

calamities by addressing the climate or the infrastructure or the environmental and economic injustice that put some people in harm's way in New Orleans in the first place.

Change is rarely straightforward, and that is one of the central premises of this book. Sometimes it's as complex as chaos theory and as slow as evolution. Even things that seem to happen suddenly arise from deep roots in the past or from long-dormant seeds. A young man's suicide triggers an uprising that inspires other uprisings, but the incident was a spark; the bonfire it lit was laid by activist networks and ideas about civil disobedience and by the deep desire for justice and freedom that exists everywhere.

It's important to ask not only what those moments produced in the long run but what they were in their heyday. If people find themselves living in a world in which some hopes are realized and some joys are incandescent and some boundaries between individuals and groups are lowered, even for an hour or a day or several months, that matters. Memory of joy and liberation can become a navigational tool, an identity, a gift.

Paul Goodman famously wrote, "Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society that you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now!" It's an argument for tiny and temporary victories, and for the possibility of partial victories in the absence or even the impossibility of total victories. Total victory has always seemed like a secular equivalent of paradise: a place where all the problems are solved and there's nothing to do, a fairly boring place. The absolutists of the old left imagined that victory would, when it came, be total and permanent, which is practically the same as saying that victory was and is impossible and will never come. It is, in fact, more than possible. It is something that has arrived in innumerable ways, small and large and often incremental, but not in

that way that was widely described and expected. So victories slip by unheralded. Failures are more readily detected.

And then every now and then, the possibilities explode. In these moments of rupture, people find themselves members of a "we" that did not until then exist, at least not as an entity with agency and identity and potency; new possibilities suddenly emerge, or that old dream of a just society reemerges and—at least for a little while—shines. Utopia is sometimes the goal. It's often embedded in the moment itself, and it's a hard moment to explain, since it usually involves hardscrabble ways of living, squabbles, and eventually disillusion and factionalism—but also more ethereal things: the discovery of personal and collective power, the realization of dreams, the birth of bigger dreams, a sense of connection that is as emotional as it is political, and lives that change and do not revert to older ways even when the glory subsides.

Sometimes the earth closes over this moment and it has no obvious consequences; sometimes empires crumble and ideologies fall away like shackles. But you don't know beforehand. People in official institutions devoutly believe they hold the power that matters, though the power we grant them can often be taken back; the violence commanded by governments and militaries often fails, and nonviolent direct-action campaigns often succeed.

The sleeping giant is one name for the public; when it wakes up, when *we* wake up, we are no longer only the public: we are civil society, the superpower whose nonviolent means are sometimes, for a shining moment, more powerful than violence, more powerful than regimes and armies. We write history with our feet and with our presence and our collective voice and vision. And yet, and of course, everything in the mainstream media suggests that popular resistance is ridiculous, pointless, or criminal, unless it is far away, was long ago, or, ideally, both. These are the forces that prefer the giant remain asleep.

Together we are very powerful, and we have a seldom-told, seldom-remembered history of victories and transformations that can

give us confidence that yes, we can change the world because we have many times before. You row forward looking back, and telling this history is part of helping people navigate toward the future. We need a litany, a rosary, a sutra, a mantra, a war chant of our victories. The past is set in daylight, and it can become a torch we can carry into the night that is the future.

Looking Into Darkness

On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, as all Europe was convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, "The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think." Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other. Or we transform the future's unknowability into something certain, the fulfillment of all our dread, the place beyond which there is no way forward. But again and again, far stranger things happen than the end of the world.

Who, two decades ago, could have imagined a world in which the Soviet Union had vanished and the Internet had arrived? Who then dreamed that the political prisoner Nelson Mandela would become president of a transformed South Africa? Who foresaw the resurgence of the indigenous world of which the Zapatista uprising in Southern Mexico is only the most visible face? Who, four decades ago, could have conceived of the changed status of all who are nonwhite, nonmale, or nonstraight, the wide-open conversations about power, nature, economies, and ecologies?

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There are times when it seems as though not only the future but the present is dark: few recognize what a radically transformed world

we live in, one that has been transformed not only by such nightmares as global warming and global capital but by dreams of freedom, of justice, and transformed by things we could not have dreamed of. We adjust to changes without measuring them; we forget how much the culture changed. The US Supreme Court ruled in favor of gay rights on a grand scale in the summer of 2003¹ and in late 2004 refused to re-examine the Massachusetts State Supreme Court ruling affirming the right to same-sex marriage, rulings inconceivable a few decades ago. What accretion of incremental, imperceptible changes made them possible, and how did they come about? And so we need to hope for the realization of our own dreams, but also to recognize a world that will remain wilder than our imaginations.

