

## Optimism and Hope in a Hotter Time

Fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators, of the human race, concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor.

Ernst Bloch (1986, quoted in Solnit 2004)

We like optimistic people. They are fun, often funny, and very often capable of doing amazing things otherwise thought to be impossible. Were I stranded on a life raft in the middle of the ocean and had a choice of a companion between an optimist and pessimist, I'd want an optimist, providing he did not have a liking for human flesh. *Optimism*, however, is often rather like Yankee fans believing that the team can win the game when it's the bottom of the ninth; they're up by a run, have two outs, a two strike count against a .200 hitter, and Mariano Rivera in his prime is on the mound. They are optimistic for good reason. Red Sox fans, on the other hand, believe in salvation by small percentages and hope for a hit to get the runner home from second base and tie the game. *Optimism* is the recognition that the odds are in your favor; *hope* is the faith that things will work out whatever the odds. *Hope* is a verb with its sleeves rolled up. Hopeful people are actively engaged in defying or changing the odds. *Optimism* leans back, puts its feet up, and wears a confident look knowing that the deck is stacked.

I know of no good reason for anyone to be optimistic about the human future, but I know a lot of reasons to be hopeful. How can one be optimistic, for example, about global

warming? First, it isn't a "warming," but rather a total destabilization of the planet brought on by the behavior of one species: us. Whoever called this "warming" must have worked for the advertising industry or the northern Siberian Bureau of Economic Development. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—the thousand-plus scientists who study climate and whose livelihoods depend on authenticity, replicability, data, facts, and logic—put it differently. A hotter world means rising odds of more heat waves and droughts; more and larger storms; bigger hurricanes; forest dieback; changing ecosystems; more tropical diseases in formerly temperate areas; rising ocean levels (faster than once thought); losing many things nature once did for us; more and nastier pests; food shortages due to drought, heat, and more and nastier pests; more human deaths from climate-driven weather events; more refugees fleeing floods, rising seas, drought, and expanding deserts; international conflicts over energy, food, and water; and if we do not act quickly and wisely, runaway climate change resulting in some new stable state, possible without humans.

Some of these changes are inevitable given the volume of heat-trapping gases we have already put into the atmosphere. There is a lag of several decades between the emission of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases and the weather headlines, and still another lag until we experience their full economic and political effects. The sum total of the opinions of climate experts is that

the planet has already warmed 0.8 °C; it will warm another ~0.6 °C; it is too late to avoid trauma but probably not too late to avoid global catastrophe, which includes the possibility of runaway climate change; there are no easy answers or magical solutions; it is truly a global emergency.

Whether we can escape global catastrophe is anyone's guess, because the level of heat-trapping gases is higher than it has been in the past 650,000 years and quite likely for a great deal longer. We are playing a global version of Russian roulette, and no one knows for certain what the safe thresholds of various heat-trapping gases might be. Scientific certainty about the pace of climate change over the past three decades has a brief shelf-life, but the pattern is clear. As scientists learn more, what they are finding is that the situation is worse than they previously thought. Ocean acidification went from being a problem a century or two hence to being a crisis in a matter of decades. Melting of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets went from being possible hundreds of years hence to a matter of decades and a century or two. The threshold of perceived safety went down from perhaps 560 ppm CO<sub>2</sub> to perhaps 450 ppm CO<sub>2</sub>, and so forth.

Optimism in these circumstances is like whistling while walking past the graveyard at midnight. There is no good case to be made for it but the sound of whistling sure beats the sound of rustling in the bushes beside the fence. But whistling does not change the probabilities one iota or much influence any lurking goblins.

Nonetheless, we like optimism and optimistic people. They soothe, reassure, and sometimes motivate us to accomplish a great deal more than we otherwise might. But sometimes optimism misleads, and on occasion badly so. This is where *hope* enters.

