

To a Future Without Hope

Michael P. Nelson

I don't hope for anything. I don't fear anything. I'm free.

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We are bombarded with a contradiction. Many of our environmental leaders go to great lengths, masterfully and persuasively, to recount our many and looming and depressing and overwhelming environmental problems. We will suffer the various effects of massive global climate change, hundreds or thousands of species will be wiped from the face of this good green Earth, and there will be tremendous and disproportionate human suffering along the path to this dimmer future. This is to say, our leaders convince us that the future is not only in jeopardy, but is essentially hopeless. These leaders then do something amazing, even audacious: they turn around and assert that there is hope, almost as a sort of un-reflected-upon reflex, an utterance of seemingly obligatory expectation. I realize this may sound terrible, but this gesture toward hope has begun to make me angry. I am told a story convincing me there is no hope, and then I am told to have hope. You are not fooling anyone: to quote Leonard

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Cohen, “Everybody knows that the ship is sinking, everybody knows that the captain lied.”

I worry that not only is hope a throwaway term—a vacuous sentiment we dole out at the end of a paragraph, or a book, or a film, or an interview—but also that it is dangerous and counterproductive. To hope, quite literally, is “to desire with expectation of obtainment” or “to expect with confidence.” But the portrait our environmental leaders paint is one where there is no reasonable expectation of obtaining a desired end. Come on—it is either dishonest or lazy to tell me both that I cannot reasonably expect some future condition, and that I can confidently expect some future condition.

I am not saying that I dislike all uses or forms of hope. Sometimes I admit there seems to be so little at stake. Someone says or writes that we need to maintain hope in the face of great harms, great sorrows; the rest of us nod and resolve to do just that; and it is not clear that any of us—the speaker, the writer, the listener—really even knows what it is that we are hoping for, or what work hope is supposed to be doing. What really worries me—terrifies me, truth be told—is the use of hope as a motivator for healing our wounded and warped relationship with the natural world. I worry that hope will actually stifle, not aid, our resolve. I worry that hope can be, and often is, a distraction, an excuse for not getting on with the work at hand.

If you Google the words “philosophy” and “hope” together, one of the first hits is a cosmetics company, oddly called Philosophy, that peddles a skin moisturizer product even more oddly called “Hope in a Jar.” Jarred hope is pricey—28 bucks for a single ounce. The company tagline reads, “Where there is hope there can be faith. Where there is faith miracles can occur.” I have to fight my gag reflex here for the same reason that I fight it when I hear hope used as a motivator for action aimed at averting environmental harms.

There is another story of jarred hope: a story equally, though differently, sickening. In ancient Greek mythology, Pandora, sister-in-law of that fire thief Prometheus, was given a dowry and ordered by Zeus to keep it sealed. But curious Pandora (or her curious husband Epimetheus) could not resist. She opened the dowry and unleashed the scourges of humanity: greed, vanity, slander, envy, pining, and other diseases. The last scourge, the last evil let loose, was hope (“hope” in

Greek, *ἔλπις* or *elpis*, is translated as “anticipation of misfortune”). Even as early as 700 BCE, Hesiod too expressed doubts about hope: “Hope is a bad companion for the man in need who sits in an idle place, when he has no sufficient livelihood.”

I think I understand what is going on here. Our environmental leaders are looking to provide a motivation to act. And sometimes people act in desperation; sometimes they do amazing, creative, and wondrous things. But sometimes, many times, they do not. I see it in my students nearly every day—the desire to do good, and just, and beautiful things in the world so easily quashed by the realization that what they decide to do won’t make a difference, or that the world is beyond repair. Some other student (or professor!) flippantly points out that their individual decisions and action do not make any real difference in the world, and the student is gutted, mouth agape, no response in sight. So they give up before they start. And I blame that on hope. As Francis Bacon once put it, “Hope is a good breakfast, but a bad supper.” Hope is sugary cereal, quick yet vacuous energy for the masses—hope is not protein, meat that will suffice in a world gone awry.

How did we set this trap for ourselves? This, it seems to me, is the nub of the problem: hope results from a fixation on consequences—on judging right and wrong actions, picking professions, and even justifying or evaluating the value of a lived life on what those actions, those professions, and that life produce. We have built a society fixated on the future, perpetually risking all the attendant problems of justifying means by their ends, and forever flirting with endorsing the hedonistic instincts of the masses. We have therefore built a society that can be readily disempowered.

It is time for a new form of motivation. Turning our backs on hope might be the best thing we can do at this moment in time. To be motivated by hope is to be stripped naked, to be vulnerable, to be disempowered. To be motivated by a sense of obligation, a commitment to virtue, is to put on a Kevlar bodysuit. “Lack of power consists only in this,” Baruch Spinoza points out, “that a man allows himself to be guided by things outside him, and to be determined by them.” Psychopathic serial killers tell us that the way they control

their victims is to give them little tastes, little slivers of hope—but when their victims lose hope, they can no longer be controlled.

The writer Derrick Jensen nails it when he proclaims that he does not “have much hope. But I think that’s a good thing. Hope is what keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing the destruction of the Earth. . . . A WONDERFUL THING happens when you give up on hope, which is that you realize you never needed it in the first place.”¹ You are free to act rightly, because it is the right way to act and not because your action will move you or the world toward some future state.

So here’s what I want, what I think we need so desperately. I want us to replace “I hope” with “I resolve to do the work” or “I will be this kind of person, I will live this kind of life” or any sort of utterance that focuses on virtue rather than on consequence. Any sort of commitment that is not subject to the fickle and fragile focus on the results of our actions and commitments. This, I think, is the new ethic in the face of a future without hope. This is the only moral anchor imaginable in the sea change rolling our way.

I am calling for us to satisfy our obligation to the future by suggesting that we ignore, or at least greatly downplay, the consequences of our actions. I am suggesting instead that our obligation to the future is most properly satisfied when we act rightly and virtuously, and when our motivation stands stubbornly apart from, not held hostage to, the consequences of our actions.

If we are really going to resolve to act on behalf of the future, we need a motivation as steadfast and tough as the one Wendell Berry’s character Dorie Catlett shows toward her forever-drunken Uncle Peach. Referring to Dorie’s moral resolve, Berry writes, “She had long ago given up hope for Uncle Peach. She cared for him without hope, because she had passed the place of turning back or looking back. Quietly, almost submissively, she propped herself against him, because in her fate and faith she was opposed to his ruin.”

What we need more than anything, need to save us from our own destructive fixation on the future, is no less than an individual and

1. Derrick Jensen, “Beyond Hope,” *Orion*, May/June 2006.

collective moral revolution: a revolution that includes abandoning hope, caring without hope, and a commitment where we quietly, almost submissively, prop ourselves against those forces in the world that are working to bring ruin. We often hear that people only change their ideas, and therefore their behavior, in the face of crisis. But we forget that a crisis can be a moral crisis as well, a sense of revulsion for a life that we are living, a commitment to live differently and to be a different kind of person. We need The Great “Yuck!” Yuck, what we are doing is repulsive. Yuck, this is not the way a responsible person lives. The Great “Yuck!” can be followed by The Great “No!” No, I will not live this way. No, I will not be this kind of a person, this kind of an agent in the world. Finally, The Great “No!” will give way to The Great “Yes!” Yes, I will live a life of respect, of humility, empathy, care, and attentiveness. Yes, I will choose to live with dignity and grace, no matter what. But none of this—the yucks or nos or yeses—is held hostage by the attainment of some future state. Each of us, right now, at this exact moment in time, has the power to choose to live the moral life, to live a life that is indeed worth living.