One June day in 1982, a million people gathered in New York City's Central Park to demand a bilateral nuclear weapons freeze as the first step to disarmament. They didn't get it. The freeze movement was full of people who believed they'd realize their goal in a few years and go back to private life. They were motivated by a storyline in which the world would be made safe, safe for, among other things, going home from activism. Many went home disappointed or burned out, though some are still doing great work. But in less than a decade, major nuclear arms reductions were negotiated, helped along by European antinuclear movements and the impetus they gave the Soviet Union's last president, Mikhail Gorbachev. Since then, the issue has fallen off the map and we have lost much of what was gained. The US Senate refused to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that could have contributed to an end

1. On June 26, 2003, the Supreme Court overturned the verdict in *Lawrence v. Texas*, a case in which two Houston residents were arrested and prosecuted under a law criminalizing sex between two men. The court decided the constitutional right to privacy made activity between consenting adults no business of the state. The decision was very different from the court's 1986 decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, upholding a Georgia law criminalizing sodomy, as oral and anal sex were Biblically termed.

to nuclear weapons development and proliferation. Instead, the arms race continues as new nations go nuclear, and the current Bush administration is considering resuming the full-fledged nuclear testing halted in 1991, resuming development and manufacture, expanding the arsenal (though Congress defunded the new nuke programs in November 2004), and perhaps even using it in once-proscribed ways. The activism of the freeze era cut itself short with a fixed vision and an unrealistic timeline, not anticipating that the Cold War would come to an end at the end of the decade. They didn't push hard enough or stay long enough to collect the famous peace dividend, and so there was none.

It's always too soon to go home. And it's always too soon to calculate effect. I once read an anecdote by someone in Women Strike for Peace (WSP), the first great antinuclear movement in the United States, the one that did contribute to a major victory: the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, which brought about the end of aboveground testing of nuclear weapons and of much of the radioactive fallout that was showing up in mother's milk and baby teeth. (And WSP contributed to the fall of the House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC], the Department of Homeland Security of its day. Positioning themselves as housewives and using humor as their weapon, they made HUAC's anticommunist interrogations ridiculous.) The woman from WSP told of how foolish and futile she felt standing in the rain one morning protesting at the Kennedy White House. Years later she heard Dr. Benjamin Spock—who had become one of the most high-profile activists on the issue—say that the turning point for him was spotting a small group of women standing in the rain, protesting at the White House. If they were so passionately committed, he thought, he should give the issue more consideration himself.

Cause-and-effect assumes history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; some-

times a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal, and change comes upon us like a change of weather. All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty is better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk.

I say all this because hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say it because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope. At the beginning of his massive 1930s treatise on hope, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote, "The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong." To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable.

Anything could happen, and whether we act or not has everything to do with it. Though there is no lottery ticket for the lazy and the detached, for the engaged there is a tremendous gamble for the highest stakes right now. I say this to you not because I haven't noticed that the United States has strayed close to destroying itself and its purported values in pursuit of empire in the world and the eradication of democracy at home, that our civilization is close to destroying the very nature on which we depend—the oceans, the atmosphere, the uncounted species of plant and insect and bird. I say it because I have noticed: wars will break out, the planet will heat up, species will die out, but how

many, how hot, and what survives depends on whether we act. The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave.

Here, in this book, I want to propose a new vision of how change happens; I want to count a few of the victories that get overlooked; I want to assess the wildly changed world we inhabit; I want to throw out the crippling assumptions that keep many from being a voice in the world. I want to start over, with an imagination adequate to the possibilities and the strangeness and the dangers on this earth in this moment.

States or the starving and shot-at in Iraq, the fish in the sea and the trees in the forests—assaulted further. That empathy was generous, and so was the sense of exhaustion—we had imagined taking off the terrible burden that is Bush, and it was painful to resume that leaden weight for four more years. We felt clearly the pain of the circumstances to which we had grown numb.

