

Meditation on Hope
By Sara Tollefson
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Good morning.

Like many people, I spent much of 2016 anxious about the election, and post-election, in a state of numb shock and grief. And to be perfectly honest, I am still grieving the loss of the future I had imagined: a female president for my four-year-old daughter to look up to; progressive Supreme Court justices; expanded civil and reproductive rights and protections; so many things.

But when Tim asked (on Wednesday!) if I would offer a reflection on hope today, I reflexively said, “sure!”. After all, I’m someone who was once voted, “Most Optimistic” in her class. :-) I thought I had reached some kind of equilibrium, and would be able to point to at least a couple of things that gave me hope for the future. But when I actually tried to come up with something specific, all I could think of was my daughter Eleanor. The more I thought about it, the less justification there seemed to be for feeling hopeful at all. Instead, I started to feel a bit panicked. Then angry. **And I don’t get angry often.** Driving my anger, I knew, was fear.

This was especially true when I stumbled upon a thought about our planet. In the past, we’ve relied on nature to sustain, inspire, renew, and outlast us. So with every negative thought I would have about growing inequality, or how the norms and laws that hold our society together might fail, I would think, well, even if we did enter a dark period in history, we would eventually emerge from it, just like they did in the Middle Ages, and we’d live to see another day, a new future. But then I would remember global warming, and come across a fact like the one I read yesterday that just last week, the governor of Louisiana declared a state of emergency there because they are losing the equivalent of a football field of coastland in that state every hour. And it was clear that **everything** is at stake now, even the survival of our species’ home as we know it. If we did enter a dark time, we might not be able to count on surviving to see better days.

So there I was, driven to **a very dark place** as I tried to locate sources of hope.

And yet. And yet. I knew this couldn't be the answer, or the end. There had to be something to console us.

And then I realized that I had been doing it -- searching for hope, that is -- wrong. I had been searching for **assurance**. I had been trying, in vain, to find something that would soothe and comfort me. I had been listening for someone to tell me that everything was going to be OK. But even if they had, I would have known they were lying. **And that's because we don't know if everything is going to be OK.** Let me say that again: **we do not know if everything is going to be OK.** We are facing uncertainty, and things could go well, or they could go badly, or both.

And this, I think, is what has rattled so many of us here in America -- especially white people. We had an expectation that things were just going to get better and better, without our having to change our ways at all. We came to count on this, and to expect this. Some might say they were "promised" this. Some even came to see this as their "right". But in our hearts, we knew that the change we were experiencing was too big to be managed or contained.

But instead of denying the shifts that are taking place in the world, or turning to someone who has promised, unbelievably, that he can make everything great, we need to make peace, first, if we haven't already, with the uncertainty that we face. We must wake up.

For many of us, having to let go of our illusions around the stability of the world as we knew it, or the inevitability of human progress is terrifying. It leaves us feeling vulnerable and stricken with grief - forsaken, even.

But if we can keep that pain from taking over, then a space is created, a space where, as psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl would say, lies our power and our freedom.

Our power and our freedom, but also, hope. **For it's in that same uncertainty that gives rise to fear where we find hope.** But this hope is **NOT an assurance. It's an opportunity.** It's the chance to act and make a difference, no matter how big or small.

Put another way, as writer Rebecca Solnit says, "We don't know what is going to happen, or how, or when, and that very uncertainty is the space of hope."

Seeing hope this way is both thrilling and daunting. It means that we matter, because our actions can change outcomes for the better. But it may also mean that nothing will happen -- or our worse-case scenario will happen -- if we don't act. As Marianne Williamson has written, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us."

The good news, though, is that if we can just begin to act, despite our fear, and despite our habits, then we are putting positive change into motion. And the more we do it, the more it becomes real to us, and connects us with the people and the world that sustain us. Acting is loving, and loving is acting. It means putting our imperfect selves out into the world. It means acknowledging that we are indeed powerful, and then not letting that paralyze or stop us.

As lonely as rising up might feel in the beginning, when we do it, we quickly realize that we are not alone. When I step out of the shell of my own fear and look around, I see my sister, who has quietly become a volunteer firefighter and trained EMT to serve the rural community where she lives east of the mountains. I see my cousin, Dylan, who last summer donated one of his kidneys to a perfect stranger. I see my friend Saadia, who for the past two years has been bravely documenting human rights abuses in South Sudan. I see my friend Jacques, who has dedicated his life to transforming the lives of prisoners through lessons in nonviolence and mindfulness. I see my colleagues at D-Rev, the nonprofit I work for, improving the lives of amputees and newborn babies around the world through their engineering of more affordable medical devices.

And then I'm reminded of the exuberant faces and wildly creative signs that Eleanor and I saw as we marched in the Women's March in New York City in January. I'm reminded of the demonstrations that spontaneously erupted at airports around the country to protest the immigration ban. And I think of the March for Science that just happened yesterday. Just since the election, we've seen the greatest surge in civic participation this country has seen in half a century. And of course, in just the last few years, there have been other astonishing moments and monumental milestones: the legalization of gay marriage, Occupy Wall Street, more serious treatment of sexual assault, recognition of transgender rights and identity, legalization of marijuana, and Black Lives Matter.

You never know what is going to be the act that triggers a sea change, or how many thousands of smaller acts might have been necessary to make that one so powerful. At the same time, even as we achieve milestones, we should never take them for granted. As Rebecca Solnit again reminds us, “A victory doesn’t mean that everything is now going to be nice forever and we can therefore all go and lounge around until the end of time.” Rather, we should celebrate them and take encouragement in them. “These memories of joy and liberation,” she says, “can become navigational tools, identities, and gifts.”

There is great suffering in the world, and our planet - the only home we have ever known - really is in peril. We are living in a time of extraordinary disruption, but we must not let this paralyze us, or make us numb or lash out in fear. We need to confront it, not look away, stay present, and be guided by the love and light within us. And as we navigate through uncharted territory, let us look for the guideposts -- connectedness and equity -- that organizers Taj James and Rosa González suggest can point us to the world we want:

Connectedness is the recognition that our well-being is inextricably tied to that of other people and the planet itself. It means there are no throwaway people, no throwaway places, no throwaway anything. In fact, there’s no “away”; there’s just here. In practice, connectedness is about lifting up the voices of the marginalized, and it means regenerating forgotten places, from industrial brownfields to hollowed-out rural towns and Rust Belt cities. The second guidepost, equity, is about recognizing and repairing the harm generated by situations of extreme power imbalance. Equity is about building power from the bottom up.

Ironically, the one thing that we can be sure of is that we will always face uncertainty, and **seen this way, hope is all around us always**. We just need to embrace it for what it is: an opportunity, an opening, an invitation. Now is not the time to despair, but simply to act.