

HOPE

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Hope is the real killer. Hope is harmful. Hope enables us to sit still in the sinking raft instead of doing something about our situation. Forget hope. Honestly and candidly assessing the situation as it truly stands is our only chance. Instead of sitting there and “hoping” out way out of this, perhaps we should recognize that realizing the truth of our situation, even if unpleasant, is positive since it is the required first step toward real change.

Gringo Stars

Hope is the leash of submission.

Raoul Vaneigem

The cure for despair is not hope. It's discovering what we want to do about something we care about.

*Margaret Wheatley*³¹²

It isn't only false hopes that keep those who go along enchained. It is hope itself.

Hope, we are told, is our beacon in the dark. It is our light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It is the beam of light that makes its way into our prison cells. It is our reason

for persevering, our protection against despair (which must at all costs, including the cost of our sanity and the world, be avoided). How can we continue if we do not have hope?

We've all been taught that hope in some future condition—like hope in some future heaven—is and must be our refuge in current sorrow. I'm sure you remember the story of Pandora. She was given a tightly sealed box and was told never to open it. But, curious, she did, and out flew plagues, sorrow, and mischief, probably not in that order. Too late she clamped down the lid. Only one thing remained in the box: hope. Hope, the story goes, was “the only good the casket held among many evils, and it remains to this day mankind's sole comfort in misfortune.” No mention here of action being a comfort in misfortune, or of actually *doing something* to alleviate or eliminate one's misfortune.

(*Fortune*: from Latin *fortuna*, akin to Latin *fort-*, *fors*, chance, luck: this implies of course that the misfortune that hope is supposed to comfort us in is just damn bad luck, and not dependent on circumstances we can change: in the present case, I don't know how bad luck is involved in the wretched choices we each make daily in allowing civilization to continue to destroy the earth.)

The more I understand hope, the more I realize that instead of hope being a comfort, that all along it deserved to be in the box with the plagues, sorrow, and mischief; that it serves the needs of those in power as surely as belief in a distant heaven; that hope is really nothing more than a secular version of the same old heaven/nirvana mindfuck.

Hope is, in fact, a curse, a bane.

I say this not only because of the lovely Buddhist saying “Hope and fear chase each other's tails”—without hope there is no fear—not only because hope leads us away from the present, away from who and where we are right now and toward some imaginary

future state. I say this because of *what hope is*.

More or less all of us yammer on more or less endlessly about hope. You wouldn't believe—or maybe you would—how many editors for how many magazines have said they want me to write about the apocalypse, then enjoined me to “make sure you leave readers with a sense of hope.” But what, precisely, is hope? At a talk I gave last spring, someone asked me to define it. I couldn't, and so turned the question back on the audience. Here's the definition we all came up with: Hope is a longing for a future condition over which you have no agency. It means you are essentially powerless.

Think about it. I'm not, for example, going to say I hope I eat something tomorrow. I'll just do it. I don't hope I take another breath right now, nor that I finish writing this sentence. I just do them.³¹³ On the other hand, I hope that the next time I get on a plane, it doesn't crash.³¹⁴ To hope for some result means you have no agency concerning it.

So many people say they hope the dominant culture stops destroying the world. By saying that, they've guaranteed at least its short-term continuation, and given it a power it doesn't have. They've also stepped away from their own power.

I do not hope coho salmon survive. I will do what it takes to make sure the dominant culture doesn't drive them extinct. If coho want to leave because they don't like how they're being treated—and who could blame them?—I will say good-bye, and I will miss them, but if they do not want to leave, I will not allow civilization to kill them off. *I will do whatever it takes*.

I do not hope civilization comes down sooner rather than later. I will do what it takes to bring that about.

When we realize the degree of agency we actually do have, we no longer gave to “hope” at all. We simply do the work. We make sure the salmon survive. We make sure prairie dogs survive. We make sure tigers survive. We do whatever it takes.

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Casey Maddox wrote that when philosophy dies, action begins. I would say in addition that when we stop hoping for external assistance, when we stop hoping that the awful situation we’re in will somehow resolve itself, when we stop hoping the situation will somehow not get worse, then we are finally free—truly free—to honestly start working to thoroughly resolve it. I would say when hope dies, action begins.

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Hope may be fine—and adaptive—for prisoners, but free men and women don’t need it. Are you a prisoner, or are you free?

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People sometimes ask me, “If things are so bad, why don’t you just kill yourself?”