But the despair was something else again. Sometime before the election was over, I vowed to keep away from what I thought of as “the Conversation,” the tailspin of mutual wailing about how bad everything was, a recitation of the evidence against us—one exciting opportunity the left offers is of being your own prosecutor—that just buried any hope and imagination down into a dank little foxhole of curled-up despair. Now I watch people having it, wondering what it is we get from it. The certainty of despair—is even that kind of certainty so worth pursuing? Stories trap us, stories free us, we live and die by stories, but hearing people have the Conversation is hearing them tell themselves a story they believe is being told to them. What other stories can be told? How do people recognize that they have the power to be storytellers, not just listeners? Hope is the story of uncertainty, of coming to terms with the risk involved in not knowing what comes next, which is more demanding than despair and, in a way, more frightening. And immeasurably more rewarding. What strikes you when you come out of a deep depression or get close to a depressed person is the utter self-absorption of misery. Which is why the political imagination is better fueled by looking deeper and farther. The larger world: it was as though it disappeared during that season, as though there were only two places left on earth: Iraq, like hell on earth, and the United States, rotting from the center. The United States is certainly the center of the world’s military might, and its war in the heart of the Arab world for control of the global oil supply matters a lot. The suffering of people in Iraq matters and so do the deaths of more than a hundred thousand of them, along with, at this writing, more

When We Lost

In the past couple of years two great waves of despair have come in—or perhaps waves is too energetic a term, since the despair felt like a stall, a becalming, a running aground. The more recent despair was over the presidential election in the United States, as though, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano commented, George W. Bush was running for President of the World. And he won, despite the opposition of most of the people in the world, despite the polls, despite the fact that a majority of US voters did not choose him—or John Kerry; 40 percent of the electorate stayed home, despite a surge of organization and activism by progressives and leftists who didn’t even agree with Kerry on so very much, despite the terrible record of violence and destruction Bush had accrued, despite the stark disaster the Iraq War had become. He won.² Which is to say that we lost.

The pain was very real, and it was generous-hearted, felt by many people who would not suffer directly but would see that which they loved—truth, their fellow human beings, as the shut-out in the United

2. That the 2000 presidential election was stolen and the 2004 one likely was, at least in Ohio, meant that the fate of the world during those eight years was not the will of the people of the United States, though perhaps it was due to our lack of will to resist these low-impact slow-motion coups.

than 1,500 Americans and 76 Britons. This is where the future is being clubbed over the head.

But I think the future is being invented in South America.³ When I think about elections in the autumn of 2004, I think of them as a trio. In Uruguay, after not four years of creepy governments but a hundred and seventy years—ever since Victoria was a teenage queen—the people got a good leftist government. As Eduardo Galeano joyfully wrote,

A few days before the election of the President of the planet in North America, in South America elections and a plebiscite were held in a little-known, almost secret country called Uruguay. In these elections, for the first time in the country's history, the left won. And in the plebiscite, for the first time in world history, the privatization of water was rejected by popular vote, asserting that water is the right of all people . . . The country is unrecognizable. Uruguayans, so unbelieving that even nihilism was beyond them, have started to believe, and with fervor. And today this melancholic and subdued people, who at first glance might be Argentines on valium, are dancing on air. The winners have a tremendous burden of responsibility. This rebirth of faith and revival of happiness must be watched over carefully. We should recall every day

3. The rise of progressive Latin American governments was a beautiful thing. But after victory comes more change. As Uruguayan political observer Raoul Zibechi noted in 2015: "Progressivism in Latin America, which broke out around 10 or 15 years ago depending on which country you're talking about, produced some positive changes. But I think that cycle has come to an end. While there continue to be progressive governments, what I am saying is that progressivism as a set of political forces that created something relatively positive: this has ended . . . Progressivism in Latin America stands at a crossroads: either it changes into a political movement advocating real change reaching the structures of society—ownership of land, tax reform targeting the rich—or these governments simply become conservative, which is a process I think has already begun." It might be added that much of the progressivism of the region was never governmental and isn't over.

how right Carlos Quijano was when he said that sins against hope are the only sins beyond forgiveness and redemption.

