



THE WISDOM OF HOPE

Harry Hutson



'Hope' is an impractical idea that turns out to be useful, especially in painful times like these.

Hope is often misunderstood, underestimated, ignored and belittled, not least because it has separate, seemingly contradictory modes. You want Hope to be there in moments of despair when the best you can do is appeal for relief. And you want to be able to earn Hope, to deserve it, to work for it. It is easy to be confused about the nature of Hope.

Understanding that Hope behaves in ways both mysterious and predictable is the secret to unlocking Hope's wisdom - wisdom available to anyone, wisdom useful every day.

Hope-in-despair resembles personal or collective grace. At the end of life, hope can appear, unbidden, able to make meaning out of mortality. And during societal crises marked by widespread anguish and discord, Hope can lead the way to solidarity and healing. "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", Rebecca Solnit writes in *Hope in the Dark*.¹

Conscious, choice-filled Hope is another matter. When faced with hardship, you are free to act in ways that garner Hope. When you do whatever you can to save the day, you may discover you have enlisted Hope to bolster your energy and heighten your sense of purpose. But in order for you to realize these benefits, you must act on your own behalf.

This essay explores Hope's channels: active ones, where you make choices and receive rewards, and wondrous ones, where autonomous forces seem to have intervened on your behalf. My aim is to frame ways of thinking about Hope that have practical implications for how you think and what you do.



WHAT IS HOPE?

A good way to define a concept is to be clear about what it is *not*. Hope is not optimism, faith, or a wish. Optimism is the feeling that everything will turn out right no matter what. Faith is confidence in the power of a guiding hand. A wish is a belief in luck or magic.

Hope is different from each of these in two ways. Hope is active, not passive, and Hope is at home in the unknown. In 1968, Jerome Frank, MD, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University, on a research grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, concluded that, “Hope inspires a feeling of wellbeing and is a spur to action”ⁱⁱ. Study after empirical study has reported benefits related to hope; in clinical settings; in office environments; in factories; in the quiet of homes; and in noisy protests. Yet if you attach Hope to an outcome or a prediction, you miss the point. Hope lives in the unexplained, the unpredictable, the dark. Hope eludes definition; it confounds cause-and-effect; and it discombobulates our attempts to own it.

But of course! How could it be otherwise? Would Hope inspire us if we could order it from Amazon? Hope is a life-force out of reach of those who would manipulate it or extinguish it. It is unafraid of trauma, the prospect of death, and even fear itself. Hope offers you choices once hidden from view, and coaxes you to pursue them while furnishing an uplift in your mood and an upturn in your resolve.

How do you gain access to Hope’s power? Which choices increase your chances?

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE HOPE?

What does it mean to *choose* Hope? I do not think you can pick hope from a list of options such as wishing, feeling optimistic, or having faith, nor can you benignly hope for Hope. To give examples of action that inspire hope, I suggest five *fields*, by which I mean spheres of activity where people, ideas and values coalesce.ⁱⁱⁱ In the often-quoted words of Rumi: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

The Field of Possibility

In our book, *Putting Hope to Work: Five Principles to Activate Your Organization’s Most Powerful Resource*^{iv}, Barbara Perry and I named ‘Possibility’ as the first principle of Hope. We wrote about possibility as both a motivator for Hope, and as a measure guiding what you should hope for. If a goal is a ‘moonshot’, we concluded, you are likely to give up. And if a goal is a ‘gimme’, you are likely to yawn. It is crucial to locate goals in the range of possibility, but that is just to start. It is the *pursuit* of important goals that engenders Hope.

Hope thrives when possibilities emerge that break the bounds of what has been taken for granted and ignite new thinking about how to solve intractable problems. Societal triumphs once believed to be out of reach were accomplished after years and years of struggle, in part because advocates always believed them to be within the realm of what is possible. Consider, for example, how emancipation, women’s suffrage, and same-sex marriage became realities. Their advocates held a steadfast vision of the possible.

Black Lives Matter demonstrations have become a global movement and the largest protest in American history. Civic awareness of racial injustice sparked by viral videos of police brutality has morphed into outrage and - a true sign of Hope - steps toward genuine reform. The death of George Floyd appears to have been a tipping point in public opinion and political resolve. Within months of his death 450 police reform proposals were introduced in 31 states of America.^v Although there is mounting resistance to “defunding the police”, Alex Vitale, author of *The End of Policing*, says that this profound shift in thinking, away from the idea that there is always a need for more police, will have huge benefits in the years ahead.^{vi}

Advocates for structural change are realistic about the forces of entrenched power that would prefer a band-aid approach to reform. And they are clear-eyed about witnessing genuine signs of progress. To wit: JPMorgan Chase, the largest bank in the country, recently made a \$30 billion pledge to address racial inequality with loans, philanthropic gifts and direct funding to expand homeownership and business development in communities of color, and more.^{vii}

When you grasp the possibility that a big idea may one day come to fruition and you work to bring it home, you choose Hope.