Hope, however, requires us to check our optimism at the door and enter the future without illusions. It requires a level of honesty, self-awareness, and sobriety that is difficult to summon and sustain. I know a great many smart people and many very good people, but I know far fewer people who can handle hard truth gracefully without despairing. In such circumstances it is tempting to seize on anything that distracts us from unpleasant things. The situation is rather like that portrayed in the movie "A Few Good Men" in which a beleaguered Marine Corp officer tells the prosecuting attorney: "You can't handle the truth!" T. S. Eliot, less dramatically, noted the same tendency: "Human kind cannot bear very much reality" (*Four Quartets: Burnt Norton*).

Authentic hope, in other words, is made of sterner stuff than optimism. It must be rooted in the truth as best we can see it, knowing that our vision is always partial. Hope requires the courage to reach farther, dig deeper, confront our limits and those of nature, work harder, and dream dreams. Optimism does not require much effort because one is likely to win anyway, but hope has to hustle, scheme, make deals, and strategize. But how do we find authentic hope in the face of climate change, the biological holocaust now underway, the spread of global poverty, seemingly unsolvable human conflicts, terrorism, and the void of world leadership adequate to the issues?

I have been thinking about the difference between optimism and hope since being admonished recently to give a "positive" talk at a gathering of ranchers, natural resource professionals, and students. Presumably the audience was incapable of coping with the bad news it was assumed

that I would otherwise deliver. I gave the talk that I intended to give and the audience survived, but the experience caused me to think more about what we say and what we can say to good effect about the kind of news that readers of this journal reckon with daily.

The view that the public can only handle happy news, nonetheless, rests on the following chain of reasoning: We face problems that are solvable, not dilemmas that can be avoided with foresight but are not solvable, and certainly not losses that are permanent. People, and particularly students, cannot handle much truth, so resolution of different values and significant improvement of human behavior otherwise necessary are impossible. Greed and self-interest are in the driver's seat and always will be, so the consumer economy is here to stay, but consumers sometimes want greener gadgets, and capitalism can supply these at a goodly profit and itself be greened a bit, but not improved otherwise. Matters of wealth distribution, poverty, and political power are nonstarters; therefore, the focus should be on problems solvable at a profit by technology and policy changes. Significant improvement of politics, policy, and governance are unlikely and probably irrelevant because better design and market adjustments can substitute for governmental regulation and thereby eliminate most of the sources of political controversy—rather like Karl Marx' prediction of the withering away of the state.

Disguised as optimism, this approach is, in fact, pessimistic about our capacity to understand the truth and act nobly. So we do not talk about limits to growth, unsolvable problems, moral failings, the unequal distribution of wealth within and between generations, emerging dangers, impossibilities, technology gone awry, or necessary sacrifices. "Realism" requires us to portray climate change as an opportunity to make a great deal of money, which it may be for some, but without saying

that it might not be for most or mentioning its connections to other issues, problems, and dilemmas or the possibility that the four horsemen are gaining on us. We are not supposed to talk about coming changes in our "lifestyles," a telling and empty word implying fashion, not necessity or conviction.

Ultimately, this approach is condescending to those who are presumably incapable of facing the truth and acting creatively, courageously, and even nobly in dire circumstances. Solving climate change, for example, is reduced to a series of wedges representing various possibilities that would potentially eliminate so many gigatons of carbon without any serious changes in how we live. There is, accordingly, no wedge called "suck it up" because that is considered to be too much to ask of people who have been consuming way too much, too carelessly, for too long. The "American way of life" is thought to be sacrosanct. In the face of a global emergency, brought on in no small way by the profligate American way of life, few are willing to say otherwise. So we are told to buy hybrid cars, but are not asked to walk, travel by bikes, or go less often, even at the end of the era of cheap oil. We are asked to buy compact fluorescent light bulbs, but not to turn off our electronic stuff or not buy it in the first place. We are admonished to buy green, but seldom asked to buy less or repair what we already have or just make do. We are encouraged to build LEED-rated buildings that are used for maybe 10 hours a day for 5 days a week, but we are not told that we cannot build our way out of the mess we have made or to repair existing buildings. We are not told that the consumer way of life will have to be rethought and redesigned to exist within the limits of natural systems and better fitted to our human limitations. And so we continue to walk north on a south-bound train, as Peter Montague once put it.