In Chile, shortly after the US election, huge protests against the Bush administration and its policies went on for several days. Maybe Chile is the center of the world; maybe the fact that they went from a terrifying military dictatorship under Pinochet to a democracy where people can be outspoken in their passion for justice on the other side of the world is indicative too. As longtime Chile observer Roger Burbach wrote after those demonstrations, "There is indeed a Chilean alternative to Bush: it is to pursue former dictators and the real terrorists by using international law and building a global international criminal system that will be based on an egalitarian economic system that empowers people at the grass roots to build their own future." A month later, Chile succeeded where Britain had failed: Pinochet was put on trial for his crimes. And in a US-backed referendum in August 2004, Venezuelans again voted a landslide victory to the target of an unsuccessful US-backed coup in 2002, left-wing populist president Hugo Chavez. That spring, Argentina's current president, Nestor Kirchner, backed by the country's popular rebellion against neoliberalism, boldly defied the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁴ The year before, Bolivians fought against natural gas privatization so fiercely they chased their neoliberal president into exile in Miami not long after Brazil, under the rule of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, led the developing world in a revolt against the World Trade Organization. South America was neoliberalism's great laboratory, and now it's the site of the greatest revolts against that pernicious economic doctrine (which might be most tersely defined as

4. South Americans would almost completely banish the International Monetary Fund and its policy impositions from their continent. Between 2005 and 2007, Latin America went from taking on 80 percent of the IMF's treacherous, conditions-laden loans to 1 percent. The transformation was made possible in part by loans to several countries in the region from oil-rich Venezuela.

the cult of unfettered international capitalism and privatization of goods and services behind what gets called globalization—and might more accurately be called corporate globalization and the commodification of absolutely everything).

Which is not to say, forget Iraq, forget the United States, just to say, remember Uruguay, remember Chile, remember Venezuela, remember the extraordinary movements against privatization and for justice, democracy, land reform, and indigenous rights in Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina. Not one or the other, but both. South America is important because these communities are inventing a better politics of means and of ends. That continent is also important because twenty years or so ago, almost all those countries were run by malevolent dictators. We know how the slide into tyranny and fear takes place, how people fall into a nightmare, but how do they wake up from it, how does the slow climb back into freedom and confidence transpire? That road to recovery is something worth thinking about, because Bush is halfway through an eight-year term, not at the start of a thousand-year reich, so far as we can tell.

For history will remember 2004 not with the microscopic lens of we who lived through it the way aphids traverse a rose, but with a telescopic eye that sees it as part of the stream of wild changes of the past few decades, some for the worse, some for the better. And even 2004 was far broader than the US election: not only did Uruguay have its first great election, but the Ukraine had its electoral upset. Massive voter fraud, dioxin poisoning, media manipulation, and the long arms of the Kremlin and the CIA hardly made for an ideal situation, but the brave resistance, camping out in the streets, chanting and dancing and pushing its way into the parliament, nicely echoed the Central European movements against the then-communist state fifteen years before. More importantly, the nearly one billion citizens of India managed to kick out the Bharatiya Janata Party, with its strange mix of Hindu racism and cultic neoliberalism. Afterward, Arundhati Roy

said, "For many of us who feel estranged from mainstream politics, there are rare, ephemeral moments of celebration." And there is far more to politics than the mainstream of elections and governments, more in the margins where hope is most at home.

This is what the world usually looks like, not like Uruguay last fall, not like the United States, but like both. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function," but the summations of the state of the world often assume that it must be all one way or the other, and since it is not all good it must all suck royally. Fitzgerald's forgotten next sentence is, "One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise." You wonder what made Vaclav Havel hopeful in 1985 or 1986, when Czechoslovakia was still a Soviet satellite and he was still a jailbird playwright.

Havel said then,

The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

Hope and action feed each other. There are people with good grounds for despair and a sense of powerlessness: prisoners, the desperately poor, those overwhelmed by the labors of just surviving, those

living under the threat of imminent violence. And there are less tangible reasons for inaction. When I think back to why I was apolitical into my mid-twenties I see that being politically engaged means having a sense of your own power—that what you do matters—and a sense of belonging, things that came to me only later and that do not come to all. Overcoming alienation and isolation or their causes is a political goal for the rest of us. And for the rest of us, despair is more a kind of fatigue, a loss of faith, that can be overcome, or even an indulgence if you look at the power of being political as a privilege not granted to everyone. And it's that rest of us I'll continue railing at—though sometimes it's the most unlikely people who rise up and take power, the housewives who are supposed to be nobody, the prisoners who organize from inside, the people who have an intimate sense of what's at stake. You can frame it another way. The revolutionary Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote a sequel to his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* called *Pedagogy of Hope*, and in it he declares, "Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can turn into tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope."