The Field of Agency

Personal agency is more than having self-confidence in a situation; it is your actual ability to perform. You have a voice, and you make it heard. You take actions and responsibility for your actions, and you make corrections in your behaviors and views as you learn from your mistakes. Exercising agency is entering a field where you choose to be involved and to participate fully.

If you understand that Hope is *not* optimism, and if you grasp that Hope can exist alongside despair, Ibram X. Kendi’s book, *How to Be an Antiracist*^{viii}, is a hopeful call-to-action. Its central theme is that racism is any *policy* that continues or worsens inequity. Being an antiracist means doing something to address injustice in all its forms. If you pretend you do not have racist views while doing nothing about injustice and oppression, Kendi would call



your behavior racist. For him, that is less a slur than a description of your stance on the realities of inequality.

Do you blame the people who are victimized by racism, which is racist, or do you blame the power and politics that victimize people, which is antiracist? The question Kendi poses is, how do you get out of a racist rut? His answer: work to change policies that cause injustice. "The fuel of change, itself, is Hope."^x

You change hearts and minds by changing the world. In America, the Affordable Care Act ^x has improved lives for millions, and many of those who were once opposed to it on political or ideological grounds have now changed their minds. Similarly, the New Deal ^{xi}, massively resisted after its initial phases, permanently changed American life; programs providing support for farmers, the unemployed, and everyone's retirement, are accepted as federal responsibilities. Antiracism will continue to gain adherents even among the powerful and the privileged when concrete steps addressing inequality prove there is no downside to fairness and justice. In the field of agency, Hope appears when work is underway and when results are achieved, not when people see the light.

Agency breeds Hope, and then Hope breeds more agency. The process is circular and nonlinear. But it does not suggest that you can skip a step and 'apply' for Hope without first applying yourself to the tasks at hand.

When you are agentic, you are choosing Hope.

The Field of Meaning

Barbara and I wrote that Hope must have worthwhile substance for it to be elevated above thought and feeling. And we said that Hope must have human betterment as its aim. The field of meaning is where purposeful action aims for goodness and generates Hope. Victor Frankl learned at Auschwitz that meaning is life's primary purpose. But do not ask about the meaning of life, he said. Instead, allow yourself to be questioned by life, and find your answers in "right action and right conduct"^{xii}.

Chad Henry is the general manager of a Novo Nordisk plant in North Carolina that manufactures diabetes and obesity medicines. His job reached new levels of difficulty when he had to respond to the pandemic. On April 21 2020, Chad wrote an email to his management team, saying in part, "I have lived through plant closures, hurricanes, unfathomable events with safety..., but nothing like this.... I have had many of our wonderful employees write to me with their prayers and well wishes. THEY know and care for us just like we do for them. Is it stressful, hell yes. Is it unnerving, hell yes. AND, are we a great team, hell yes!!! Without your inspiration

and enthusiasm every day, this crazy time would have broken even the strongest of leaders. I am writing to you to let you know how much I love you guys and how much you are an inspiration to me! Let's keep this train rolling to ensure the safety of our employees and the health of our patients."

Having been at the side of many leaders during crises, I find his note to be remarkable. In one compact statement Chad acknowledged his feelings of fright and vulnerability; he expressed gratitude for the unsolicited support of employees; he conveyed trust in his staff and confidence in the future; he gave voice to the compassion he felt for his colleagues; and he reaffirmed their shared purpose: the safety of employees and the health of patients.

For Chad, shared purpose emanates from his personal purpose. His early years of employment were spent in North Carolina's declining textile industry, where employment has fallen by 82% since the 1980s. He knows how small towns have been hollowed out. Members of his family now rely on the very drugs his factory produces. Chad's reasons for caring about his community and patients run deep; he expresses these publicly and with ease. When you have clear purpose in your vocation, when you act from a center of reflection and self-knowledge, and when you seek meaning in your life, you choose Hope.

