

## Hope in Dark Times

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.

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...

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...

**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.**

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. 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).

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.

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...

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... Change is rarely straightforward... 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 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...

Americans are good at responding to crisis and then going home to let another crisis brew both because we imagine that the finality of death can be achieved in life — it's called *happily ever after* in personal life, *saved in politics* — and because we tend to think political engagement is something for emergencies rather than, as people in many other countries (and Americans at other times) have imagined it, as a part and even a

pleasure of everyday life. The problem seldom goes home...

Going home seems to be a way to abandon victories when they're still delicate, still in need of protection and encouragement. Human babies are helpless at birth, and so perhaps are victories before they've been consolidated into the culture's sense of how things should be. I wonder sometimes what would happen if victory was imagined not just as the elimination of evil but the establishment of good — if, after American slavery had been abolished, Reconstruction's promises of economic justice had been enforced by the abolitionists, or, similarly, if the end of apartheid had been seen as meaning instituting economic justice as well (or, as some South Africans put it, ending economic apartheid).

It's always too soon to go home. Most of the great victories continue to unfold, unfinished in the sense that they are not yet fully realized, but also in the sense that they continue to spread influence. A phenomenon like the civil rights movement creates a vocabulary and a toolbox for social change used around the globe, so that its effects far outstrip its goals and specific achievements — and failures. ...It's important to emphasize that hope is only a beginning; it's not a substitute for action, only a basis for it...

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...

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...

**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 for our victories. The past is set in daylight, and it can become a torch we can carry into the night that is the future.**

**Rebecca Solnit**

Excerpted passages from  
**Hope in the Dark:**

**Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities**



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