The despair that keeps coming up is a loss of belief that the struggle is worthwhile. That loss comes from many quarters: from exhaustion, from a sadness born out of empathy, but also from expectations and analyses that are themselves problems. "Resistance is the secret of joy," said a banner carried by Reclaim the Streets in the late 1990s, quoting Alice Walker. Resistance is first of all a matter of principle and a way to live, to make yourself one small republic of unconquered spirit. You hope for results, but you don't depend on them. And if you study the historical record, there have been results, as surprising as Czechoslovakia's 1989 Velvet Revolution, and there will be more, though they are in the dark, beyond what can be expected. And as

Freire points out, struggle generates hope as it goes along. Waiting until everything looks feasible is too long to wait.

This book tells stories of victories and possibilities because the defeats and disasters are more than adequately documented; it exists not in opposition to or denial of them, but in symbiosis with them, or perhaps as a small counterweight to their tonnage. In the past half century, the state of the world has declined dramatically, measured by material terms and by the brutality of wars and ecological onslaughts. But we have also added a huge number of intangibles, of rights, ideas, concepts, words to describe and to realize what was once invisible or unimaginable, and these constitute both a breathing space and a toolbox, a toolbox with which those atrocities can be and have been addressed, a box of hope.

I want to illuminate a past that is too seldom recognized, one in which the power of individuals and unarmed people is colossal, in which the scale of change in the world and the collective imagination over the past few decades is staggering, in which the astonishing things that have taken place can brace us for entering that dark future with boldness. To recognize the momentousness of what has happened is to apprehend what might happen. Inside the word *emergency* is *emerge*; from an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters.

ministration decided against the “shock and awe” saturation bombing of Baghdad because we made it clear that the cost in world opinion and civil unrest would be too high. We millions may have saved a few thousand or a few tens of thousands of lives. The global debate about the war delayed it for months, months that perhaps gave many Iraqis time to lay in stores, evacuate, brace for the onslaught.

Activists are often portrayed as an unrepresentative, marginal rabble, but something shifted in the media in the fall of 2002. Since then, antiwar activists have mostly been represented as a diverse, legitimate, and representative body, a victory for our representation and our long-term prospects. Many people who had never spoken out, never marched in the street, never joined groups, written to politicians, or donated to campaigns, did so; countless people became political as never before. That is, if nothing else, a vast reservoir of passion now stored up to feed the river of change. New networks and communities and websites and listservs and jail solidarity groups and coalitions arose and are still with us.

In the name of the so-called War on Terror, which seems to inculcate terror at home and enact it abroad, we were encouraged to fear our neighbors, each other, strangers (particularly Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim people or people who looked that way), to spy on them, to lock ourselves up, to privatize ourselves. By living out our hope and resistance in public together with strangers of all kinds, we overcame this catechism of fear, we trusted each other; we forged a community that bridged the differences among the peace-loving as we demonstrated our commitment to the people of Iraq.

We achieved a global movement without leaders. There were brilliant spokespersons, theorists and organizers, but when your fate rests on your leader, you are only as strong, as incorruptible, and as creative as he—or, occasionally, she—is. What could be more democratic than millions of people who, via the grapevine, the Internet, and various assemblies from churches to unions to direct-action affinity groups,

What We Won

What prompted me to start writing about hope was the first wave of despair, the one that followed a season of extraordinary peace activism in the spring of 2003. The despairing could only recognize one victory, the one we didn't grasp, the prevention of the war in Iraq. The Bush and Blair administrations suggested that the taking of Baghdad constituted victory, but the real war began then, the guerrilla resistance and the international fallout that will long be felt. By the fall of 2003, we had been vindicated in our refusal to believe that Saddam Hussein's regime posed a serious threat to the United States, the UK, or the world, or harbored serious arsenals of weapons of mass destruction. By the winter of 2004, few members of the bullied minor nations known as the “coalition of the willing” remained, we were in quicksand, and hardly anyone bothered to argue there had been a good reason for jumping into it. But being right is small comfort when people are dying and living horribly, as are both the Iraqis in their ravaged land and the poor kids who constitute our occupying army.

At the same time, the peace movement that erupted so spectacularly in 2003 accomplished some significant things that need to be recognized. We will likely never know, but it seems that the Bush ad-

can organize themselves? Of course leaderless actions and movements have been organized for the past couple of decades, but never on such a grand scale. The African writer Laurens Van Der Post once said that no great new leaders were emerging because it was time for us to cease to be followers. Perhaps we have.