The Open Field

Openness is Hope's context and a source of its mystery. Yet the kind of openness inherent in Hope is not chaos; rather, openness is principled and aligned with authenticity, trust and compassion. A sign of openness is being awake to what might happen next. The open field demarcated by Hope is characterized by curiosity, humility and transparency - foundational qualities in effective counseling and healthcare.

Too many healthcare professionals in America are treating patients with COVID-19 under impossible conditions, and are suffering the debilitating psychological distress associated with moral injury: feelings of guilt, shame and disgust. "Do no harm" is more than an ethical stance in healthcare; it is a lifelong commitment that guides one's practice. But in underequipped and overrun hospitals, patients are being unintentionally and unavoidably harmed. Practitioners are suffering too, though they may not realize the depth of their distress.

Perhaps the overriding ethic in healthcare is, "Where there's life there's Hope," which applies to patients and caregivers alike. Being radically open to the needs of your patients, at the expense of acknowledging your needs as a provider, is an unnecessary and sometimes tragic tradeoff. Moral injury turns deadly when it closes in and constricts our sense of personal efficacy.



Healthcare organizations are responding to this secondary crisis with urgency and transparency. Moral injury is being addressed in many ways. Professionals are encouraged to take time off when they must, embrace techniques of mindfulness and resilience, look out for their colleagues, and get professional help for themselves without risking their privacy or self-respect.

When you are being truthful and open about real needs, and when you are performing self-care as an inherent function of your caring for others, you choose Hope.

The Common Field

In our book, we describe the fifth principle underlying Hope as the principle of connection, a centripetal force that draws together and harmonizes disparate elements of a collective effort. When diverse people are valued for who they are and how they contribute to a project or cause, they are at work in a common field. Commonality elevates us to being fully human.

In the common field, as in an emergency room, everyone has a place. Dr. Jessica Benedetto, an internal medicine physician at North Shore Medical Center in Salem, Massachusetts, wrote an essay that was circulated among staff in the craziest days of the pandemic, "We Are All in This Together." It is a view from the front line.

Here is the core of her message: "Primary care doctors, cardiologists, gastroenterologists and endocrinologists have all volunteered to join us in the hospital ranks. They have brushed up on their general internal medicine skills and asked us for help when needed. The amount of positive energy and collaboration at our hospital is at an all-time high... And then there are the nurses. They are my heroes. To adjust to the surge in patients, they have had to adjust their workflow tremendously, bundling their interactions with patients into discrete visits within the patient rooms... There is positive energy flowing through our hospital that is unprecedented. We are all in this together, until the last COVID-19 patient goes home to their family. On that day, we will celebrate, in unison."

Dr. Benedetto is describing a new normal in her hospital that has emerged wherever COVID-19 is being treated: selfless collaboration, voluntary contribution, genuine teamwork and compassionate connection among co-workers. When a mission is held in common - and vigorously pursued by a team - there is a leveling effect that softens hard edges among team members and lubricates interaction. What matters most is your contribution to accomplishing the mission. In this sense, commonality unites diverse people and unique talents and makes extraordinary success possible.

The crux of Dr. Benedetto's essay is that pulling together yields positive energy. When you join others in common purpose to achieve goodness, you choose Hope.

THE WISDOM OF HOPE

I believe you can enact hope by making conscious choices, and you can substitute hope for fear. But there is obviously more to the story. I am given cause to pause when thinking about people too trapped in misery, people too ill or infirm, too defeated by false hopes, too fearful to exercise choice, or too overtaken by despair, to perform conscious and willful acts of self-preservation. Are they then left out of the realm of Hope?

I am also left in a state of wonderment about times when Hope, against all odds, defeats despair and advances a collective cause. Plenty Coups, chief of the Crow Nation, a tribe of Native Americans living in Montana, created a strategy for survival in the face of existential threats posed in the nineteenth century by the demise of beaver and buffalo, constant wars with neighboring tribes, disease and starvation, and the inexorable loss of land to White encroachment and settlement. The source of his strategy was a dream that the Crow Nation would survive if they made best use of their talents and *listened to others*. Thus, they chose to learn from, and negotiate with, the inevitable victors rather than deluding themselves with ghost dances or fighting to the bitter end. Unique among the great nomadic tribes of the West, the Crow Nation have kept their ancestral land and revived their identity. Jonathan Lear, who pieced together this remarkable story, concluded that they had "radical hope" on their side.^{xiii}

What if Hope is both a power responsive to individual choice *and* a force that appears on its own? And what if Hope is not restricted to individual predicaments and is equally amenable to collective concerns? Can Hope hold two (or more) seemingly contradictory meanings (a true characteristic of wisdom), by being both accessible to you when you act in specific ways, while retaining its autonomy and freedom to present itself, without invitation, on your behalf?

