

# Beyond Hope

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Photograph by Stephen Wilkes

THE MOST COMMON WORDS I hear spoken by any environmentalists anywhere are, *We're fucked*. Most of these environmentalists are fighting desperately, using whatever tools they have—or rather whatever legal tools they have, which means whatever tools those in power grant them the right to use, which means whatever tools will be ultimately ineffective—to try to protect some piece of ground, to try to stop the manufacture or release of poisons, to try to stop civilized humans from tormenting some group of plants or animals. Sometimes they're reduced to trying to protect just one tree.

Here's how John Osborn, an extraordinary activist and friend, sums up his reasons for doing the work: "As things become

increasingly chaotic, I want to make sure some doors remain open. If grizzly bears are still alive in twenty, thirty, and forty years, they may still be alive in fifty. If they're gone in twenty, they'll be gone forever."

But no matter what environmentalists do, our best efforts are insufficient. We're losing badly, on every front. Those in power are hell-bent on destroying the planet, and most people don't care.

Frankly, I don't have much hope. But I think that's a good thing. Hope is what keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing the destruction of the Earth.

To start, there is the false hope that suddenly somehow the system may inexplicably change. Or technology will save us. Or the Great Mother. Or beings from Alpha Centauri. Or Jesus Christ. Or Santa Claus. All of these false hopes lead to inaction, or at least to ineffectiveness. One reason my mother stayed with my abusive father was that there were no battered women's shelters in the '50s and '60s, but another was her false hope that he would change. False hopes bind us to unlivable situations, and blind us to real possibilities.

Does anyone really believe that Weyerhaeuser is going to stop deforesting because we ask nicely? Does anyone really believe that Monsanto will stop Monsantoing because we ask nicely? If only we get a Democrat in the White House, things will be okay. If only we pass this or that piece of legislation, things will be okay. If only we defeat this or that piece of legislation, things will be okay. Nonsense. Things will not be okay. They are already not okay, and they're getting worse. Rapidly.

But 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 be avoided at all costs). 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, being 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.

The more I understand hope, the more I realize 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 way of keeping us in line.

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," 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 magazine editors have asked me to write about the apocalypse, then enjoined me to 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 turned the question back on the audience, and 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.

I'm not, for example, going to say I hope I eat something tomorrow. I just will. I don't hope I take another breath right now, nor that I finish writing this sentence. I just do them. On the other hand, I do hope that the next time I get on a plane, it doesn't crash. To hope for some result means you have given up any agency concerning it. Many people say they hope the dominant culture stops destroying the world. By saying that, they've assumed that the destruction will continue, at least in the short term, and they've stepped away from their own ability to participate in stopping it.

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

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

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 resolve it. I would say that when hope dies, action begins.

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. I am full of rage, sorrow, joy, love, hate, despair, happiness, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and a thousand other feelings. We are really fucked. Life is still really 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. 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, they may be forced to do something about it.

Another question people sometimes ask me is, "If things are so bad, why don't you just party?" Well, the first answer is that I don't really like to party. The second is that I'm already having a great deal of 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. 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.

I told him I disagreed.

Doesn't activism make you feel good? he asked.

Of course, I said, 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.

A WONDERFUL THING happens when you give up on hope, which is that you realize you never needed it in the first place. 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.

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 not) to defend your family. The you who will fight (or not) to defend those you love. The you who will fight (or not) 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, 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 cooption 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 is it rather the case that these exploiters frame physical, social, and emotional circumstances such that victims perceive themselves as having no choice but to inflict this cooption 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 turn away from fear.

And when you quit relying on hope, and instead begin to protect the people, things, and places you love, you become very dangerous indeed to those in power.

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