



## Hope in the, like, really dark.

*To be truly radical is to make hope possible,  
rather than despair convincing.*

— Raymond Williams

“Everything’s coming together,” says 350.org co-founder Jamie Henn, “while everything’s falling apart.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed it is, and we are all living on that crazy cusp. Except, most days, it’s just a whole lot more obvious how things are falling apart, and not at all obvious whether we can get things together strongly enough and soon enough to avoid the very worst of our possible futures.

In the face of looming catastrophe—climate and otherwise—we don’t know whether to double down on hope, or give up hope completely. We’re not hopeful because things—like the facts—are pretty hopeless. But we’re not hopeless either, because, well, we love life and have a heart that still beats and some part of us will always remain an irrepressible hope machine. It’s a paradox, but that’s how we do. And so, we need a strategy; we need a way to walk our paradoxical path, a way to twin our warring selves.

Over a decade ago, Rebecca Solnit showed us how to “hope in the dark,” but things are darker now. These days we need a way to hope in the, like, *really* dark. What kind of hope can still serve us? (As there are many kinds.)

Per Espen Stoknes distinguishes four kinds of hope: passive hope, heroic hope, stoic hope, and grounded hope. Passive hope<sup>3</sup> is super-positive, almost Pollyanna-ish. It naively trusts that *technology will fix things*, or that *since the Earth’s climate has changed before, we’ll be fine*. The basic attitude here is *don’t worry, be happy, because somehow it’s all going to work out*. Which, though it gives you more peace of mind, leaves little reason to act.

Heroic hope, while also hyper-optimistic, is far more action oriented. It lives by the credo, “the best way to predict the future is to invent it.” It takes a *Yes we can! There’s no limit to human ingenuity! Just do it!* attitude. Despite their striking differences, passive and heroic hope share one important quality: they both depend on results. When actual outcomes

turn sour and dark (or threaten to), this kind of optimism-based hope can quickly crumble and turn into pessimism.

“Optimism,” Stoknes says, “has—scientifically—a weak case.”<sup>4</sup> We should expect any hope that depends on results to get crushed by objective reality. Especially these days. So, now what? Fortunately, we have two other kinds of hope to turn to. Stoic hope says: *We can handle it. We’ve survived tough times before. Whatever happens, we can make it through, we can rebuild. (And, if worse really does come to worse, I’ll drown with my boots on.)*

Unfortunately, stoic hope, though sturdy and resilient, is not particularly proactive or strategic—and we need to be both. Enter what Stoknes calls *grounded hope*. This kind of hope embraces the full paradox of our predicament. It says: “Yes, it’s hopeless, and I’ll give it my all anyway.” This kind of hope is not dependent on outcomes, nor attached to optimism or pessimism; instead it’s grounded in “our character and our calling.” It recognizes the full difficulty of our situation yet still chooses to be hopeful.

Grounded hope channels the pivotal insight of Vaclav Havel: “Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”<sup>5</sup> Grounded hope offers us no guarantee that we’ll ever walk on out of the darkness, but it shows us how to walk through it. Here, one simply does what is right and what is necessary—and the doing and the walking are their own reward. It recalls Tim DeChristopher’s understanding of hope as “the will to hold on to our values in the face of difficulty” (see page 97).

Embedded in all this is a crucial distinction between optimism and hope. Although we often conflate them in everyday speech (“She’s an optimistic person.” “I’m hopeful about our chances.”), they’re not the same at all. During a celebrated interview<sup>6</sup> with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, David Frost commented, “I always think of you as an optimist.” Tutu replied: “I’m not an optimist, I’m a prisoner of hope.” If they were people, optimism would be a very likable and somewhat overly caffeinated director of marketing; hope, a sailor caught in a storm. Optimism needs results and a rationale; hope is its own rationale.

Prominent non-optimist Richard Heinberg, bombarded at his day job at the Post-Carbon Institute by what he calls the “toxic knowledge” of our dark climate future, admits he’s “not hopeful in the way that most

people mean it.” Instead he adopts an approach he dubs “strategic hope.” “No matter how bad things get,” he says, “and no matter how much worse they’re likely to get, I know there’s always something I can do to make things better.”<sup>7</sup> In this way—and by playing his violin three hours every day—he’s able to keep his head and heart in the game.

In the face of looming climate catastrophe, eco-philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore notes how we tend to polarize into one of two camps: either Blind Despair (“No matter what I do, it’s not going to make a difference”) or Blind Hope (“I’m just going to trust that somehow it’s all going to work out”). In either case, there’s no reason to do anything. Both of these positions, argues Moore, are moral abdications, and together they suggest a false dichotomy. Instead, Moore suggests that “we respond to a lack of hope” by “do[ing] what’s right because it’s right, not because you will gain from it. There is freedom in that. There is joy in that. And, ultimately, there is social change in that,” she says.<sup>8</sup>

Now, it’s one thing to provide hopeless people with a way to act ethically, and quite another thing to accept that the world is objectively unsalvageable. So, which is it? Rebecca Solnit weighs in on this question in her 2004 *cri de coeur* *Hope in the Dark*. Writing during the depths of the Iraq War and the Bush Presidency, she sees darkness all around, but it’s darkness in the best sense of dark: unknown and full of possibility, a “darkness as much of the womb as the grave.” She writes beautifully (uh, doesn’t she always?) about how hope is a wild affirmation in this darkness; history an unpredictable trickster; activism a fluid, soulful, courageous project; and how revolutions are “days of Creation.”<sup>9</sup>

For her, hope and despair are not simple opposites; one is not good and the other bad. “Despair,” she says, “can also be liberating.” To illustrate, she uses the metaphor of a door and a wall: “Blind hope faces a blank wall waiting for a door in it to open. Doors might be nearby, but blind hope keeps you from locating them; in this geography despair can be fruitful, can turn you away from the wall.”<sup>10</sup> “False hope,” says Solnit, “can be a Yes to deprivation, an acquiescence to a lie. Official hope can be the bullying that tells the marginalized to shut up because everything is fine or will be.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, “despair can lead to the location of alternatives, to the quest for doors, or to their creation.” “The great liberation movements hacked doorways into walls, or the walls came tumbling down.”<sup>12</sup>

“Hopefulness is risky,” says Solnit, “since it is after all a form of trust, trust in the unknown and the possible.”<sup>13</sup> But these days what exactly is

still possible? Solnit was writing in 2004, when things were only dark. Now things are, like, *really* dark. Yes, Bush is gone, even Trump is gone, but we're 20 years deeper into the maw of climate chaos's relentless timeline. Up against its implacable math, what chance does Solnit's "Angel of Alternate History" really have? If we're basically past the threshold where we can prevent catastrophe, what kind of hope is there?

But Solnit's hope is not a naive kind of hope, far from it. It is a sober, hard-earned, long-game hopefulness, profoundly grounded in the complexities and uncertainties of how change happens. For her, "Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed." "The planet will heat up," she acknowledges, "species will die out, but how many, how hot, and what survives depends on whether we act."