Perhaps both are true: you can choose Hope and Hope can choose you.

A majority of Americans now say there is significant discrimination against Blacks, an increase from 19% when the Supreme Court dismantled the Voting Rights Act in 2013. We are living in a moment of rupture, Solnit would say, and there is a new 'we'. When transcendent Hope springs up spontaneously among diverse communities all over the world, we may be dealing with an intrinsic Hope that is inter-mutual.



Brad Stewart, Avis Begoun, and Leonard Berry, writing in the *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*) describe Hope as having a dual nature that becomes evident at the end of life. Focused Hope, they say, is oriented toward relief or cure, when recovery may still be possible. It is outer-directed and dependent on information provided by clinicians. Intrinsic Hope, they observe, is altogether different. It “lies buried in the human psyche... [and] can emerge unexpectedly after longed-for outcomes fail to materialize and focused hope fades...” They continue: “Intrinsic hope may wax and wane, but because its source is internal, it can spring eternal. As death approaches, it may evolve into a state of living in the moment.”^{xiv} This is emergent, palliative Hope.

In an extensive review of the literature on Hope, Jaklin Elliott concluded that Hope’s myriad meanings make it “a slippery little concept”^{xv}. Yet two themes emerge and endure: Hope’s significance and Hope’s power. In my desire to put Hope to work over many years, I have underestimated the wisdom of Hope. By trying hard to make Hope something useful in organizational life, I have come close to reducing it to a transaction. In the myth of Pandora^{xvi}, Hope can be interpreted as either the evil that stayed behind to make matters worse for humanity, or an antidote to the afflictions that escaped from the jar. Holding both possible meanings simultaneously may allow us to arrive closer to the inherent wisdom of Hope.

I would go further and offer an archetypal understanding of Hope to try to reconcile this seeming paradox. Paul DeBlassie III, a Jungian therapist, writes that the Greek god, Hermes, is the archetypal god of hope^{xvii}. According to myth, Hermes is the messenger of the gods and the only Olympian who could cross the boundary between the living and the dead. He is the symbol of transitions and transformations, the messenger between the conscious and unconscious, and the “friendliest of gods”. As a seasoned guide whose duty is to carry the souls of the dead to Hades, “Hermes is able to provide us with what we need most, at the time we are most in need”. As a trickster god, Hermes can appear out of nowhere in our storm-tossed boat, “assuring us that this way has been traveled before, and that there is - as we call it in our plainest and most succinct language - hope”^{xviii}.

Hope may emerge when there is unceasing, positive action. Hope may emerge for the good of one or many when action is impossible. And hope can burst onto the scene when there is a shock to the system and be a catalyst for concerted action. Acting in ways that evoke Hope, and bearing witness to Hope when it appears on its own, affirms the ancient wisdom of Hermes: you have an ally in Hope.

PRAXIS

In this paper I am proposing angles on Hope that appear to be at odds. Even so, a picture emerges that may have practical implications: for leaders and their coaches; for educators and their students; for healthcare workers and their patients; for social change activists; and for everyday people who dream of a better world.

Here are three ways I think Hope can be enacted, embodied, and put to good use.

1. You can choose Hope by taking effective action to make things better. And you can encourage your clients and friends to do the same. It is that simple. The process is a generative cycle: you make things better; you benefit personally by being attached to something larger than you and by feeling a sense of efficacy. This is why it is important for you to ‘get involved’ with movements for positive change. When you do, you are creating a larger ‘we’. You are building fellowship and momentum. You are multiplying the power of Hope.
2. You can choose Hope by telling, and listening to, the truth. And you can encourage everyone you know to do likewise. If you are a physician or hospice volunteer, when you listen well and tell the truth you let Hope emerge. If you are a leader, and you are dedicated to the truth - especially in a moment of crisis - you engender solidarity and trust. And whenever you think someone else cannot handle the truth, reflect on your own ability to put truth on the table. Hope has no time for spin, happy talk or falsity. Hope does have infinite patience for reality.
3. You can be the Hope you want to reside in others. The life and work of Harriett Tubman shines as an example of Hope conquering fear for the benefit of others. She risked her life 20 times to lead more than 300 enslaved people to safety and freedom on the Underground Railway. “I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.” She was a spy for the US Army; she cared for wounded Black soldiers after the war, without payment; she raised money for freedman’s schools and destitute children; she worked tirelessly against racism and for women’s rights; she lived for 93 years. Her courage was catching, and her spirit was indomitable.^{xix} Hope is on your side when you are on the journey to realize your destiny; Hope is necessary if your purpose is to help others discover theirs.



