

Abandoning Hope, Abandoning Hopelessness

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Right now many of us are staring doom in the face and asking to see more, unable to stop watching, unable to take action. There are many ways for governments and other actors to demobilize political movements, but most movements demobilize themselves. Behind any social movement there is a great deal of human emotion. No one joins a political group without either strong personal emotional attachment to aspects of the group, or a desire for power. The jump from strong feelings about something, to acting on those feelings, requires opportunity, knowledge, and either a genuine willingness to accept good or bad outcomes, or hope that the best will happen. A sense of hopelessness saps all of these. Of course some hopelessness is based on real concerns, but hopelessness, regardless of its sources, is clearly advantageous to the governments and cops of the world.

It is so strange and telling that the compound word doom-scrolling exists. It's such a succinct description of the state of doom. Doom is a fated bad outcome, the worst thing that could happen, and also that heavy feeling of expecting the worst to happen, feeling certain the worst will happen; And scrolling comes from the terminology of the warped skeuomorphic pagination of modern social media, the infinite scroll. In discourse, doom-scrolling is labeled as a personal problem. Always the sense of doom is assumed justified; the only harms being cited, are harms caused by excess attention towards the causes of our purported doom; All this propelled by a program designed to attract attention by any means necessary.

But what good is our doom and how real is it. *Things are better than you think. Things are worse than you think.*

The antidote prescribed for a sense of doom or hopelessness is almost always some variant of hope; faith, purpose, love, possibility. We pick an idol to lay our offerings before, and take strength from the next best thing to certainty, hope.

Hope has such a strong purchase as an idea amongst modern humans that it behooves me to be very explicit about this; Hope is deceitful even when one gets what they hoped for. If I hope that the coin will land heads up, and it does, I may, with time, transmute that hope into a sense of control via will. I may come to look at every coin flip as evidence to weigh against my hope or faith, and then, through emotional investment, fall to one or another gambler's fallacy.

If one hopes for someone to get hurt, and then that person does get hurt, one feels bad, as if hope caused these things to happen. Hope is a tool, and a blunt one at that. It is as likely to get you a meaningless vote or a seat at the bloodied table as it is to get you dead or in prison, but it is most likely to get you nothing.

We love to talk about fear-mongering, and of course we should, but who is going to finally take a stand against the hope-mongers?

Our growing cultural obsession with doom comes from the real threats of climate change, civilizational collapse, genocide, war, disease, and from a sense of alienation in an increasingly unstable world. It is also constructed. Any propagandist knows that fear can spur action or inaction more effectively than collective feeling or simple desire. Fear of lack, of losing your status, of being unattractive or weak, are cornerstones of advertising; And advertising relies on forms of media that either can't be avoided e.g. billboards and bus stop ads, or which are of interest or entertainment value; TV, radio, social media. The history of modern mass media is deeply intertwined with advertising, from the soap operas invented to sell soap to the personalized ad you see after looking at pictures or videos of another horrible thing that is happening.

The doom-scroll is a natural outgrowth of a delivery mechanism designed to keep your attention as long as possible, a world of deep inequality and disparity, and a human attention

mechanism tuned towards danger. It isn't hard to illustrate how a sense of constant threat is deeply numbing. I think most of you reading this are already familiar with the paroxysm of fear, doom and hopelessness.

In a self-fulfilling prophecy of dialectics, thesis, antithesis, those who wish to challenge this fear and sense of hopelessness, unfailingly reach for its apparent opposite, hope. I will challenge hopelessness later in this piece, but first I must help demonstrate how the false binary between hope and hopelessness leads us astray.

Hope-mongers would have you think that one must only feel, must only believe, must only think of a particular uncertain outcome fondly, and then all of ones hopes, dreams, prayers, desires, intentions will come true. We know our hopes may not be true; we would speak of knowledge of an outcome rather than hope for one if we didn't have to admit that hope is modulated uncertainty. We hope mostly in order to find a more comfortable relationship with the uncertainty of the future.

Often the comfort that hope is selling you is there to make you vulnerable, to instrumentalize you, to use you in service of maintaining a system built to oppress, to get you to vote for someone who really works for the rich. Hope can inspire people to sacrifice themselves for an eternal promise in heaven, or to break themselves on the wheel of work, or to keep themselves in an abusive relationship. Hope is mobilizing, but towards what.

