

## Living in Transapocalyptic Times

Hope as a Survival Trait

*Herman Greene*

*It's not the end of the world, but it is the end of the world as we've known it.*

—Alex Steffen, “The Transapocalyptic Now”

**T**alks on the environment often tell the story of decline in the health of the biosphere and of more trouble to come. I have given such talks, and in the Q&A period following the talks, almost always someone asks, “Do you have hope?”

Until recently, I dismissed this question because it seemed beside the point—whether I had hope or not wouldn't change the situation one way or another.

If I did respond I would do so by asking, “Does that really matter? Do *you* have hope?”

I respond to the question differently now.

### Do You Have Hope?

Dystopian stories of the future abound. Dystopia can be understood as a dreadful outlook for the human future. Moreover, there are stories of human extinction where the human future is nonexistent rather than dreadful, yet surely dreadful along the way.



You know these stories: Jem Bendell on deep adaptation; Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway on the collapse of western civilization; Roy Scranton on learning to die in the

Anthropocene; Mark Lynas on what the world may be like if global temperature rises by six degrees Celsius. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its Sixth Assessment Report shows that we are on course to exceed a dangerous two degrees Celsius but indicates we can avoid this if changes are made. “Net-Zero” pledges abound, yet greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase and the adverse effects of even our current 1.1-degree Celsius rise in global temperature are evident.

Collapsology, how societies and civilizations collapse, is an emerging discipline.

Do you have hope?

Dahr Jamail in *The End of Ice* writes, “For each of us attuned to the Age of Loss in which we now live, feeling the passing away of species and life-giving systems of Earth, living with grief is part of our daily life. Slowly we come to terms with the magnitude of what is inevitable.” He says the problem is not CO<sub>2</sub> but the deeper system that caused the extractive economy, slaughtered Indigenous people, enslaved people, colonized people, and “all of our roles [now] that are contributing to what is going on, regardless of our political ideologies.”

He foresees an Earth in which, in one passage, one billion people survive—imagine the suffering along the way—and, in another passage, that extinction of our species is likely. Beyond the transience of human life, his grief extends to other species and potentially the “collapse of nature.”

Jamail’s portrayal of the future presents a period of existential angst along the lines of that described by Sartre, Camus, and others in the mid-20th century. As with them, for Jamail there is no exit for any of us from being free and responsible for the fate of nature. Bruno Latour in his new book, *After Lockdown*, discusses our dilemma: On a warm day we who care cannot help but think of global warming and how we are contributing to it. When there is drought, we feel we are responsible for the conditions that led to it. When tending to our landscapes, we suffer for being responsible for pollution. Driving a car . . . don’t even think about it! Decline in insects . . . what did we do to cause that? Knowing we cannot live without impact, we fruitlessly imagine living without one and worry that we are, after all, a parasite or cancer within Earth community. In Latour’s words, we “modernized ourselves into collective suicide. Our death wish was such that it’s not surprising that themes of collapse were so swiftly popularized.”

Jamail makes the case for living without hope: “A willingness to live without hope allows me to accept the heartbreaking truth of our situation.” Grief is the way forward for Jamail. He quotes Stephen Jenkinson:

“Grief requires us to know the time we are in. . . . The great enemy of grief is hope. Hope is the four-letter word for people who are willing to know things as they are. Our time requires us to be *hope-free*. To burn through the false choice of being hopeful and hopeless. They are two sides of the same coin. Grief is required to proceed.”

Grief enables us to see things as they are, to give up our rights and accept our obligations. Considering his obligations leads Jamail to ask, “Knowing what is happening to the planet, *to what do I devote my life?*” Here, on the other side of giving up hope for continuation of life as we have known it, hope arises for him in the sense expressed by Vaclav Havel, whom Jamail quotes, “Hope is not the conviction that things will turn out well, but the conviction that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out.”

What are people asking me when they ask, “Do you have hope?” What am I telling them if I answer, “Yes, I have hope,” or “No, I do not”?