BIOGRAPHY

Harry Hutson's life purpose is infused with curiosity, and in this essay he explores a topic he has grappled with for two decades. In their book, *Putting Hope to Work*, his coauthor, Barbara Perry and he make the case for an "agentic" Hope: to realize Hope you must actually do something. But they say, "doing" has limits that Aristotle has contemplated: moderate your expectations for Hope or you may end in despair. Here Hutson introduces Hermes as another ancient source of understanding Hope. Hermes, mercurial and friendly, is a symbol of Hope's power to show up, unbidden, when you need it most. In his work as a (Hope-filled) executive coach and consultant, Hutson emphasizes the enduring value of purpose for individuals and organizations. He serves on the boards of two nonprofit organizations: The New England Center for Children (autism), and Baltimore Outreach Services (homeless women and their families). www.harryhutson.com

January 2021

NOTES

- i Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), xxv.
- ii Jerome Frank, "The Role of Hope in Psychotherapy," *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, V, No. 5 (1968), 383-95.
- iii An archetypal understanding of "fields" deepens our respect for their energy and power to pattern behavior and evoke consistent emotional responses. See Michael Conforti, *Field, Form, and Fate: Patterns in Mind, Nature, and Psyche* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2003).
- iv Harry Hutson and Barbara Perry, *Putting Hope to Work: Five Principles to Activate Your Organization's Most Powerful Resource* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2006).
- v Alan Suderman, "States race to pass policing reforms after Floyd's death," www.apnews.com, August 8, 2020,
- vi Sam Levin, "The movement to defund police has won historic victories across the US. What's next?" *The Guardian*, August 15, 2020.
- vii Ruth Umoh, "JPMorgan Announces \$30 Billion Commitment to Advance Racial Equity," *Forbes*, October 8, 2020.
- viii Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019).
- ix "Overdue: Confronting Race and Racism in Newton," virtual conversation with Professor Ibram X. Kendi, August 12, 2020.
- x The Affordable Care Act, popularly known as Obamacare, was enacted in 2010 to expand and improve medical coverage. It has been resisted relentlessly by Republicans, the opposition party, who continue to mount a stream of legal challenges. Many Americans initially opposed the law while supporting many of its provisions. But by 2017 the ACA was seen favorably by most Americans; provider rates have come down, restrictions on pre-existing conditions have been lifted, coverage has been greatly expanded, and other popular changes have been implemented. To a great extent, the ACA now enjoys broad support.
- xi The New Deal, FDR's suite of relief, recovery and reform programs enacted to combat the Great Recession, was opposed by conservatives, numerous political allies, and a majority in the Supreme Court, because it reshaped the role of the federal government and intervened in the economy. Whether the New Deal ended the Great Depression is debated by economists; the consensus view, however, is that the New Deal preserved democracy.
- xii Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press: 1963), 122.
- xiii Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- xiv Brad Stuart, Avis Begoun, and Leonard Berry, "The dual nature of hope at the end of life," *thebmjopinion*, April 13, 2017.
- xv Jaklin Elliott, "What Have We Done with Hope: A Brief History," *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, Jaklin Elliott, ed. (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2005), 3-45.
- xvi Pandora, in Greek mythology the first woman, opened a sacred jar (out of curiosity?) containing all manner of evils including Hope, while Hope remained trapped inside. Or in another version of the story, the jar contained blessings, including Hope, intended for humanity. Does the story explain the origin of human misery or good fortune? Or both?
- xvii According to Karl Jung, an archetype is an unconscious image of an instinctual pattern of behavior. Archetypes themselves can never be seen. Hermes therefore is a *symbol* of the archetype of Hope, and in my view, one of many possible forms. If Hope is so deeply human it exists beneath what we perceive as multicultural patterns, its archetypes and visible symbols must be ubiquitous.
- xviii Paul deBlassie III, "Trauma, Death, and the Archetype of Hope," *Depth Insights: Seeing the World with Soul*, www.depthinsights.com, February 25, 2016.
- xix Paula B. Nelson, "Harriett Tubman," <http://learningtogive.org>