

# Hope in the Dark

Untold Histories,  
Wild Possibilities

REBECCA SOLNIT

WITH A NEW FOREWORD AND AFTERWORD

“Rebecca Solnit is a national literary treasure: a passionate, close-to-the-ground reporter with the soul and voice of a philosopher-poet. And, unlike so many who write about the great injustices of this world, she is an optimist whose faith is deeply grounded in a knowledge of history. This is a book to give you not just hope but zest for the battles ahead.”

—ADAM HOCHSCHILD

“I’ve found no more lucid and luminous a defense of hope than the one Rebecca Solnit launches in *Hope in the Dark*—a slim, potent book penned in the wake of the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq, a book that has grown only more relevant and poignant in the decade since.”

—MARIA POPOVA

Foreword to the Third Edition (2015)

## Grounds for Hope

**Y**our 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 naïvete,” 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 flowered 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

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.

# False Hope and Easy Despair

**I**n 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-

ged 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.