Roman Krznaric in *The Good Ancestor* distinguishes optimism, a cheery look on the bright side despite the evidence, and hope. Optimism leads to “complacency and inaction.” Hope is “a more active and radical ideal that recognizes the real possibility of failure, yet at the same time holds on to the prospects of success despite the odds, driven by a deep commitment to an outcome we value.”

Jane Goodall in her book co-written with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Hope*, says the question she is asked more than any other is whether she honestly believes there is hope for our world and for future generations. She responds, “we are going through dark times,” which are only likely to get worse before they get better. People understand “the dire state of the planet—but do nothing about it because they feel helpless and hopeless.” People need hope to act: “Without hope, all is lost. It is a crucial survival trait that has sustained our species from the time of our Stone Age ancestors.”

She says hope is what enables us to go forward in the face of adversity. It is what we want but have to work hard to make happen. Drawing on the science of hope she identifies four elements that are necessary for a lasting sense of hope: “We need to have realistic *goals* as well as realistic *pathways* to achieve them. In addition, we need the *confidence* that we can achieve these goals and the *support* to help us overcome adversity along the way.” And she gives four reasons for hope: (i) the amazing human intellect, (ii) the resilience of nature, (iii) the power of young people, and (iv) the indomitable human spirit.

How have the intrusion of COVID-19, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, rising tension between China and the West, racism—the deepening of the human drama—affected the question “Do you have hope?” and its possible answers? We who care about the environment can exclude nothing. Everything is connected. We are concerned about ourselves, our children, humanity, other species, our planet, and future generations of all species. It all seems so overwhelming.

As of this writing, the Ukrainians are in a war with Russia. They bring to us anew what it means to live in hope, hope that transcends living and dying. One can imagine what would happen if they lost hope. One can see what happens to members of a sports team when they lose hope or when a sick patient loses hope. We know stories of people who have survived great calamities because they did not give up hope and of those who did not because they lost it. We also know stories of people who had hope to the end but failed. Hope is not a guarantee of success, but in extremely difficult times, more often than not it is a condition of success. It is a survival trait for individuals and for societies.

We live in transapocalyptic times. It is the end of the world as we have known it, but not the end of the world. Surely the people of Ukraine know that the Russian invasion brought the end of their country as they have known it; nonetheless they have hope that what they value most will survive. They commit themselves to this and give their lives to it, even when things appear to get worse and no matter what the result. In doing so, they give us hope and we join them in their belief that good will come out of the present darkness.

Those stories of doom I listed at the beginning of this writing may not have been stories of doom at all. The authors probably did not mean them to be so. Their common theme is that we are living through the end of things as we know them, and things will likely get worse. The changes we are dealing with are of civilizational dimensions, even geobiological period dimensions, and even perhaps mass extinction dimensions.

In answer to those who ask, “Do you (I) have hope?” I would have to say in all honesty that I do not have hope that modernity will continue as we have known it. I see much unavoidable suffering ahead. I worry about whether I would rise to the occasion if I were required to give up what I have, or if I were faced with evil and danger, death, hunger, cold, and even torture as people, and other species, in Ukraine and in other places are.

I know this: Others have shown me the way. As Jane Goodall has written hope is a survival trait that has sustained our species from the beginning and carried us thus far. I believe that hope arises both from letting go and accepting life as it comes to us and from commitment. Hope in the deepest trials is grounded in commitment to higher values, to things we believe in, to what we are working to achieve, to what we are willing to die for, and, also, in our preparation (inward and outward), the realism of our goals and strategies, and the support we receive from others, the resilience of nature, and our higher power.

We cannot know if we are doing the right things with our lives or if we are doing enough. We can only daily give ourselves to that which we value and in so doing we are given in equal measure the hope we seek and even a kind of peace, troubled as it may be.

Yes, I have hope. I am doing the Great Work. I am doing my best.

Do you have hope?