FREEING OURSELVES FROM THE ADDICTION TO HOPE

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My Intention: This article presents a severe critique of current attempts to increase activism by offering people more causes for hope, causes founded on false premises. My intention is to warn us activists away from the drug of hope, to fully face the reality of climate change, to end the deceit that we can reverse these changes through our indomitable human spirits. Freed from a hope-filled drugged state, with appropriate humility and reliable compassion, we can identify roles for ourselves that make a difference in how we stay together and alleviate suffering. We cannot save the world but we can embody our best human qualities of generosity, creativity and compassion to offer support, companionship, consolation and humor to those within our sphere of influence.

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The siren song of hope is sung with increasing volume these days in a number of events, books and podcasts that promise us more hope. The need to be hopeful rises in direct proportion to our growing despair as we recognize the destruction of planet, peoples, species and the future. This relationship between hope and despair is guaranteed--they're two sides of the same coin. Buddhist wisdom has warned us for millennia that hope and fear are one emotional state: when what was hoped for fails to materialize, we flip into fear or despair. Motivated by hope, we end up in despair; the greater the hope, the greater the despair. Those who seek hope as their motivation for activism are doomed to suffer this disabling dynamic.

Yet I want to honor those who search for hope as people who have not given up or turned away. They want to make a difference, they want to stay involved, they want to contribute. Their good intention to offer themselves in service lures them into the false promise that, with more hope, they'll have more energy, focus and conviction that they can stop the destruction and chaos now upon us.

This disastrous pursuit of hope as our primary motivator finds strength from certain assumptions proudly exclaimed. We proclaim the power of human will. If we act in solidarity with others, we have the power to turn things around. A summit on hope proclaims "together we can, together we will." It's up to us humans, independent of any other dynamics on this planet, to create positive change.

> Declaring human's capacity to create change oblivious to other causes and conditions is unconscious Anthropocentrism, the unexamined arrogance that we are Masters of the Universe.

Similarly, we claim hope is justified because we have faith in human nature. Our efforts will succeed because humans are unstoppable, indomitable (I'm quoting an event brochure). The grave danger here is that when our efforts fail, what do we attribute as the cause of that failure? Have people failed to live up to our expectations? Are we humans not as good as we thought? Does our shattered faith lead to cynicism and withdrawal?

Relying on hope sets us on the path to despair and cynicism, the very emotions we are trying to avoid by grasping for hope. But in this culture, hope is an addiction.

***Hopium*—"Irrational or Unwarranted Optimism"** [1]

Many have noted that we live in a culture addicted to hope--we can't imagine making it through a day without it. Like all addicts, we get caught in the cycle of craving—we need more and more of our drug to get any effects. We don't question the drug or its negative effects on us, we just have to find more sources to give us the high that keeps us going.

[1] **Hopium** 1.An addiction to false hopes. 2. The state of wallowing in self-pity combined with the delusion of potential fame/greatness. www.Urbandictionary.com

Through the haze of addiction, we grow increasingly confused over what can truly sustain us to stay active and caring in this world. Without hope as our energy source, how can we work for positive change? If we don't see big results, why would we work so hard? If we don't succeed, what's the point of doing anything?

> The Bible says, "without vision, the people perish." But with hope as our primary motivator, we perish in cynicism and despair when our efforts are defeated by forces indifferent to and stronger than our heartfelt attempts.

The Hopeful are Science Deniers

When we declare our human power to create change, we deny the planet and the known sciences of how the planet works. It seems bizarre, but our declarations of human power are based on science denial. Who would have thought we'd be in league with climate deniers.

We have no trouble accepting the fact that humans have caused these massive losses of species and habitat and the new-normal of climate extremes. But when we believe we can stop these processes by banding together and singing songs of hope to each other, we are denying the science, the reality of how this planet works, the reality of where we are.