The answer is that life is really, really good. I am a complex enough being that I can hold in my heart the understanding that we are really, really fucked, and at the same time that life is really, really good. Not because we’re fucked, obviously, nor because of

the things that are causing us to be fucked, but despite all that. We are fucked. Life is still good. We are really fucked. Life is still really good. We are *so* fucked. Life is still *so* good.

Many people are afraid to feel despair. They fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate our situation really is, they must then be perpetually miserable. They forget that it is possible to feel many things at once. I am full of rage, sorrow, joy, love, hate, despair, happiness, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and a thousand other feelings. They also forget that despair is an entirely appropriate response to a desperate situation. Many people probably also fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate things are that they may be forced to *do something* to change their circumstances.

Despair or no, life is good. The other day I was lying by the pond outside my home, looking up through redwood needles made translucent by the sun. I was happy, and I thought, “What more could anyone want?”³¹⁵ Life is so good. And that’s all the more reason to fight.

Another question people sometimes ask is, “If things are so bad, why don’t you just party?”

Well, the first answer is that I don’t really like parties. The second is that I’m having great fun. I love my life. I love life. This is true for most activists I know. We are doing what we love, fighting for what and whom we love.

I have no patience for those who use our desperate situation as an excuse for inaction.³¹⁶ I’ve learned that if you deprive most of these people of that particular excuse they just find another, then another, then another. The use of this excuse to justify inaction—the use of any excuse to justify inaction—reveals nothing more nor less than an

incapacity to love.

At one of my recent talks someone stood up during the Q and A and announced that the only reason people ever become activists is to feel better about themselves. Effectiveness really doesn't matter, he said, and it's egotistical to think it does. He trotted out the old line about how the natural world doesn't need our help. At least he averred the natural world exists, as opposed to being the movement of some god's eyebrows, but the end result was the same old narcissism.

I told him I disagreed.

He asked, "Doesn't activism make you feel good?"

"Of course, but that's not why I do it. If I only want to feel good, I can just masturbate. But I want to accomplish something in the real world."

"Why?"

:Because I'm in love. With salmon, with trees outside my window, with baby lampreys living in sandy streambottoms, with slender salamanders crawling through the duff. And if you love, you act to defend your beloved. Of course results matter to you, but they don't determine whether or not you make the effort. You don't simply hope your beloved survives and thrives. You do what it takes. If my love doesn't cause me to protect those I love, it's not love. And if I don't act to protect my landbase, I'm not fully human."

Awhile back I got an email from someone in Spokane, Washington. He said his fifteen-year-old son was wonderfully active in the struggle for ecological and social sanity. But, the father continued, "I want to make sure he stays active, so I feel the need to give him hope. This is a problem, because I don't feel any hope myself, and I don't want to lie to him."

I told him not to lie, and said if he wants his son to stay active, he shouldn't try to give him hope, but instead give him love. If his son learns how to love, he will stay active.

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A wonderful thing happens when you give up on hope, which is that you realize you never needed it in the first place.³¹⁷ You realize that giving up on hope didn't kill you. It didn't even make you less effective. In fact it made you more effective, because you ceased relying on someone or something else to solve your problems—you ceased hoping your problems would somehow get solved through the magical assistance of God, the Great Mother, the Sierra Club, valiant tree-sitters, brave salmon, or even the Earth itself—and you just began doing whatever it takes to solve those problems yourself.

Because of industrial civilization, human sperm counts have been cut in half over the last fifty years. At the same time, girls have begun to enter puberty earlier: 1 percent of three-year-old girls have begun to develop breasts or pubic hair, and only in the last six years, the percentage of girls under eight with swollen breasts or pubic hair has gone from 1 percent to 6.7 percent for white girls, and 27.2 percent for black girls.³¹⁸

What are you going to do about this? Are you going to hope this problem somehow goes away? Will you hope someone magically solves it? Will you hope someone—anyone—will stop the chemical industry from killing us all?

Or will you do something about it?

When you give up on hope, something even better happens than it not killing you,

which is that in some sense it does kill you. You die. And there's a wonderful thing about being dead, which is that they—those in power—cannot really touch you anymore. Not through promises, not through threats, not through violence itself. Once you're dead in this way, you can still sing, you can still dance, you can still make love, you can still fight like hell—you can still live because you are still alive, more alive in fact than ever before. You come to realize that when hope died, the you who died with the hope was not you, but was the you who depended on those who exploit you, the you who believed that those who exploit you will somehow stop on their own, the you who believed in the mythologies propagated by those who exploit you in order to facilitate that exploitation. The socially constructed you died. The civilized you died. The manufactured, fabricated, stamped, molded you died. The victim died.