Most of us succeeded in refusing the dichotomies. We were able to oppose a war on Iraq without endorsing Saddam Hussein. We were able to oppose a war with compassion for the troops who fought it. Most of us did not fall into the traps that our foreign policy so often does and that earlier generations of radicals sometimes did: the ones in which our enemy's enemy is our friend, in which the opponent of an evil must be good, in which a nation and its figurehead, a general and his troops, become indistinguishable. We were not against the United States and UK and for the Baathist regime or the insurgency; we were against the war, and many of us were against all war, all weapons of mass destruction, and all violence, everywhere. We are not just an antiwar movement. We are a peace movement.

Questions the peace and global justice movements have raised are now mainstream, though no mainstream source will say why, or perhaps even knows why. Activists targeted Bechtel, Halliburton, Chevron-Texaco, and Lockheed Martin, among others, as war profiteers with ties to the Bush administration. The actions worked not just by shutting places down but by making their operations a public question. Direct action is indirectly powerful: now the media scrutinizes those corporations as never before, and their names are widely known.

Gary Younge writes in the *Guardian*,

The antiwar movement got the German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, re-elected, and has pushed the center of gravity in the Democratic primaries in a more progressive direction. Political leaders need not only geographical but also ideological constituencies. Over the past two years the left has built a strong enough base to support those who chose to challenge American hegemony.

True, none of this has saved Iraqi lives. But with ratings for Bush and Blair plummeting, it may keep Iranians, North Koreans or whoever else they are considering bombing out of harm's way.

Even Canada and Mexico distanced themselves from the United States, as though they could make the center of the continent the island it is in diplomatic terms. Despite a huge open bribe, because of the outcry of countless Turkish citizens, the Turkish government refused to let the invaders of Iraq use Turkey as a staging ground. And many other nations arrived at a stance on the war that was driven by public opinion, not by strategic advantage. The war we got was not the war that would have transpired with universal public acquiescence.

None of these victories are comparable to the victory that preventing the war would have been—but if the war had indeed been canceled, the Bush and Blair administrations would have supplied elaborate reasons that had nothing to do with public opinion and international pressure, and many would still believe that we had no impact. The government and the media routinely discount the effect of activists, but there's no reason we should believe them or let them tally our victories for us. To be effective, activists have to make strong, simple, urgent demands, at least some of the time—the kind of demands that fit on stickers and placards, the kind that can be shouted in the street by a thousand people. And they have to recognize that their victories may come as subtle, complex, slow changes instead, and count them anyway. A gift for embracing paradox is not the least of the equipment an activist should have.

And there's one more victory worth counting: The scale and scope of the global peace movement was grossly underreported on February 15, 2003, when somewhere between twelve and thirty million people marched and demonstrated, on every continent, including the scientists at MacMurdo Station in Antarctica. A million people marching in Barcelona was nice, but I also heard about the thousands in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the hundred and fifty people holding a peace

vigil in the small town of Las Vegas, New Mexico, the antiwar passion of people in even smaller villages in Bolivia, in Thailand, in Inuit northern Canada. George W. Bush campaigned as a uniter, not a divider, and he very nearly united the whole world against the administrations of the United States and Britain. Those tens of millions worldwide constituted something unprecedented, one of the ruptures that have ushered in a new era. They are one reason to hope for the future.

False Hope and Easy Despair

In his book *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch declares, "Fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators, of the human race, concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor" and speaks of "informed discontent which belongs to hope, because they both arise out of the No to deprivation." When I think of the recent US presidential election, I think of Bush's constant deployment of false hope—that we were going to win the war in Iraq, that his wars had made US citizens and the world safer, that the domestic economy was doing fine (and that the environment is not even a subject for discussion). Perhaps *hope* is the wrong word for these assertions, not that another world is possible, but that it is unnecessary, that everything is fine—now go back to sleep. Such speech aims to tranquilize and disempower the populace, to keep us isolated and at home, seduced into helplessness, just as more direct tyrannies seek to terrify citizens into isolation.

The Bush administration uses fear too, and it's interesting that those urbanites who have been at risk—of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War, of assault during the crime-ridden 1980s, of being tar-

geted by terrorism nowadays, insofar as terrorism is a meaningful risk at all—have been among the least fearful. Instead, people who are already isolated in suburbs and other alienated landscapes, far from crime, outside key targets for war or terror, are far more vulnerable to these fears, which seem not false but displaced. That is to say, the fear is real, but its putative subject is false. In this sense, it is a safe fear, since to acknowledge the real sources of fear might itself be frightening, calling for radical questioning, radical change. This, I think, is how false hope and false fear become such a neat carrot and stick luring the democratic beast along to its own demise.