To say we are unstoppable or indomitable is to place humans in the God position, a role we've failed at for several hundred years. Now, living in the wreckage we created by ignoring the planet, living now with the planet's predictable responses, who do we think we are to reenter the arena declaring our capacity for victory? We pump ourselves up with hope like a sports team on steroids preparing for a tough game. But this game has its own rules which we ignored and violated for centuries. It is the height of Anthropomorphism--asserting ourselves as the primary players--to proclaim that we are indomitable.

The Myth of Progress

In addition to this obvious Anthropocentrism, we are blinded by another cultural norm: progress is inherent, things are always improving despite temporary setbacks, optimism for the future is always justified. But we all know in our direct experience that Life is cyclical, not progressive. Everything alive passes through the repeating cycles of birth and death. Yet belief in progress, the myth of progress, is sacrosanct in American culture. This unchallenged belief is clearly evident in how we think about evolution and tipping points.

It is very common for evolution to be used as a synonym for progress. But this is not how evolution works. Evolution is a description of how all living beings respond to changes in their environment, how they adapt to current circumstances. These adaptations are for survival; they can either be a step forward or back. 'Success' is defined as survival, not as progress or increased capacity. Those who adapt survive; fit for their local environment, survivors continue the species.

We also apply the myth of progress to "tipping points." Here also, we've assumed that when a system tipped, it would be for the better. (I'm aware of activists who've worked hard to reach a sufficient number of people to tip the human species into new ways of thinking and acting, including higher states of consciousness.)

> Tipping points are real. They describe a system's sudden change into a new way of being from which there is no return. These dramatic shifts can be dangerous or progressive but, once tipped, there is no way back.

If the change is negative, the only route is to focus on mitigation, not reversal. Climate scientists currently are tracking many planetary tipping points that have either occurred or are anticipated soon, any one of which severely threatens the planet's ability to sustain life.[2]

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[2] The geological record shows that abrupt changes in the Earth system can occur on timescales short enough to challenge the capacity of human societies to adapt to environmental pressures. In many cases, abrupt changes arise from slow changes in one component of the Earth system that eventually pass a critical threshold, or tipping point, after which impacts cascade through coupled climate–ecological–social systems. Brovkin, V., Brook, E.,

Self-reinforcing Feedback Loops [3]

Living Systems, i.e. the planet, behave in highly probable ways. In the past few decades, science has developed a rich understanding of the laws and patterns by which everything alive participates in the web of life, an incomprehensible complexity of interrelationships and interbeing. When we declare ourselves Masters of the Universe, when we hope to intervene to create positive change, we are avoiding reality.

> We only see what we want to see and what we insist on seeing is anything that gives us hope. It's a self-reinforcing feedback loop that distorts reality, creating blindness rather than clear seeing.

Beyond our personal perceptual loops, self-reinforcing feedback loops are critical to our understanding of what's going on with the planet. In these next paragraphs, I go into scientific descriptions, deliberately.[4] It requires your attention to absorb the complexity described here, but if we don't understand how the planet works, we waste our energy on false pursuits fueled by hope, not reality.

Here is perhaps the most dire example of a self-reinforcing feedback loop: the imminent loss of Arctic sea ice and the melting of the Greenland ice sheet.[5] Warmer oceans have shifted atmospheric currents so that the Arctic (including Siberia) have longer periods of extreme hot weather, above 100 degrees for several days in Summer. Melting ice introduces fresh water into

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Williams, J.W. *et al.* Past abrupt changes, tipping points and cascading impacts in the Earth system. *Nat. Geosci.* **14,** 550–558 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41561-021-00790-5

[3] Scientist Guy McPherson has detailed 65 self-reinforcing feedback loops, any one of which threatens the planet's ability to support life. See www.guymcpherson.com. His site is a treasure trove of his pioneering and prophetic work on near-term environmental collapse. "Our days are numbered. Passionately pursue a life of excellence."

[4] The most inclusive and comprehensive resource of scientific information about the planet, presented in a deeply compassionate and spiritual framing, is the brilliant work of eco-theologian Michael Dowd at www.postdoom.com.