And who is left when that you dies? You are left. Animal you. Naked you. Vulnerable (and invulnerable) you. Mortal you. Survivor you. The you who thinks not what the culture taught you to think but what you think. The you who feels not what the culture taught you to feel but what you feel. The you who is not who the culture taught you to be but who you are. The you who can say yes, the you who can say no. The you who is a part of the land where you live. The you who will fight (or won't) to defend your family. The you who will fight (or won't) to defend those you love. The you who will fight (or won't) to defend the land upon which your life and the lives of those you love depends. The you whose morality is not based on what you have been taught by the culture that is killing the planet, killing you,³¹⁹ but on your own animal feelings of love and connection to your family, your friends, your landbase. Not to your family as self-identified civilized beings but as animals who require a landbase, animals who are being

killed by chemicals, animals who have been formed and deformed to fit the needs of the culture.

When you give up on hope—when you are dead in this way, and by so being are really alive—you make yourself no longer vulnerable to the co-optation of rationality and fear that Nazis inflicted on Jews and others, that abusers like my father inflict on their victims, that the dominant culture inflicts on all of us. Or rather is it the case that the exploiters frame physical, social, and emotional circumstances such that victims perceive themselves as having no choice but to perpetrate this co-optation on themselves. But when you give up on hope, this exploiter/victim relationship is broken. You become like the Jews who participated in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

When you give up on hope, you lose a lot of fear. And when you quit relying on hope, and instead begin to protect those you love, you become very dangerous indeed to those in power.

In case you're wondering, that's a very good thing.

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I'm talking to a friend, an ex-con, who says he thinks revolutions only take place when some critical mass of people get to what he calls the "fuck it" point: the point where things are so bad that people are finally ready to just say *fuck it* and do what needs to be done.

I can't say I disagree.

It reminds me of a talk I gave a few months ago. I spoke of how so many of my

students at the prison fully recognized civilization's destructiveness and were ready to bring it all down. Afterwards someone from the audience stood and said that he was a public defender, and that his experience with his clients was radically different. They did not, he said, want to bring it down. They merely wanted a bigger slice of the capitalist pie.

What he said struck me immediately as true. But I did not know how to merge truth with what my former students had told me. Later that night a friend made it clear: the public defender and I were dealing with people who were at a different parts of the process of being eaten by the state. The people he worked with had merely been arrested. Perhaps some still thought the system was fair. Perhaps others thought they could beat the system. Perhaps still others hoped merely that the system would not destroy them. None of them had yet reached the "fuck it" point. My students, on the other hand, were at a maximum security prison, many for the rest of their lives. There was no longer any reason for them to believe in the system. They had nothing left to lose.

* * *

We know what those in power do to those who threaten that power. Jeffrey Leuers burned three SUVs in an act of symbolic resistance, and was sentenced to more than twenty-two years in prison, a far longer sentence than that given to rapists, to men who beat their wives to death, to chemical company CEOs who give so many of us cancer. If we were to seriously threaten the perceive entitlement of those in power to convert the living world into consumer products to be sold, they would not kill us.

I don't particularly want to die. I love living, and I love my life. But I'll tell you

something that helped me lost at least some of the fear I have that those in power will kill me if I threaten their perceived entitlement to destroy the planet. I asked myself: What's the worst they can do to me? Effectively, the worst they can do is kill me. Yes, they can torture me—as they do to so many—or they can put me in solitary confinement in a tiny box—as they also do to so many—but I would hope (there's that word) that in those cases I'd be able to kill myself if necessary. Well, so far as I can figure, if they kill me, most probably one of three things will happen. One possibility is that when we die, it's "boom, boom, out go the lights," in which case I'll just be dead, and I won't know anything anyway. Another possibility is that after we die we go "somewhere else," whatever that means, in which case I'll just keep fighting them from there. And a third possibility is that after we die we get reincarnated. If that happens, I'll follow the lead of the eighteen-year-old Indian Kartar Singh (Sardar Kartar Singh Saraba, or sometimes Shaheed Kartar Singh Saraba) who fought to drive the British from his home, and who in 1915 was betrayed and caught. When the magistrate overseeing the case was about to choose whether to hang him or imprison him for life, Kartar Singh stated: "I wish that I may be sentenced to death, and not life imprisonment, so that after re-birth, I may endeavour to get rid of the slavery imposed by the whites. If I am born as female, I shall bear lion-hearted sons, and engage them in blowing to bits the British rulers."³²⁰

The court decided he was too dangerous to be allowed to live.

