

Despair is Not a Strategy: 15 principles of hope

By Abby Hoffman, March 6, 2017, on Medium

If you're out there trying to change your neighborhood, community, city, country, or the world then this is for you. In moments when everything seems hopeless, read this to get your hope on.

1. Hope can co-exist with other feelings. Grief and hope can co-exist. Fear and hope can co-exist. Disappointment and hope can co-exist. Sadness and hope can co-exist. As poet Yehuda Amichai writes, "A man doesn't have time in his life to have time for everything. He doesn't have seasons enough to have a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes was wrong about that. A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment, to laugh and cry with the same eyes, with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them, to make love in war and war in love." Writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit concurs in her book "Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities" where she writes: "A gift for embracing paradox is not the least of the equipment an activist should have."

2. People have power no matter how certain, impossible, or predetermined a situation may seem. Professor and activist Howard Zinn writes: "The struggle for justice should never be abandoned because of the apparent overwhelming power of those who have the guns and the money and who seem invincible in their determination to hold onto it. That apparent power has, again and again, proved vulnerable to moral fervor, determination, unity, organization, sacrifice, wit, ingenuity, courage, and patience."

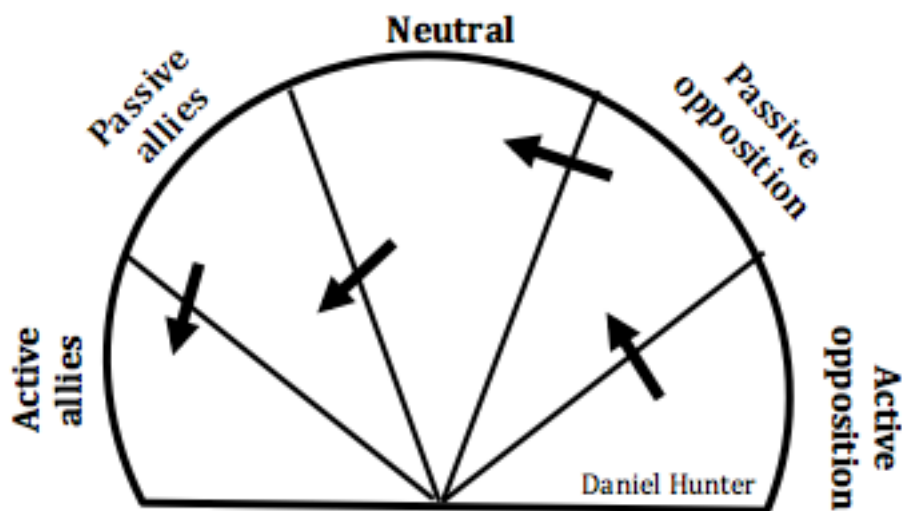
3. There is a difference between our actions being worthless and our actions not accomplishing what we hoped they would. Our actions, no matter how small, register in two ways: externally in the social world and internally towards the cultivation of our character. In the social world, our actions often have a delayed sense of cause-and-effect as they aggregate with the actions of others. This can fool us into thinking our actions failed to accomplish our goal- like flipping a light switch and the light not going on. But really it's just that social change doesn't work as quickly as electricity so it may take 'the light' a few months (or longer) to turn on. That said, even when it seems that our actions truly haven't had the impact we had hoped for (in the time we hoped it would take), our efforts were not wasted if they contributed to our growth and the fortification and improvement of our moral personhood. The next time you call your legislators, tell yourself that you're calling to influence their actions but also because you want to be the kind of person who gets involved/chooses action over despair/stands up for what you believe is right.

4. Success does not always correlate with approval. Today, we see the Civil Rights movement as good thing but [Gallup polls](#) from the 1960s show that the movement was incredibly unpopular in its time: 57% of people thought 'sit-ins' at lunch counters and

‘freedom buses’ would hurt instead of help the civil rights cause (only 25% thought they would help, 16% had no opinion); 61% disapproved of what the ‘Freedom Riders’ were doing (only 22% approved, 15% had no opinion); 70% of people thought mass demonstrations would hurt the movement for racial equality and desegregation (only 19% thought they should continue, 8% didn’t know even after President Kennedy credited them for what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964); and 60% thought unfavorably about the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” (only 23% were favorable, 17% had no opinion). What does this teach us? People eventually favor social change but often oppose the very actions needed to bring it about. Do not be deterred or demoralized by criticism and remember that the goal is not approval — this isn’t a popularity contest — but rather to affect change.

5. We don’t need to persuade our most ardent opponents for change to happen.

Activist educators Martin Oppenheimer and George Lakey offer the following tool, entitled the “spectrum of allies,” to demonstrate that while some people are in direct agreement with us, others are completely opposed to our goals, many lie in between.



Subconsciously many of us assume we need to convince the “active opposition.” But really a lot of our work is in the other sectors. Martin Oppenheimer and George Lakey, *A Manual for Direct Action* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965).

Why is this important? Because it re-calibrates our expectations. As activist and author Daniel Hunter further explains, “Campaigns don’t succeed by getting everyone to agree with us! In fact, in most successful campaigns, the active opposition don’t change their minds (despite our best efforts). Rather, support for their position is pulled away by shifting the passives and neutrals one step in our direction...[So] we don’t need to convince everyone to become active allies to achieve our goals. Take the abolitionist movement against slavery in this country, as an example. If you add up every petition signed, every meeting, every public action — not even 1% of the population were active allies. Yet the movement was successful.” Put differently, [studies](#) show that it may take

only 3.5% of a population engaged in sustained nonviolent resistance to topple brutal dictators.