[5] For in-depth details and good tutorials, see the National Ice and Sea Data Center https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/icelights/arctic-sea-ice-impacts

the northern Atlantic. Lower salinity decreases the density of water so that cool water fails to sink quickly. The conveyor belt action of the Gulf Stream (a major player in the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation AMOC) slows down, less cool water is circulated to the tropics so the oceans warm. (Scientists are extremely alarmed to observe that the Gulf Stream is at its slowest in 1600 years.)

The loss of Arctic ice also directly accelerates the heating of oceans and atmosphere. Less ice means more dark open water. The reflective power of white snow is lost (Albedo effect); dark waters absorb more heat, contributing to more ice melt and inhibiting the creation of new ice during the winter. Increased heat has resulted in permafrost melting that releases methane and carbon; methane is 100 times more toxic than CO_2 in the atmosphere. A rerouted and slower Gulf Stream is now evident in colder and wetter climate in Northern Europe and Scandinavia, more frequent and severe storms pummeling the southeast coast of the U.S., droughts and desertification in Africa and changes in monsoons in India and SE Asia.

Self-reinforcing feedback loops are why every recent science report states that the effects observed are happening "faster than expected" or "earlier than expected." Why is this true? The interconnections and feedback loops in any system are not easily observable; only when we see effects can we begin to understand the complexity and density of interrelated causes. You can't see into a system until you prod or provoke it; the dense web of interconnections remains invisible until you act (I learned this as an organizational consultant engaged in systems change).

> Today we suffer the effects of what was set in motion minimally 10-20 years ago as we indifferently dumped outrageous levels of CO_2 into the atmosphere. The present situation was created by past behaviors. These changes are irreversible, the ice melt will continue, the Earth will continue heating. This tipping point has tipped.

Nature Always Bats Last

These are the facts of inhabiting a living system with its known and predictable behaviors. While we ignored these dynamics and played God with our future, the planet simply kept acting according to its laws and dynamics. We may now want to change our relationship, learning Indigenous ways of partnering with Nature, taking our place in the family of all beings, surrendering our domination, admitting defeat—but it's far too late. Nature behaves as Nature. We got it wrong, we insisted on ignorance and then denial fueled by greed. No degree of faith in human beings, no amount of sloganeering "We can and we will" can influence the inexorable course of the planet. Gaia isn't the slightest bit interested in our aspirations now to partner with her. She is batting last and the game has always been rigged against any contender.

So What Do We Do?

I didn't lead you through this difficult journey to abandon you to despair. My intention is to relieve you of the terrible burden of hope, its blinders that prevent us from discerning where and how we might contribute. I know from years of personal experience how impossible it is to absorb this information without being overcome by despair. But the antidote to despair is not to drug ourselves with hope. Free of hope and fear, we can see more clearly. With clear seeing and genuine curiosity, we can discover our work, work that truly contributes to what is needed.

Nature bats last. And we are still here, wanting to make a contribution, wanting to discover what is meaningful work in the face of this known future.

What I now describe as your future state is true in my own experience and those of leaders training with me as Warriors for the Human Spirit. Above all, you have to be very patient and compassionate with yourself—it takes time to get 'clean' of an addiction and they'll be many times when you reach again for a dose of hope just to feel better—briefly. But once free of hope, you will notice you have more energy and interest in the world. You want to discover where you might be needed, the form of your work, and what skills you can offer.

I have learned the power and pleasure of asking one question continuously: *What is needed here? Am I the right person to contribute to this need?*