Bush invited his constituency to be blind to the world's real problems, and leftists often do the opposite, gazing so fixedly at those problems that they cannot see beyond them. Thus it is that the world often seems divided between false hope and gratuitous despair. Despair demands less of us, it's more predictable, and in a sad way safer. Authentic hope requires clarity—seeing the troubles in this world—and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable and immutable.

Left despair has many causes and many varieties. There are those who think that turning the official version inside out is enough. To say that the emperor has no clothes is a nice antiauthoritarian gesture, but to say that everything without exception is going straight to hell is not an alternative vision but only an inverted version of the mainstream's "everything's fine." Then, failure and marginalization are safe—you can see the conservatives who run the United States claim to be embattled outsiders, because that means they can deny their responsibility for how things are and their power to make change, and because it is a sense of being threatened that rallies their troops. The activists who deny their own power and possibility likewise choose to shake off their sense of obligation: if they are doomed to lose, they don't have to do very much except situate themselves as beautiful losers or at least virtuous ones.

There are the elaborate theory hawkers, who invest their opponents with superhuman abilities that never falter and can never be successfully resisted—they seem obsessed with an enemy that never lets them go, though the enemy is in part their own fantasy and its fixity. There are those who see despair as solidarity with the oppressed, though the oppressed may not particularly desire that version of themselves, since they may have had a life before being victims and might hope to have one after. And gloom is not much of a gift. Then there are those whose despair is personal in origin, projected outward as political analysis. This is often coupled with nostalgia for a time that may never have existed or may have been terrible for some, a location in which all that is broken now can be imagined to have once been whole. It is a way around introspection.

Another motive for gloom is grandstanding, for the bearer of bad news is less likely to get shot than to acquire a certain authority that those bringing better or more complicated news won't. Fire, brimstone and impending apocalypse have always had great success in the pulpit, and the apocalypse is always easier to imagine than the strange circuitous routes to what actually comes next. And then, speaking of fire, there is burnout, the genuine exhaustion of those who tried—though sometimes they tried in ways guaranteed to lead to frustration or defeat (and then, sometimes, they burned out from being surrounded by all these other versions of left despair, to say nothing of infighting).

Sometimes the commitment to the gloomy version becomes comical. From the 1960s onward, people worried about "the population bomb," the Malthusian theory that global population would increase without any check short of resource and health disasters. Sometime in the 1990s, it became clear that birthrates in many parts of the world were decreasing, that globally population would peak—in about 2025, according to current estimates—then decline. Nations of the industrialized world, where resource consumption is highest, including Japan, Canada, Australia, Europe, and Russia, are already on the downswing. Rather than cele-

brate that an old problem had gone away of itself (or of changed social circumstances, including the spread of women's reproductive rights), declining population is often framed as a new impending crisis. The situation had changed completely, but the song remained the same.

The focus on survival demands that you notice the tiger in the tree before you pay attention to the beauty of its branches. The one person who's furious at you compels more attention than the eighty-nine who love you. Problems are our work; we deal with them in order to survive or to improve the world, and so to face them is better than turning away from them, from burying them and denying them. To face them can be an act of hope, but only if you remember that they're not all there is.

Hope is not a door, but a sense that there might be a door at some point, some way out of the problems of the present moment even before that way is found or followed. Sometimes radicals settle for exco-riating the wall for being so large, so solid, so blank, so without hinges, knobs, keyholes, rather than seeking a door, or they trudge through a door looking for a new wall. Hope, Ernst Bloch adds, is in love with success rather than failure, and I'm not sure that's true of a lot of the most audible elements of the left. The only story many leftists know how to tell is the story that is the underside of the dominant culture's story, more often than the stuff that never makes it into the news, and all news has a bias in favor of suddenness, violence, and disaster that overlooks groundswells, sea changes, and alternatives, the forms in which popular power most often manifests itself. Their gloomy premise is that the powers that be are not telling you the whole truth, but the truth they tell is also incomplete. They conceive of the truth as pure bad news, appoint themselves the deliverers of it, and keep telling it over and over. Eventually, they come to look for the downside in any emerging story, even in apparent victories—and in each other: something about this task seems to give some of them the souls of meter maids and dogcatchers. (Of course, this also has to do with the nature of adversarial activism, which leads to obsession with the enemy,

and, as a few environmentalists have mentioned to me, with the use of alarmist narratives for fundraising and mobilizing.)

