

## ***Beyond Hopelessness***

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Derrick Jensen's "Beyond Hope" was a provocative essay, but, for me, it mainly provoked disagreement. As a historian, I'm committed to complexity, so I have a hard time with the simplifications of Jensen's essay. For example, although I agree that many environmental indicators are negative, I don't believe "We're fucked." Second, I don't agree with Jensen's hazy definitions of hope. Third, while I think it's rewarding to consider the unintended consequences of hope, I don't believe that hope is a primary cause of human apathy and inactivity. And I can't imagine that a world without hope will encourage the activism that Jensen so wishfully hopes for.

In the first place, it seems to me, some of Jensen's assertions are empirically questionable. Are environmentalists losing badly on *every* front? Are those in power—which would include many of us in our own institutions—"hell-bent on destroying the planet?" Is the system entirely corrupt? Is there even "a system"—or is that just recycled Sixties rhetoric (and proof perhaps that not everything is worth recycling)? When hope dies, does the "civilized self" die too, or just the most civilized part of the civilized self? Is there any such thing as a purely "animal you?" When people stop hoping, do they actually turn away from fear and apathy—or do they fall further into it?

Secondly, I don't think Jensen has an operative definition of hope. In one paragraph, he's arguing not against hope, but against "false hopes." Later, he seems to equate hope with optimism, or belief in inevitable progress. Throughout, he sees hope as a catalyst for inaction. These things all need criticism, but not because they're hope.

Indeed, as Vaclav Havel has suggested, real hope isn't wishful thinking, and it's definitely not optimism. In *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel suggests that hope is

*a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. . . . Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing*

*as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.*

In this formulation, hope involves faithfulness to our principles, and faith in our fellows to resonate (some sooner, and some later) with the promise of a good life—not just in the suburbs, but in the biosphere.

For spiritual people—which is all of us—real hope involves the faithfulness to those elements of our traditions that teach us how to be creatures who use our creativity to nourish the ongoing creation. Christians, for example, can reflect on the meanings of sacramentalism and sabbath, vocation and stewardship, mysticism and asceticism, justice and prophecy, love (including biophilia) and community (including the natural world which God calls "very good" even before people show up in Eden). All spiritual traditions profess such teachings which show us how to live in harmony in the world.

Finally, while Jensen sees hope as a handmaid of helplessness, I see just the opposite. He claims that "hope is what keeps us chained to the system." Sometimes, surely, that's true. But sometimes hope leads to revolution, and sometimes those revolutions even come from inside the system, where most of us currently live. Jensen claims that "when hope dies, action begins." That may occasionally be true. But as Elie Wiesel suggests, when hope died in the concentration camps of World War II, people died with it. In totalitarian regimes, when hope dies, so does a people's humanity. In America, when hope dies, people watch TV.

Jensen claims that "hope is a longing for a future condition over which you have no agency." For some people—the wishful thinkers—that might be true. But the history of hope suggests other possibilities. Indeed, history is full of people whose hope fueled revolutions, both inside and outside of systems. When Abraham Lincoln began to speak against slavery in the 1850s, for example, he didn't do it with the expectation that an emancipation proclamation was imminent—or even probable. He did it with the expectation that emancipation was possible if people consulted "the better angels of our nature." In 1854, he was outside the system. But instead of giving up on the American system, he decided to inhabit the system. By 1860, he was inside the system—although others seceded—and as President he used

the system itself to realize the changes he hoped for. Lincoln's hope helped Americans make their hopes real. As environmentalists, we can also articulate hopes that call citizens of the world to "the better angels of our nature," both human and otherwise

On a smaller scale, at St. Olaf College, where I teach, a collaboration of students and staff and faculty and administrators have harnessed hope to an ongoing program of sustainability. Our food service is conscientious about procurement, shifting as many purchases as possible to local suppliers; buying organic milk, cage-free eggs, hormone-free and antibiotic-free chicken; and offering a wide array of vegetarian and vegan entrees. Entrepreneurial students started an organic garden, which sold \$10,000 of produce to the cafeteria last year. A new composter converts 1000 pounds of daily food waste to mulch, which feeds the plants that flourish in the gardens and grounds of campus. A new wind turbine will supply almost a third of our electricity. In 25 years, we have restored acres of forests, wetlands and prairies. Our chemists have served as catalysts for a cutting-edge program of green chemistry. Students in a Campus Ecology class research resource flows on campus, and make new proposals to a Sustainability task force every year. We do this, not because we've gone "beyond hope," but because we think hope isn't just something you *have*—it's something you *make*.

One of my favorite novels is Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, which is all about hope and despair, activism and passivism, love and vocation. My favorite passage in the whole book is at a funeral, when Codi reads a letter from her sister Hallie, who has died in solidarity with the people of Nicaragua: "The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope." At St. Olaf, we're trying to live inside our hopes. The college isn't yet sustainable, and it won't be in my lifetime, but, hopefully, it will be a small part of the history of hope in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Jensen thinks *we're fucked*. Maybe so. But I think hopeful environmentalists (including Jensen) are making love to a planet that needs it, and that's good, whether or not we survive.

For more on St. Olaf's sustainability efforts, see [www.stolaf.edu/green](http://www.stolaf.edu/green) .