Does my hope for trans liberation suddenly stop trans genocide? Does my hope for Black liberation free anyone from the tyranny of white supremacy? When we cling to hope we're saying, "damn the future and its many possibilities, I will persevere on the slim, or absent, possibility of my exact preferred outcome." And this preference for, expectation of, a specific outcome is almost never based on a material understanding of the world. We hope for impossible things for lack of understanding, and when we have some understanding, our knowledge is still warped by desire. Humans, to survive psychologically, must have some irrationality. Heuristics are more effective for life than algorithms, and no one has full access to knowledge, to the material state of the world. Even if we had no leanings or biases, the complexity and volume of information is an insurmountable barrier.

When we expect an outcome we are doing something like folk statistics. We draw from our experience and the information available to us, and this is necessarily limited. Then we make a rough estimation of probability, weighted by our emotions, our desires, and even the physical workings of our body (our hunger, our thirst, our tiredness)

Hope is often no better than a guess. There is nothing wrong with guessing, but doesn't "I guess that this is going to happen" sound different than "I hope it will"? We trick ourselves with hope, and in a world of binary oppositions, all that we are offered in its place is hopelessness or apathy.

So if hope is such a demagogue, shouldn't we embrace our doom, our hopelessness?

What is false about a binary that is as simple as, full of Hope, and lacking of it?

The false binary of hope and hopelessness.

Hopelessness is a despairing preference for a bad outcome. Preference not in the sense of the outcome we would prefer, but preference in the sense of there being a scab picking urge to focus again and again on the horrors that most resonate with our own fears.

We find our favorite doom from our experiences, from our cultures, from the dark interiors of our own thoughts, and we think “this fear, these fears, they speak to me.” People most often pay witness to the things that are shown to them the most, and which most legibly strike their internal sense of fear and helplessness.

Hopelessness also deceives us. It is no better than hope. Only the apparent opposite of hope because it more often plunges people into despairing immobility than spurring action. Though hopelessness can certainly spur action as well.

Why would anyone prefer hopelessness? Of course some don't, and are thrown into it anyway, through chance, or through an open eye to the horrors of the world; But hopelessness, despair, has some of its draw from the same place as faith. In a situation one can see no way out of, a certain doom can be a dark kind of faith. Hopelessness serves as certainty where there is none. “Nothing will ever get better.” “I will always feel this way.” “Nothing good will ever happen again.”

When the pain feels insurmountable, a certainty of doom gives us a sense of purpose, a sense of our place in the world; it also allows us to pretend to an omniscience about the possibilities of the future, and to imagine a static, easily predictable, world. For someone in the worst condition I cannot say if things will get better for them, but I can say with an uncharacteristic certainty that things will change. Change is the only constant.

Hopelessness has a strong pull, and is a nearly universal human experience. There are so many well-intentioned people rightfully concerned about despair, hopelessness, depression; but all they seem to offer as a replacement is deception, is that universal faith we call hope.

Fighting Hopelessness, Fighting Hope

I have been an adherent of both hope and hopelessness, both faith and despair. I would be foolish to say that I learned nothing from this. I hoped for revolution, and though I never met my hoped for goals, I did things I am still proud of. I felt hopeless for the possibility of ever feeling okay, of ever feeling whole, and I learned what wholeness is, learned what I dearly felt I was lacking in my life. — I also followed both hope and hopelessness down dangerous roads, and sometimes threw my money, my time, and my autonomy away, in pieces, to pursue hope or hopelessness.

My desire to abandon both hope and hopelessness comes from how altering those mindsets can be, and because of the strength of their pull on me. Abandoning hope was easier, or quicker at least. The conditions of the world, and the outsized scale of my hopes made it simpler. Gathering evidence that said “abandon hope” took almost no effort, and propelled itself once started. This loss of hope did not become despair and hopelessness all at once. First, and sometimes sporadically flaring afterwards, my loss of hope manifested as anger. Strong rage. The despair took longer, burned colder than the rage. Once boiled over, the indignity of my hopes being dashed felt like a prediction of all futures, an essential feature of my existence. This sense of certainty,

of permanence, while false, was very appealing after losing sight of my guiding light of hope. Despair however is not sustainable.