And maybe, told that its hindquarters are caught in a ringer, the public would panic or, on the other hand,

become so despairing as to stop what they otherwise would do that could save us from the worst outcomes possible. This is an old view of human nature epitomized in the work of Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud and the founder of modern advertising. Public order, he thought, had to be engineered by manipulating people to be dependent and dependable consumers. People who think too much or know too much were in his view a hazard to social stability.

Maybe this is true and maybe gradualism is the right strategy. Perhaps the crisis of climate and those of equity, security, and economic sustainability will yield to the cumulative effects of many small changes without any sacrifice at all. Maybe changes now underway are enough to save us. Maybe small changes will increase the willingness to make larger changes in the future. And state-level initiatives in California, Florida, and northeastern states are changing the politics of climate. Wind and solar are growing over 40% per year, taking us toward a different energy regime. A cap-and-trade bill will soon pass in the U.S. Congress, and maybe that will be enough. Maybe we can win the game of climate roulette at a profit and never have to confront the nastier realities of global capitalism and inequity or confront the ecological and human violence that we have unleashed in the world. But I wouldn't bet the Earth on it.

The remorseless working out of the big numbers (e.g., 430 CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent + 2.5/year) gives us no margin for safety and none for delay in reducing CO<sub>2</sub> levels before we risk triggering runaway change. "Climate," as Wallace Broecker once put it, "is an angry beast and we are poking it with sticks," and we've been doing it for a while. So call it prudence, precaution, insurance, or common sense, but this ought to be regarded as an emergency like no other. Having spent any margin of error we might have had 30 years ago, we now have to respond fast and effectively or else.

That is what the drab language of the fourth report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is saying. What is being proposed, I think, is still too little, too late—necessary but not nearly sufficient. And it is being sold as "realism" by people who have convinced themselves that they have to understate the problem to be credible.

Climate roulette is part of a larger equation of exploitation of people and nature, violence, inequity, imperialism, and intergenerational exploitation, the variables of which are interlocked. In other words, heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere are a symptom of something a lot bigger. To deal with the causes of climate change, we need a more thorough and deeper awareness of how we got to the brink of destroying the human prospect and much of the planet. It did not happen accidentally but is, rather, the logical working out of a set of assumptions, philosophy, worldview, and unfair power relations that have been evident for a long time. The wars, gulags, ethnic cleansings, militarism, and the destruction of forests, wildlife, and oceans throughout the twentieth century were earlier symptoms of the problem. We have been playing fast and loose with life for a while now and it is time to discuss the changes we must make in order to conduct the public business fairly and decently over the long haul.

The upshot is that the forces that have brought us to the brink of climate disaster and biological holocaust and are responsible for the spread of global poverty—the crisis of sustainability—remain mostly invisible and in charge of climate policy. The fact is that climate stability, sustainability, and security are impossible in a world with too much violence, too many weapons, too much unaccountable power, too much stuff for some, too little for others, and a political system that is bought and paid for behind closed doors. Looming climate catastrophe, in other words, is a symptom of a larger disease.

I propose that those of us concerned about climate change, environmental quality, and equity treat the public as intelligent adults who are capable of understanding the truth and acting creatively and courageously in the face of necessity—much as a doctor talking to a patient with a potentially terminal disease. There are many good precedents for telling the truth. Abraham Lincoln, for one, did not pander, condescend, evade, or reduce moral and political issues to economics, jobs, and happy talk. Rather he described slavery as a moral disaster for slaves and slave owners alike. Similarly, Winston Churchill in the dark days of the London blitzkrieg in 1940 did not talk about defeating Nazism at a profit and the joys of urban renewal. Instead he offered the British people "blood, toil, tears, and sweat." And they responded with heart, courage, stamina, and sacrifice. At the individual level, faced with a life-threatening illness, people more often than not respond heroically. Every day soldiers, parents, citizens, and strangers do heroic and improbable things in the full knowledge of the price they will pay.