I hope he came back to fight again.

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The man from the EPA continued, “I’m glad you’re not a pacifist. I’m peace-loving myself, but have long studied martial arts. I don’t consider this a contradiction.

Sometimes danger is a form of protection. There’s a reason that even peaceful wild things are born with thorns and claws. The real questions are: how and when you should ‘open the can of whoop ass’ (that’s redneck talk).

“I’m glad that you’re willing to eat meat yet you question how meat is produced. This is a very important distinction. I wrote a discharge permit for one of the largest slaughterhouses in the world. Five thousand cows per day, plus processing of meat from the equivalent of five thousand cows per day killed in off-site slaughterhouses. That’s a lot of slaughter. Pollution output like a big city. This is the most economically efficient production of meat the world has ever seen, but highly polluting and unconscionably cruel. I believe it hurts as a people to allow this cruelty to animals, and it hurts our souls to pretend meat is raised in some peaceful rural barnyard.

“You mentioned that you thought that things might go with a Bang. Since 9/11, I have been working on security issues, vulnerability assessments, response plans, etc. I know a bit about these matters and agree that there is a very real possibility of use of “weapons of mass destruction” by the U.S. or others. My pet theory, however, is not a bang, but a whimper. As you said, the gasoline party is over. We’ve passed the halfway mark of mineable petroleum supply, and the last half will be harder to extract economically than the first half. (Old Jed won’t find more bubbling crude without high tech equipment and expensive extraction methods.)

“Meanwhile, world consumption is growing

“As oil, water, and key minerals go into shorter supply, the slow squeeze will

begin. Power structures, political and otherwise, need power to stay in power. It's hard to run an Empire on an empty tank, and the political/economic powerhouses could find themselves coughing to a stop in some very bad neighborhoods. That is happening now.

“In the twilight of civilization, the state of emergency or crisis can last a century. There will be key watershed events within that cycle, but in terms of human experience, this cycle is evolutionary, punctuated by big scary events. Sort of like low-level warfare. Actually, it is characterized by low-level warfare. I believe we're at the point of key events in this cycle. Our collective decisions are critically important right now. I am saddened that we're so collectively asleep at the wheel, so enamored with the trivial and our trinkets.

“When I look at the points of crux, I think they focus around energy, water, and food. Gee that was hard: DUH!...The basics. The world industrial complex is geared up for overproduction, just as some key resources become scarce. When hungry people are overproducing widgets, while rich people go in debt to over consume widgets, this will produce unexpected feasts and famines. We can expect more surprises from the energy sector. Infrastructure can be a very fragile thing if not actively maintained and sustained. Our dependence on genetically altered monoculture for food crops and animals sets us up for rapid spread of disease. There is a looming Dust Bowl (overgrazing) in China, which will greatly disrupt domestic food production, and this will spread ripples in the pond. We overruled our own tit into this wringer. You are right: we are really FUCKED...

“I noted that some people were very disturbed by the fact that you consider some form of societal collapse is imminent. (‘I’m twenty, I want a life, what do I do?') That one surprised me: I realized that I have considered societal crisis as an ongoing given, while

others have not. Again, this as an evolving process, which will have flashpoints and key moments of decision.

“There is a way out, but it requires a certain minimum level of focus and engagement from the larger public. Unfortunately, the Bread and Circuses have paid off for Korporate Amerika. Most people are fairly satiated and numb, and they don’t have a place to put that vague gnosis of getting screwed. If something happened and the light bulb switched on, we could use our remaining wealth as seed money. I wouldn’t mind a little Utopian thinking if it were practical and focused, with a vision of minimalized ecological footprint. If we don’t embrace that little downgrade of lifestyle now, we will pay dearly, and not far down the road. I suspect that the downgrade will be forced upon us by the slow squeeze of economic downturn, etc.

“I think folks missed your message of healing. You managed to cry it through. Wish I did that more. You are right: Life is Wonderful, friends are loving, and there is a group of people who are ‘getting it.’ I am blessed with an occupation that allows me to push in the right directions, a wonderful son, good friends, a herd of nice old bonsai trees, and a bumper crop of watermelons. Lately, my relationships have been deeper than I thought possible. I’m rethinking things. My deepest wishes are changing. All of these are good reasons to stop the Pollyanna routine and get a little busy...Nothing wrong with being a mean old protective Earth Daddy. After all, a real good dog knows who to bite.”