Sometimes these bad-news bringers seem in love with defeat, because if they're constantly prophesying doom, actual doom is, as we say in California, pretty validating. They come to own the bad and even take pride in it: the monsters and atrocities prove their point, and the point is very dear to them. But part of it is a personal style: I think that this grimness is more a psychology than an ideology. There's a kind of activism that's more about bolstering identity than achieving results, one that sometimes seems to make the left the true heirs of the Puritans. Puritanical in that the point becomes the demonstration of one's own virtue rather than the realization of results. And puritanical because the somber pleasure of condemning things is the most enduring part of that legacy, along with the sense of personal superiority that comes from pleasure denied. The bleakness of the world is required as contrasting backdrop to the drama of their rising above.

Despair, bad news, and grimness bolster an identity the teller can affect, one that is tough enough to face the facts. Some of them, anyway. (Some of the facts remain in the dark.) The outcome is usually uncertain, but for some reason tales of decline and fall have an authority that hopeful ones don't. Buddhists sometimes decry hope as an attachment to a specific outcome, to a story line, to satisfaction. But beyond that is an entirely different sort of hope: that you possess the power to change the world to some degree or just that the world is going to change again, and uncertainty and instability thereby become grounds for hope.

Walls can justify being stalled; doors demand passage. Hopefulness is risky, since it is after all a form of trust, trust in the unknown and the possible, even in discontinuity. To be hopeful is to take on a different persona, one that risks disappointment, betrayal, and there have been major disappointments in recent years. Other times that tale of gloom seems to come from the belief in a univocal narrative, in the idea that

everything is heading in one direction, and since it's clearly not all good, it must be bad. "Democracy is in trouble" is the phrase with which an eminent activist opens a talk, which is true, but it's also true that it's flourishing in bold new ways in grassroots movements globally.

It's important to denounce the wall, to describe its obdurate impenetrability. Before a disease can be treated, it must be diagnosed. And you do not need to know the prescription before you diagnose a disease. Thus it is that telling the bad news can be a gift and a step toward hope, as long as that news can be let go when the time comes or the world changes. But you have to be able to see farther, to look elsewhere.

Political awareness without activism means looking at the devastation, your face turned toward the center of things. Activism itself can generate hope because it already constitutes an alternative and turns away from the corruption at center to face the wild possibilities and the heroes at the edges or at your side. These ideas of hope are deeply disturbing to a certain kind of presumptive progressive, one who is securely established one way or another. It may be simply that this is not their story, or it may be that hope demands things of them despair does not. Sometimes they regard stories of victory or possibility as hard-hearted. Another part of the Puritan legacy is the belief that no one should have joy or abundance until everyone does, a belief that's austere at one end, in the deprivation it endorses, and fantastical in the other, since it awaits a universal utopia. Joy sneaks in anyway, abundance cascades forth uninvited. The great human rights activist and Irish nationalist Roger Casement investigated horrific torture and genocide in South America's Putumayo rainforest a century ago and campaigned to end it. While on this somber task, his journal reveals, he found time to admire handsome local men and to chase brilliantly colored local butterflies. Joy doesn't betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection.

A History of Shadows

Imagine the world as a theater. The acts of the powerful and the official occupy center stage. The traditional versions of history, the conventional sources of news encourage us to fix our gaze on that stage. The limelights there are so bright that they blind you to the shadowy spaces around you, make it hard to meet the gaze of the other people in the seats, to see the way out of the audience, into the aisles, backstage, outside, in the dark, where other powers are at work. A lot of the fate of the world is decided onstage, in the limelight, and the actors there will tell you that all of it is, that there is no other place.

No matter the details or the outcome, what is onstage is a tragedy, the tragedy of the inequitable distribution of power, the tragedy of the too common silence of those who settle for being audience and who pay the price of the drama. The idea behind representative democracy is that the audience is supposed to choose the actors, and the actors are quite literally supposed to speak for us. In practice, various reasons keep many from participating in the choice, other forces—like money—subvert that choice, and onstage too many of the actors find other reasons—lobbyists, self-interest, conformity—to fail to represent their constituents.

Pay attention to the inventive arenas that exert political power outside that stage or change the contents of the drama onstage. From the