Telling truth means the people must be summoned to a level of extraordinary greatness appropriate to an extraordinarily dangerous time. People, otherwise highly knowledgeable of the latest foibles of celebrities, must be asked to be citizens again, to know more, think more, take responsibility, participate publicly, and, yeah, suck it up. They will have to see the connections between what they drive and the wars we fight, the stuff they buy and crazy weather; the politicians they elect and the spread of poverty and violence. They must be taught to see connections between climate, environmental quality, security, energy use, equity, and prosperity. They must be asked to think and to see. As quaint and naïve as that may sound, people have done it before and it has worked.

Telling the truth means we will have to speak clearly about the causes

of our failures that have led us to the brink of disaster. If we fail to deal with causes, there are no band-aids that will save us for long. The problems can in one way or another be traced to the irresponsible exercise of power that has excluded the rights of the poor, the disenfranchised, and every generation after our own. That this has happened is in no small way a direct result everywhere of money in politics, which has aided and abetted the theft of the public commons, including the airwaves where deliberate misinformation is a growing industry. Freedom of speech, as Lincoln said in 1860, does not include "the right to mislead others, who have less access to history and less leisure to study it." The rights of capital over the media now trump those of honesty and fair public dialogue and will continue to do so until the public reasserts its legitimate control over the public commons including the airwaves.

Telling the truth means summoning people to a higher vision than that of the affluent consumer society. Consider the well-studied but little-noted gap between the stagnant or falling trend line of happiness in the last half century and that of rising gross national product. That gap ought to have reinforced the ancient message that, beyond some point, more is not better. If we fail to see a vision of a livable decent future beyond the consumer society, we will never summon the courage, imagination, or wit to do the obvious things to create something better than what is in prospect. So, what does a carbon-neutral society and increasingly sustainable society look like? It has front porches; public parks; local

businesses; windmills and solar collectors; local farms and better food; better woodlots and forests; local employment; more bike trails; summer sports leagues; community theaters; better poetry; neighborhood book clubs; bowling leagues; better schools; vibrant and robust downtowns with sidewalk cafes and great pubs serving microbrews; more kids playing outdoors; fewer freeways, shopping malls, and sprawl; less television; and no more wars for oil or anything else.

Nirvana? Hardly. Humans have a remarkable capacity to screw up good things. But it is still possible to create a future that is a great deal better than what is in prospect. Ironically, what we must do to avert the worst effects of climate change are mostly the same things we would do to build sustainable communities, improve environmental quality, build prosperous economies, and improve the prospects for our children.

Finally, I am an educator and earn my keep by perpetuating the quaint belief that if people only knew more they would act better. Some of what they need to know is new but most of it is old, very old. On my list of things people ought to know in order to discern the truth are a few technical things, such as

1. the laws of thermodynamics that tell us that economic growth only increases the pace of disorder (i.e., the transition from low to high entropy);
2. the basics of the sciences of biology and ecology (e.g., how the world works as a physical system); and

3. the fundamentals of carrying capacity, which apply to yeast cells in a wine vat, lemmings, and humans.

But everyone ought to know, too, about human fallibility, gullibility, and the inescapable problem of ignorance. So I propose that schools, colleges, and universities require their students to read Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, and the book of Ecclesiastes. They would be taught how to distinguish those things that we can do from those that we should not do. And they should be taught the many disciplines of applied hope that include the skills necessary to grow food, build shelter, manage woodlots, make energy from sunlight and wind, develop local enterprises, cook a good meal, use tools skillfully, repair and reuse, and talk sensibly at a public meetings.

Hope, authentic hope, can be found only in our capacity to discern the truth about our situation and ourselves and summon the fortitude to act accordingly. We have it on high authority that the truth will set us free from illusion, greed, and ill will, and perhaps with a bit of luck it will save us from self-imposed destruction.

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