6. Change is rarely straightforward. It does not occur in either short bursts or not at all but rather slowly, incrementally, and in a nonlinear fashion: you can feel hopeless one day and the next day have an inexplicable breakthrough. This is especially important to realize because along the road to winning there will be a lot of losing, as Ezra Levin, co-founder of the Indivisible Movement, explains: “This is the long game. We are going to lose a lot. We are going to get good at losing. We are going to lose cabinet votes for terrible nominees. We are going to lose bills that are offensive and appalling. But while we are losing, something else is going to happen. We are going to keep raising our voices and slowly our representatives are going to start listening to us... It’ll happen over months, where you keep showing up, regularly. Then, we are going to start winning. It’ll sneak up on us. We won’t understand why we are winning. But it starts with losing in a particular way- where we raise our voices and call it out when we aren’t listened to, where we get close but not quite there.”

7. It’s always too soon to go home and too soon to calculate effect. It’s easy to assume we can perfectly calculate the effects of our actions based on our intent, but great humility is required because, as Rebecca Solnit [explains](#), “Nobody can know the full consequences of their actions, and history is full of small acts that changed the world in surprising ways.” Like the antinuclear activist from Women Strike for Peace (WSP) who recounted feeling foolish and futile while standing in the rain one morning protesting at the Kennedy White House only to learn years later that Benjamin Spock, a high-profile activist in the antinuclear movement, was first inspired by “a small group of women protesting outside the Kennedy White House.”

8. Small actions matter. Have you ever given someone abundant thanks only for them to tell you it was no big deal? Has someone thanked you profusely and you couldn’t understand why what you did was such a big deal? This ‘mismatch’ is a sign that a favorably lopsided/disproportionate act has occurred. A short conversation that changes how we think, an introduction that opens new doors, a simple note that is just what we needed to keep going. Remembering that others could not have foreseen how much their seemingly small acts would mean to us, that often the “output” is greater than the “input,” is good motivation for small, strong, positive acts. Just because we can’t do everything and this can feel overwhelming, we will not diminish the importance of what we can do, no matter how small.

9. We can change the world because we have, many times before. “What lies ahead seems unlikely but when it becomes the past it seems inevitable,” writes Solnit. To make social change feel possible, we need to study the history and legacy of nonviolent resistance movements. The status quo wants us to believe that things don’t change and that situations are immutable and inevitable but as Zinn writes: “There is a tendency to think that what we see in the present moment will continue. We forget how often we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by extraordinary changes in people’s thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick

collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible. What leaps out from the history of the past hundred years is its utter unpredictability.”

10. Hope is a basis, not a substitute, for action. In the words of Rebecca Solnit, hope is only a beginning. It gets you there but work gets you through.

11. If you embody what you aspire to then you have already succeeded. As Rebecca Solnit writes, “If your activism is already democratic, peaceful, creative, then in one small corner of the world these things have triumphed... Make yourself one small republic of unconquered spirit.”

12. Total victory is not the goal. We mustn't be perfectionists because as Solnit once again explains, “Most victories will be temporary, or incomplete, or compromised in some way...When activists mistake heaven for some goal at which they must arrive, rather than an idea to navigate Earth by, they burn themselves out...don't believe the moon is useless unless we land on it.” Instead, we must recognize success in small victories, delays, and even in what doesn't happen. Solnit describes how there are large swaths of pristine land and healthy rivers that aren't just beautiful spaces in nature but are proof of success. For example, pristine land on the west side of the Sierra Nevada where a huge Disney-owned ski complex would have been built if the Sierra Club hadn't fought it; Ward Valley in the Mojave desert which would have been decimated by a low-level nuclear waste dump if it wasn't for a beautiful coalition of local tribes and antinuclear activists who fought in court for ten years to defeat the plans; or eastern Oklahoma where environmentalists and the Cherokee Nation shut down 23% of the world's uranium production. “All of these places,” writes Solnit, “are places of absence, or at least the absence of devastation...nothing is what victory often looks like.”

13. If you're losing hope, do more before giving up. In my own life, I've noticed an anecdotal relationship between engagement and hope, and between disengagement and despair. I don't know if it is causal or correlative but I have found that the people who have the most hope are also the ones most engaged (in fighting poverty, sickness, inequality, injustice both here in the US and abroad), and the the most cynical ones are the ones who are distant and disengaged. This is surprising — wouldn't the opposite make more sense, that those closest to the pain feel the most hopeless? Something to consider and reflect on for yourself.

14. Recognize and account for our mind's Negativity Bias. The Negativity Bias is our mind's tendency to weigh negative things more heavily than positive things, even when they are of equal intensity. Consider annual reviews: for many people, if their boss mentions three things they're doing wonderfully and ONE thing to work on, they will come out of the meeting stewing on the one thing that needs improvement instead of on the three things being done well. Because of this mental bias, renown couples therapist Dr. John Gottman says that couples need to have FIVE positive interactions for every ONE negative interaction. There are many horrible and scary things happening today but to truly gauge the state of the world, we must acknowledge the role of our mind's Negativity Bias and then seek out stories of positive change to counterbalance it.

15. We stand on the shoulders of giants. Thank you Corazon Aquino, Audre Lorde, Howard Zinn, Bella Abzug, Malala Yousafzai, Marsha P. Johnson, Ella Baker, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Saul Alinsky, Yuri Kochiyama, Miss Major Griffin Gracy, Grace Lee Boggs, Berta Cáceres, Dolores Huerta, LaDonna Harris, Dorothy I. Height, Wilma Mankiller, Diane Nash, Hannah G. Solomon, Gloria Steinem, and many, many others for showing us the way.