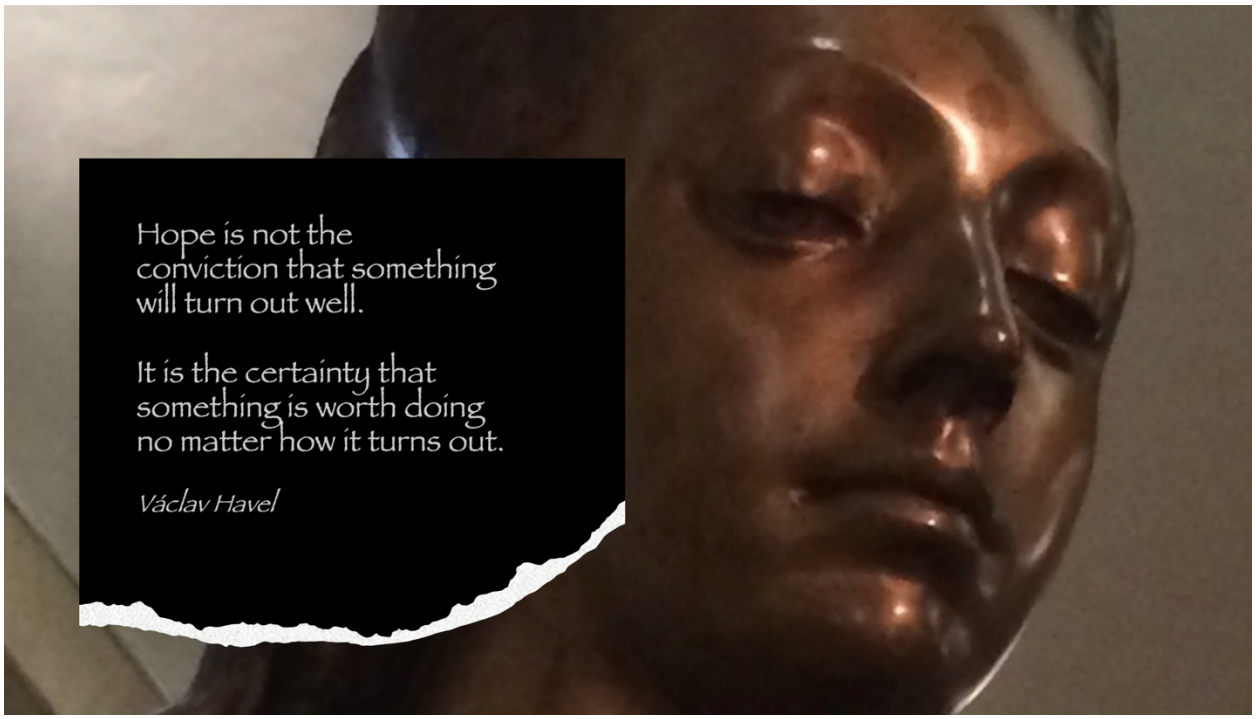
Sorrow is Our Constant Companion

We aspire to see clearly to determine how best to be useful. As we open to the world as it is, we feel intensifying grief and sadness. These searing emotions cannot be avoided or repressed in this world of sorrows and tribulations. Sadness is the consequence of waking up to what's truly going on, refusing to deny or turn away. Yet sadness also opens our hearts and releases genuine compassion and love. Freed from denial, motivated by love not hope, we discover many ways to be useful, to lend support, to console one another, to honor the magnitude of this time, to laugh together at the incomprehensible insanity, to let the darkness of the future bring us to the light of the present moment that always offers abundant opportunities for relationship and service.

We did not save the world. And we can still be the best of human beings: generous, creative and kind to one another. This is an infinite well from which humans always have drawn strength no matter what is going on around us. What we thought we needed to feel nourished--respect, impact, big results, large scale change—these no longer pressure us. We are free to notice where we are needed. And contribute what we can, sometimes with positive impact, sometimes without good results.

For everything we care about, for every cause that we continue to serve in our long history of activism, we now engage with greater wholeheartedness. We bring everything we know--our hard-earned wisdom and skills--to these causes. Whatever our level of success or failure, we don't give up. We learn to embody Vaclav Havel's redefinition of hope as a potent energy fueled by commitment rather than achievement.

We engage because it's the right thing to do. We say, "I can't *not* do this work," the most meaningful double negative of all time.


Hope is not the
conviction that something
will turn out well.
It is the certainty that
something is worth doing
no matter how it turns out.
Václav Havel