There is no good or bad in this world but thinking makes it so, neither is there certainty except for the certainty of change, and death, so, In my striving to break out of this untenable despair, I sought to address my thoughts and self-deceptions. Because of my previous training in psychology and my experience doing anarchist mental health projects, I leaned on one of my strengths and utilized psycho-therapeutic tools for this self examination.

There's a psychotherapy modality called ACT which I found very useful in dealing with my (now in remission) anxiety disorders. Most psychology is just philosophy applied, and the best therapies, like ACT, are developed by people who experience these psychological pains themselves.

ACT, acceptance and commitment therapy, is based on relational frame theory, a model of cognition which has fairly strong evidentiary support. Relational frame theory posits that language itself, built on a scaffold of related words in a semantic web, tied up with emotion and experience, naturally results in psychopathology. What is relevant for our discussion of escaping despair, are in their six core processes. ACT frames psychological distress as a result of psychological inflexibility. In their analysis most psychological problems, including despair, are a result of six tendencies of psychological inflexibility. These are

- Inflexible attention,
- disruption of core values,
- inaction impulsivity or avoidant persistence,
- attachment to the conceptualized self,
- cognitive fusion (believing the truth of your own thoughts), and
- experiential avoidance.

The proposed 6 features of psychological flexibility naturally follow,

- Flexible attention to the present moment
- Values
- Committed action towards those values
- Self as context
- De-Fusion and
- Acceptance

Because hopelessness is related to all of these core processes, ACT also has the concept of creative hopelessness. When all hope is lost we believe our despair, and think nothing will change. We are right that nothing will change only if we make it so by continuing to do *exactly* what we are doing. Creative hopelessness is an approach to that stuck feeling. If what you're doing isn't

working, it's time to give up on that approach and try something different. If you're in a hole and you keep digging and digging but still can't seem to get out, the first thing to do is stop digging.

Our hopelessness drags us into repetitive unconscious ways of dealing with things; And what's worse we believe our own terrible thoughts as if they were words spoken from on high.

So let's say you have lost hope. You have experienced a great disruption in your values. You are horrified by this, and are seeking to avoid it either through rapt attention to an untenable future, or avoidant escape into fantasy of one kind or another. That hope served as a part of your identity, like faith. That scaffold for creating a constant sense of self or supporting your static conception of yourself has also been thrown into disarray. Finding this all very unacceptable, you despair, certain that you will always be this way, that no change is possible, that avoiding these internalized states would be safer, easier.

But what if we instead faced this self-deception and tried something else.

Something other than hope and hopelessness.

I would be lying if I said I have no expectations of the future, both pleasant and unpleasant. I *can* say, however, that I am not hopeful, and neither am I hopeless.

The false expectations of hope and hopelessness make seeing real possibilities much more difficult. We expect a particular outcome, and then fail to attend to the unexpected. I still have desired outcomes, but unlike when I was fully absorbed by hope and hopelessness, these desired outcomes are recognized for their variable probabilities, and prepared for without the single-minded attention that previously prevented me from preparing for outcomes towards which I have more nebulous preference. I may desire a less onerous way to make money, and I may also desire the complete collapse of civilization, one of those is more likely than the other, though I realize they are still related.

If we believe our hope, our false expectation of a certain "good" future, we sacrifice a clean view of the present, which is much more useful for creating many of the things one could hope for.

If we believe our hopelessness, our false expectation of a certain "bad" future, we shut ourselves off from action, from experience, from change and renewal.

I move forward with an eye to the values I have chosen for myself, and try to act in ways which adhere as closely to those values as I'm able. I want freedom and autonomy, but I do not despair when it seems impossible, and I do not let my hope for its eventual arrival make me overlook opportunities for some autonomy here and now.

My expectations are set with the understanding that any expectation is likely to be subverted; And though I work to make my future feel legible enough to face, I do so in the present, remembering that nothing is forever, that there is always something new to try, and that *things are always better and worse than I think*.

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